

EX LIBRIS?

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The recent demise and apparent rebirth of Kepler's, the venerable Menlo Park bookstore, underlined how fragile independent bookstores have become as a business. Kepler's has been reborn, with "angel" investors pooling \$500,000 to cushion the impact of financial ups and downs on the bookstore.

I watched the developments at Kepler's with special interest, and a rueful smile, since I am now a partner in an independent bookstore. Last year, four women in a small town in Northern California approached me to ask if I would invest with them to open a bookstore and art gallery. I hesitated, guessing that this was an investment that would probably never see a return. Then I decided it would be fun, and a good contribution to the community, even if I never saw my money back. I suspended financial judgment and joined up.

In the eight months I have been a partner in the bookstore, I have seen firsthand some of the struggle Kepler's – and virtually every independent bookstore – has experienced. Distributor companies, representing the publishers, control the supply of books. Small bookstores must purchase through them, at about 60 percent of the cover price.

Because of the publishers' and distributors' pricing, and the fact that they have a fixed retail price, books have a lower margin than other retail goods. Even the glossiest coffee-table books have a relatively low per-unit price (compared to, say, a refrigerator), necessitating a high volume of purchases. And of course, there are all the factors of competition from the behemoth bookstore chains, which negotiate discount prices from publishers and distributors and pass the discounts on to customers, have comprehensive selections and stay open at all hours. Keeping the bottom line in the black is a real struggle for stand-alone bookstores.

Independent bookstores have developed creative strategies to deal with these challenges. Few independent bookstores today survive just by selling books. In addition to offering coffee and sweets to lure patrons, many have additional lines of business, often related to books they sell – garden tools, artwork, knitting supplies. To bring customers into the store, they schedule authors to speak and sign books – and, as in the case of San Francisco's Stacey's and Books Inc., they collaborate with organizations like The Commonwealth Club on programs featuring authors. Their web sites and newsletters have become fonts of advice on books and discourse on literary topics. They have started book clubs associated with their stores. Attractive window displays, reading recommendations by staff – you name it, and independent bookstores are trying it, in an effort to be financially viable.



Bookstore co-owner Gloria Duffy (center) gets help from Club Board members Dennise Carter (left) and Mary Huss in directing customers.

With Barnes & Noble and Borders down the street, open at 9 p.m. when that sudden urge to browse hits, and Amazon.com available online 24/7, why worry about independent bookstores? Why is the concept important? Perhaps it is because reading, and the intellectual and spiritual growth that comes from it, is a very personal matter. Whether it is in the thought that goes into selecting books for the store, the availability of a knowledgeable proprietor for advice about books, or the potential for a bookstore to be a center of conversation in a community, independent bookstores are personal – while big chains are not.

The extraordinary efforts to salvage Kepler's last fall – fundraising, gathering a group of supporters in the community – reminded me more of what communities do to sustain non-profit organizations than of mere support for a local business. The lengths to which friends on the Peninsula went to rescue Kepler's seems to indicate that others see independent bookstores the way I do – as a social benefit to the community.

David Mas Masumoto, the Central Valley farmer and writer whose books about the joys and tribulations of family farming often grace the shelves of independent bookstores, recently compared his "artisan" organic farming to corporate farms. In *Four Seasons in Five Senses*, he writes: "Mass-produced peaches are designed to excite the visual senses as consumers trade money for something that resembles a peach. But my peaches begin with a journey into taste, texture and aroma, accompanied by stories.... The best farmers of personalized produce strive to create true stories and personal connections through our fruits."

When you walk through the door of an independent bookstore, you can expect to find stories, personal connections, hand-selected reading material, friendly recommendations, and a conversation with a neighbor over a cup of coffee. The last time I visited our bookstore, one of my partners had set up an old black Royal typewriter, with a sheet of paper on which the words "this is the song of mehitabel..." were typed. Fans of vintage journalism will catch this reference.

The sense of humor and warmth we find at an independent bookstore may explain why we are willing to pay a few dollars more for the books, just as we do for "artisan" produce. Ω