

Are Bookstores Defunct?

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Recently I went into my big neighbourhood bookstore with my “to buy” list of current releases. Sadly, they only had half the titles. Well, of course stores have limited shelf space and can’t possibly carry every title that every customer might want. A couple they did have were trade paper, and I knew I could buy those from their website at a discount (and hard covers for an even larger discount) so I asked a salesperson if I’d get the same discount if I bought the books at the bricks-and-mortar store. No. That seemed kind of strange, so I said, “So, I guess I should put all these back on the shelf and go order online, where I can get all the titles I want, discounts on some, and free shipping to my door. I’d be crazy to buy these here, in the store. Right?” And he said, “Right.”

So, the bookstore didn’t really care whether I came in to buy the six or so books on my list. They didn’t care if I browsed the shelves and quite likely picked up another two or three books, not to mention maybe a notebook, a card, some candles, and all that other stuff they carry in addition to books. Very interesting.

All right, this was only one sales guy and he wasn’t the best trained or most highly motivated, but let’s face it, he was only reflecting the message that the store, by its business decisions, was conveying. Was this just one store, with strange policies? No, of course not, it’s pretty typical of what’s happening with bookstores these days.

Since then I’ve seen some statistics. Studies indicate that up to 80% of readers are buying books online. There are all sorts of reasons. Some don’t have easy access to an actual store. They can shop at two in the morning. They can order books that aren’t available in stores. They can often get deeper discounts. They can pre-order a book that hasn’t been released yet, and maybe even get the book before it hits the shelves in stores. If they buy in sufficient quantities, they get free delivery to the door. For some, in this day and age of technology, perhaps they’re simply more comfortable dealing with computer screens than human beings.

The business of selling books has changed immensely over the last twenty years. We have seen bookstores – especially the huge chains and the larger stores – develop an online presence. We’ve also seen e-publishers, small presses and self-publishers set up shop on the internet. If today’s consumer wants to shop online and never visit a bricks-and-mortar store, the industry has chosen to make it easy. It’s evolution, and I suppose it’s inevitable.

And then, there’s a whole other kind of book purchase. The grocery/drug/department store one. From the corner mini-mart to the giant Wal-Mart, it seems like almost every store you go into carries books. Not a large selection, but anything from a couple dozen to a couple hundred books – from the most popular lines and authors. It’s easy for the casual reader to pick up a book every now and then without ever going near a bookstore, be it a bricks-and-mortar one or an online one. Apparently, a huge percentage of book sales take place in venues like Wal-Mart, which means these stores are another major factor contributing to the demise of bricks-and-mortar bookstores.

The readers who shop at those stores are exposed to a tiny percentage of all the books available, and will never stumble across those written by new or mid-list authors – unless the publishers have chosen those books for a major marketing push.

There are some things I'd like to know. Do people buy fewer books or more books if they shop online, at a bookstore, or at a department/grocery store? Where are they more likely to make impulse purchases? How does the quality of the experiences compare? What kind of people shop in each venue? What's the age breakdown for the different kinds of shoppers? Is it the older readers who are more hooked on the bookstore experience and the sight and feel of real live books?

Most importantly, what do these changes in purchase opportunities and habits mean? Will those lovely stores – from the glossy modern ones with Starbucks, through to the cozy old-fashioned ones with antiques and cinnamon-scented tea – survive? Or are they going the way of the dinosaur? Maybe I'm a dinosaur myself, but I'd hate to see them disappear.

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