Independent Bookstores
Our Partners in Crime

The 2015 Sisters in Crime Publishing Summit Report
Introduction

Who among us hasn’t spent many a blissful hour browsing the shelves of a bookstore? Whether writer, librarian, publishing industry professional or reader, we have taken joy from discovering a book that touched our lives. We’ve been captivated by atmospheric covers or eye-catching graphics, and reached for a book with an image that speaks to us. We’ve sat tucked into a chair with a cushion flattened by many other rear ends, lost in the first pages of a new book. We’ve chatted with strangers about books they recommend, gone to story hours as children, met with writing groups and book clubs — all in bookstores. Some of those bookstores are small, cozy spaces with an owner and a couple of book-loving employees we know by name. Others are larger chain stores that smell of coffee, with a labyrinthine maze of bookshelves. Regardless of where our bookstores were and are, whether they’re large or small, have a specialized stock or everything from a reference book on amphibians to Goodnight, Moon to Agatha Christie, they are central to our lives as literate people who believe in the power of story.

Given that, the Sisters in Crime Publishing Summit team (see our bios at Appendix A) believed the time was right to check in with bookstores, to assess their health and well-being, discover the ways they prefer to interact with authors, and find out about their procedures and future plans. Why now? The rise of e-publishing and Amazon have, for better or worse, changed the way books are published, distributed and bought. That inevitably affects bookstores, and social media is rife with tales of stores going belly-up, of bookstore owners throwing in the towel, of whole sections of towns and cities that are now bookstore-less. Yet, brick and mortar bookstores remain, some thriving, some deciding week by week whether or not they can afford to stay open. Since bookstores are an author’s key partner, we thought that finding out what makes them tick, what keeps them going, and how authors can best engage with them would be valuable information for our members.
Methodology

We constructed a 32-question survey and distributed it via email in October 2014, to 830 booksellers. This is a good place to point out that we only approached brick and mortar stores—Amazon and other online retailers were not part of this study. (Please see the 2010 Publishing Summit—listed in Previous Summit Reports sidebar—for more information about Amazon and its practices.) We offered to enter respondents into a drawing for a $500 grant to be used toward author events as incentive for owners/managers to complete the survey, and we guaranteed anonymity for respondents. (See We Love Bookstores sidebar for more information.) We sent a reminder email ten days after distributing the survey. We received 109 responses for a 13% response rate. Not as high as we would have liked, but definitely enough to garner interesting and useful data.

Since data never tell the complete story, we embarked on a series of in-person interviews with selected stores. The stores were not selected on the basis of their responses to the survey questions (since those remained anonymous); rather we selected them to represent a cross-section of the bookstore business: stores that sell a wide variety of books vs. mystery-oriented stores; stores from different geographic areas; stores that have been in business many years vs. relative newbies; stores with annual sales of less than $100K vs. stores with larger grosses. We developed a list of interview questions (Appendix B) that our interviewers asked at each interview. As one of our team members is fond of saying, the plural of anecdote is not data, but the anecdotes definitely shed light on the nature of the business and the whys and philosophy behind of some of the decisions and processes.

We also interviewed sales representatives from two Big Five publishers, each with decades of experience in the business. One of them wishes his/her comments to remain anonymous, and we have respected that request. Since sales reps are the bookstores’ interfaces with publishing houses, and carry information both to the bookstore and from the bookstore back to the publisher, we thought it important to get their perspective.

Disclaimer

We do not pretend that this document is a definitive statement about the status of bookstores. It is a snapshot of bookstores’ health and welfare and attitudes toward the publishing business in late 2014. We hope you will use it to educate yourself about the realities bookstore owners face every day, and the ways in which they prefer to interact with authors.
History

U.S. bookselling over the past several decades has been a volatile industry. Technological advances have spurred new business practices. There have been casualties. Independent and behemoth booksellers alike have shuttered their doors. Still others have adapted to the changing marketplace and prospered.

Since the early 1970s, market analysts have predicted the demise of independent booksellers (though it’s worth recalling that the “golden age” of bookstores is something of a myth; a 1931 study found only 500 in the United States, with most U.S. counties lacking a single bookstore). In the seventies, mall-based chain stores, such as Waldenbooks and B. Dalton, Booksellers, flourished. According to Reference for Business, an online encyclopedia offering insight into American industries, these chain stores typically carried between 15,000 and 20,000 titles, and sold volume. By comparison, the independents—although smaller and frequently operating from a single storefront—offered more variety and often stocked between 30,000 and 40,000 titles.

By the end of the decade, book discounters such as Crown Books had also entered the marketplace. The combined impact both hurt and helped the independent booksellers. Some simply could not compete, and they folded their operations, but as American Booksellers Association (ABA) executive director G. Royce Smith observed in Publishers Weekly, the total market for books was expanding.

The competition between chains and independents continued through the 1980s, but the landscape remained relatively stable until many of the chain stores opened “superstores”—destination stores that stocked 50,000 to 150,000 titles (many heavily discounted). They often expanded their inventory to include music, videos, and gift items. Many had in-store cafes and reading areas. They also had an efficient centralized inventory system that allowed them to return books that didn’t move; according to a 2000 report for the Author’s Guild by David Kirkpatrick, midlist titles were treated like “wallpaper,” while publishers paid for premium store placement. The success of Barnes & Noble and Borders Bookstore extended options for customers and often brought bookselling to areas that lacked bookstores, but renewed concern for the viability of independent booksellers.

Arguably the most seismic event to hit the industry occurred in the mid-1990s with the proliferation of online bookselling. The most successful of the online retailers, Amazon.com, claimed to be “Earth’s biggest bookstore” and in 1997, boasted 2.5 million titles.

Independent booksellers sought to level the playing field and fought back by lobbying their states governments to require chain booksellers and online vendors to collect sales tax in any state where they had a physical presence.
While quibbling over sales tax may strike some as trivial, consider this. Only 3 percent of books sold in 1998 were purchased on the Internet. In 2000, according to the U.S. Census Bureau’s Statistical Abstract of the United States, online sales jumped to a staggering 49 percent of all books sold.

The 21st century opened with several giants dominating the industry. Less than twenty years later, several of the chain stores and many more independents have disappeared due to an inability to reclaim sufficient market share.

Meaningful statistics regarding the bookselling industry are somewhat elusive, sometimes contradictory, and at times difficult to interpret. What doesn’t seem to be disputable is the sobering statistic from the U.S. Census Bureau Industry Snapshot that the total number of bookstores declined 27.9 percent from 12,363 establishments in 1997 to 7,177 in 2012. This includes the demise of Borders and Waldenbooks in 2011 and the closing of hundreds of Barnes & Noble stores.

Across the pond, British and Irish independent booksellers are experiencing a downward trend. Stephen Heyman of the New York Times reports a 25% loss of independent booksellers in the past decade.

But there is hope. The ABA reported a significant increase in bookstore membership since 2009, signaling a resurgence among indie bookstores in the U.S.

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While not all independent booksellers are members of the organization, the ABA is a bellwether of the independent bookselling landscape. According to Dan Cullen, Senior Strategy Officer of the ABA, "Book sales in independent stores grew almost 8 percent in 2012 in the U.S. over the previous year, and independent bookstores held on to almost all those gains in 2013. And in 2014, indie stores maintained the growth seen over the past few years. In addition, nationally in the U.S., new stores are opening, established stores are finding new owners, and a new generation is coming into the business as both owner/managers and frontline booksellers. All of this is a result of the fact that indie booksellers remain a resilient and entrepreneurial group."
Flash forward to the ABA’s latest report. Fifty-nine independent booksellers joined their organization in 2014, marking the largest number of new stores joining the trade association since 2008. An additional twenty-nine stores changed hands, but remained in business.

After years of flat or declining sales, Shelf Awareness recently reported that, after years of flat or declining sales, sales for independent bookstores in 2014 rose 6 percent (as tracked by the American Booksellers Association). Shelf Awareness cited numerous reasons for this resurgence. Many of those reasons are cited by the booksellers surveyed for this report. The specifics are detailed throughout this document, offering authors insight into an often perplexing industry.

**Key Findings**

**The Independent Bookstore Is Undergoing a Renaissance**

Although we did not collect financial data from them, independent bookstore owners’ experiences largely bear out the figures from the Shelf Awareness report: Indies are doing better in the last year or eighteen months. New stores have opened (Battle Creek Books in Michigan, Clock Tower Books in South Carolina, and many more), existing stores have expanded or added new locations (Tattered Cover in Denver, Changing Hands Phoenix, and others). One store owner wrote that media reports about “the death of the independent bookstore” are detrimental to business. So, spread the word—indies are alive and, though they face the challenges of all small businesses, they are thriving.

Barbara Peters, owner of The Poisoned Pen in Scottsdale, Arizona, attributes this is in large part to an uptick of interest in the “shop local” movement, an increasing consumer awareness of the importance of buying locally. She feels that Small Business Saturday, a marketing event that follows Black Friday, has helped increase awareness of the movement, especially since the American Booksellers Association started promoting it. Ironically, another factor that has heightened consumers’ desire to buy locally was the Amazon lawsuit about not paying state and local taxes. The visibility of the lawsuit, Peters contends, brought the issue to buyers’ attention and made them aware of the impact that the lost tax revenues have on their towns and cities. This has brought them into local stores in greater numbers, willing to purchase books (and other goods).

McKenna Jordan of Houston’s Murder by the Book agrees that things are looking up for indie bookstores. “The store is doing well—it supports pretty decent salaries; the staff is well taken care of. It’s down from where it was in 2009, but it’s holding on.” Otto Penzler, owner of The Mysterious Bookshop in New York, and manager Ian Kern have also noted a recent uptick in business. Today, they are turning a profit, supporting a full-time staff of five employees, and celebrating the fact that customers seem to be re-embracing the sense of community and services they offer.

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**INDependent Bookstores: Our Partners in Crime**
This renaissance may also be due to bookstores’ willingness and ability to offer services and/or experiences that e-tailers can’t replicate. These range from giving access to the very smell of books (referenced by several respondents), to events that offer interaction between readers and authors, to expert recommendations based on customers’ tastes (as opposed to the often wildly inaccurate algorithm recommendations from Amazon which don’t realize that the sci-fi book you bought was a gift for your brother so it deluges you with “you might also likes” that bear no relation to your reading tastes). Indies also offer a knowledgeable sales staff that reads widely and can champion a book by a debut author or midlister that otherwise would get lost in the deluge of author factory books (titles by huge name authors who team with less well known writers to produce eight, ten or fifteen books a year—think James Patterson).

Three words came up again and again in the survey comments and in interviews: curation, community and diversity.

**Curation:** Laurie Stephens of Mystery Lovers Bookstore in Pittsburgh says, “Curate is the new buzzword. It resonates with me because I used to be a librarian. I am creating and curating a collection.” Almost all the bookstore owners we interviewed talked about the importance of curation. It sets bookstores apart from e-tailers. Barbara Peters reads at least 50 pages of the up to 300 galleys/ARCs she receives each month. Bookstores’ staffs read widely as well, and many stores have Staff Recommendations tables or shelves. At Murder by the Book, staff have assigned sub-genres to read (period mysteries, paranormal, etc.). Michael Keefe of Annie Bloom’s in Portland says “Nothing sells books like word-of-mouth from friends.” In the next breath, he adds, “We sell quite a bit from our Staff Favorites table, which is always gratifying.”

**Community:** Again and again, booksellers mentioned their connection to the local community. The implication that customers regard the staff as friends is a telling one. For many consumers, that sense of relationship and trust is not there with an e-tailer. Booksellers get to know the interests of a local community and curate with that in mind. They also play a role in supporting the local economy and other local businesses and cultural organizations.

**Diversity:** When asked why independent booksellers matter, survey respondents emphasized how important it is for human beings, not algorithms or sales histories, to curate books for their communities to discover. As one wrote, independent booksellers collectively “provide the greatest diversity of voice and content and choice; without them we lose access to the margins and the marginal, the local and the individual, the common place and the uncommon, the new, the unexplored, the undiscovered. In other words, they are essential sites and sources of community and discovery, in an increasing atomized and monolithic world.” As another put it more bluntly, “There is no one who nurtures new and midlist authors like an indie bookstore.”
CHALLENGES
While indie bookstores might be undergoing a renaissance, the landscape is not trouble-free. When asked about their three biggest challenges, booksellers almost unanimously cited Amazon (and in one case listed Amazon as all three). Other items mentioned were cash flow, limited square footage, and competition from electronics for readers’ time, but Amazon is clearly the elephant sitting squarely between an indie’s selling space and the cash register. One respondent referred to it almost as a supervillain, calling it “SPECTRE.” All lament the etailing giant’s impact on their bottom line. Some see beyond that to a more pernicious influence: “I think [Amazon has] had a huge impact on making people feel a book isn’t worth anything; many people don’t want to pay what books are worth.” Other responders also commented on how Amazon and Jeff Bezos have devalued intellectual property and books in particular. Maryelizabeth Hart and Terri Gilman of San Diego’s Mysterious Gallery pointed out that “Amazon is a danger to all independent retailers, not just books and music.”

Not all booksellers see Amazon as a negative force, however. One who wishes to remain anonymous says, “I think Amazon has had a positive impact. True bookstore supporters might do their research on Amazon (all those reviews are so useful!) but they come into the store to buy. Think global, buy local—those aren’t empty words in our community . . . Maybe prices have gotten too high. It’s hard for readers to shell out $25 for a hardcover when it’s for sale on Amazon for ten bucks. That’s why we don’t stock the big guys—the really big bestsellers—and yes, they’re mostly guys, men like Patterson and Baldacci. It doesn’t make sense to stock those books in our store. We have to maintain a tricky balance to get the economics to work for us.”

Respondents who weren’t completely opposed to Amazon’s effect were few and far between, however. Barbara Peters comes at it from a slightly different perspective. She says that, yes, Amazon has had a negative impact, but so did Barnes & Noble. Similarly, Alzada Knickerbocker, who owns Avid Reader in Davis, California, says she’s made her peace with Amazon. Borders, she adds, was much more of a threat. She even admits to using Amazon on occasion to avoid disappointing a customer. “We use Amazon. We have a business account with them and buy books from them as a last resort. We would rather buy from Amazon than say no to a customer.” Peters concurs that in many ways Amazon is less harmful [than Borders or Barnes & Noble] because it’s not located in her city (Phoenix). She contends that people who want to push a button to buy a book, never shopped at The Poisoned Pen to begin with. She thinks that with the opening of an actual Amazon store in Manhattan that Amazon is going to stub its toe, to overreach like Microsoft and Standard Oil. “They’re so busy doing all this stuff,” Peters says, “that they’re not looking over their shoulder.”
Regardless, the pressure from Amazon and big box stores has forced indies to find a way to differentiate themselves, to offer something those other merchandisers can’t or don’t. One thing almost all indies offer is events.

**Events Sell Books**

For every newbie author who has scheduled a bookstore event, only to attract an audience of one or two (or none), there is hope: almost all of our survey respondents host author events, and all but one of the bookstore owners we interviewed say they’re crucial to strong sales. “Events absolutely sell books,” says Jordan McKenna. “They are MBTB’s bread-and-butter.” Forty-three percent of our survey takers will hold between 1–15 author events in 2015, with 19% hosting 16–25 events and a similar number, 18%, putting together 25–50 events. Fifteen of our responding stores plan to hold more than fifty author events in 2015. Stores like The Poisoned Pen routinely have 250 events per year. “This store[The Poisoned Pen]is basically a theater—everything moves out. The books on the walls are set decoration. This store is designed to be a theatre, not a bookstore,” says Barbara Peters.

Most of us who are authors struggle with defining what constitutes a “successful” or “effective” event. Does it have to do with the number of books sold while you’re in the store? The number of people who attend? Bookstores also wrestle with that question. One bookseller says, “Defining effective, though, is tricky. Is it audience size, number of books sold, number of question asked, quality of engagement between author and audience, percentage of books sold as related to audience size? We’ve had lousy events with 100+ people, and wonderful ones with five.” Another store pointed out that they need to make $100 profit minimum from sales per event to just break even, with larger events needing greater sales. There are benefits, tangible and intangible, beyond the day of the actual event, too. An event may lead to greater name recognition for the author, or to someone’s buying a book they heard about at the event six months later for a friend’s birthday. Such benefits are impossible to quantify. Annie Bloom’s reports that advance publicity can sometimes sell a few copies before the event, and “the buzz from the event can last a week or two after the reading, too. Hosting events is good for the store because they bring in new people.”

On the other hand, stores in less population-dense areas may find it difficult to attract a crowd for an event. Such is the experience of David Wilson of Mystery on Main Street in Brattleboro, Vermont, whose business is largely tourist-driven. However, even he admits the right kind of event, such as the Atria Great Mystery Bus Tour which featured four Atria authors, can draw...
a crowd and drive sales. He reports that he sold a “phenomenal number of books” via the group bus tour.

So, what is the “right” kind of event? Group events are popular and successful, many respondents report. Whether they are publisher group events (where several authors who share a publisher do a joint event), or based on a genre (cookbook authors, cozy mystery authors, fantasy authors), or revolve around a holiday (a Valentine’s Day event might feature the authors of a biography of St. Valentine, a romance or two, and a mystery set around the holiday). Having 3–5 authors involved, all publicizing the event to their fans, families and social media followings, brings more people into the store. More people=more sales.

Author events held in conjunction with literary festivals, arts festivals, or other community events that bring people into the bookstore’s area also tend to attract many customers. Bookstore owners such as Laurie Stephens are willing to “take it to the people,” to transport books to where the customers are. So, if your next book is set in a hair salon, consider hosting a launch party there and ask your local bookseller to support it. Your book’s set in outer space? Have an event at a museum, or in conjunction with a trade show for space-related industries. “Be creative” is the message we received from almost all respondents. “Events are best when the author is doing something other than a reading —like hairdos for kids, live music, an animal slide show.”

**How Books Get on Bookstore Shelves**

One of the challenges many booksellers mentioned was finding the right books. Curation may be an art, involving knowing what customers like, perusing catalogs, and perusing advanced reader copies looking for gems, but a large percentage of the bookstore owners we surveyed and interviewed said the publish-

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### You’ve Booked a Store Event — Now What?

- **Publicize the event.**
  - Respondents and interviewees mentioned the importance of both the store and the author (and sometimes the publisher) promoting the event via newsletters, websites, Facebook, Twitter, and word of mouth.
  - Do a press release and try to place an article about the event in the newspaper. Bookstore owners say this really drives up attendance.

- **Dress nicely.** *(Don’t look like you stopped by on the way to the gym.)* Business casual is usually a good bet. Laurie Stephens offers sage advice: “You’re not selling books when you do an event in person, you’re selling an image.”

- **Be prepared.**
  - Write out and rehearse your speech, if you’re giving a talk.
  - Have the paragraphs you’re reading marked (if you’re doing a reading). Note: “Readings consist of more than reading (!)” says one commenter. “More often it consists of story-telling about the genesis of the book, personal stories about the book or the characters, and/or provides a glimpse into the author’s personal life.”
  - Make sure any projection equipment works. (Arrive early to check this out.)

- **Be nice.** To the bookstore staff and to customers. Sounds like common sense, but bookstore owners mentioned this time and again in their comments.

- **Engage the customers.** “Engaging” was a word that respondents used over and over to describe authors who had successful events.
  - Mystery Lovers Bookshop says, “A good speaker is genuine. You can tell she wants to talk to the audience. She tells anecdotes about herself, is generous with information about herself to entertain the audience, be their friend. She’s gracious. And willing.”
  - Survey comments included: “The author [of their most successful event] was prepared to engage the audience and knew how to entertain them.” Successful events features “authors known to customers as someone who engages warmly with them.”

- **Do not give away your books (even to family) in advance of the event.**

- **Do not, under any circumstances, mention Amazon.** Seriously.
  - “Don’t mention Amazon or Barnes & Noble in your speech at our store while you’re drinking our wine and eating our food. You would think this was obvious and common courtesy, but it happens at one of three signings.”
ers’ sales reps play a huge role in determining what books they choose to stock in their stores. Ergo, we sought out sales reps to get a feel for what a rep does, what their perspective on bookstores is, and how they influence the bookselling process. If we look at the bookselling business as a triangle, with author at one corner, bookstore at another, and publishers at the third, editors are the line that joins author to publisher and sales reps are the line that joins bookstores and publishers. They provide information and product from the publisher to the bookstore, and take bookstores’ feedback to the publisher. (The line between author and bookstores exists only if the author makes the effort to create it.)

One rep we visited with, who is Director of Field Sales for a Big Five publishing house, and who used to be a buyer at a bookstore with multiple outlets, agreed to talk with us anonymously. Let’s call him/her Sydney (a nicely gender neutral name). Sydney says a typical rep might cover ten states, and have 70 accounts, meaning they’re in a unique position to observe what goes on at dozens of bookstores. The other rep we talked to, Kasey Pfaff, is the Sales Manager, Penguin Adult Division, for Penguin Random House. She was initially in publicity and has now been in sales for nine years. Her territory covers four states in the Southwest and encompasses about 25 indie bookstores and an independent chain. (See Sidebar on “A Day in the Life . . . ”)

There are three selling seasons per year, and both reps say that catalogs are still important sales tools, as are print galleys and ARCs (so, authors, get your agents to lobby for them). Most buyers, Sydney says, are buying from Edelweiss. (Don’t know what that is? See the sidebar on page 17.) Kasey is also enthusiastic about Edelweiss, a “brilliant tool” used by most publishers as a central clearinghouse for posting digital catalogs online. Sydney says buyers pay a lot of attention, via Edelweiss, to “how much love a book is getting on Goodreads” before placing an order.

Sales reps also have an impact on what books stores order, and their honesty is valued. Alzada Knickerbocker of Avid Reader says, “We work from past sales of an author and we can’t be persuaded by an enthusiastic rep except for some debut novels. That said, our trusted reps don’t oversell anyway.” Sydney says that reps always know what a publishers’ lead titles are, but that they also try to identify the sleepers and the surprise break-out books. Sydney contends that it’s a bunch of “intangibles” that go into that identification process. Sometimes it has to do with the author’s platform or media contacts (such as a debut author who writes for the New York Times in his day job), or with the subject matter. There’s no artificial reason to push a book; in fact, sales reps sometimes talk up the books being sold by rival publishers. Sales reps read voraciously and get excited about good books, no matter who is putting them out.

When reps attend launch meetings at their publishing houses, six months in advance of a book going on sale, they hear from editors about all the up-
coming books. The sales reps then tell publicity about the stores where they think particular books will connect. Either the reps or the stores themselves may make a pitch for an author appearance. All requests are then pulled together into one document for the publicity department. (If you’re an author who’s pretty sure bookstores aren’t fighting over the opportunity to host your signings — yet — you’re not alone.) The sales rep also works with the store to determine the number of books to order and makes sure they arrive on time.

With their window into the operations of dozens, if not hundreds, of stores, sales reps can see what’s working and what’s not. In general, Sydney says, the stores who harness social media effectively are doing better than those who don’t. Newsletters are important. Additionally, those who “raise the bar” on events, who make events something different, who offer something entertaining and fun (food sampling at a cookbook signing), who are willing to do offsite events and school events, are the ones who are prospering. Kasey adds that “independent stores that have a clear identity are the ones that tend to thrive. They use that identity to guide their inventory choices and marketing decisions.” She agrees with Sydney that the successful stores market themselves through social media. “There is so much juice in kids and young adult books and they are so active on Twitter and social media [that] stores really need to be engaged in that sphere.”

Sales reps carry comments and requests from booksellers back to publishing houses. “We talk about covers weekly,” Sydney says. Reps sell to the “big accounts” (major wholesalers like Ingram and Baker & Taylor, and Barnes & Noble) weeks in advance of selling to individual bookstore accounts, and if a big account has a negative reaction to a cover, that feedback may prompt a re-think and a re-do of the cover.

When asked if there’s a place for author-sales rep interaction, Sydney mentioned trade shows. They’re very valuable for authors, Sydney says. Signing at trade shows is good, but doing an event is even better. Any other interaction between authors and sales reps should be channeled through editors and publicists. Sydney mentioned a recent pre-publication tour with a debut author that featured the author and sales rep traveling to several stores together. It was set up through the publisher’s publicity department.

For those who doubt the value of book awards (Edgars, Agathas, Hugos, Ritas, etc.), Sydney says that they bump up sales immediately, and boost pre-orders. They are “ammo to take to a buyer meeting,” and they help with backlist sales and re-orders, too. Sydney’s parting advice for authors was to read Putting Your Passion Into Print by Arielle Eckstut and David Henry Sterry. “It’s brutally honest, tough love.”
Independent Bookstores Are Indispensable

The perception among bookstore owners (borne out by industry statistics) is that ebook sales have leveled off and that readers are returning to bookstores; indeed, many never left. Even some readers who buy in e-format also want to own a hardcover book, either as a collector’s item, because they like the tactile experience of a book, they want it signed, or they know their ebooks are subject to mysterious disappearances. Above and beyond that, people come to bookstores because they create a sense of community, they champion books that would get little notice otherwise (including those by marginalized voices), they are cultural hubs and they provide vetted guidance in a flood of books (the “curation” we talked about earlier.) They are also reliable allies in literacy efforts and a place where serendipity happens. You can find a book you didn’t know about, something you didn’t know you wanted to read, by browsing at a bookstore. That’s much harder to do online. “Walking into a bookstore is like walking into an art gallery. Your mind and intellect become engaged.” “It’s not just bookstores but all small businesses that matter. Do we really want to be a world of warehouses and delivery trucks?”

Successful booksellers are in touch with their larger communities and create an indispensable niche for themselves. Many dovetail their efforts with their local arts boards or colleges, with annual festivals and other events. Otto Penzler of Mysterious Bookshop in Manhattan attributes his success in a borough where high rents challenge business owners to the many events they host and a robust mail order business through which they offer several different kinds of first edition buyer’s clubs. Other bookstores offer similar clubs. Many mail books around the globe. David Wilson of Mystery on Main Street in Brattleboro imports many books, such as those by Scandinavian and British authors, which are in demand but unavailable in the U.S. The Poisoned Pen in Phoenix has recently started customizing signings with something extra. For instance, they’re including a quiz in the Enochian language when they send out copies of the new James Rollins book and are now looking to design something related to Lucas Davenport to sell with John Sandford’s 25TH Prey novel. “We’re going into the design business,” Peters says. “We’re always looking for ways to customize.”

Independent bookstores are indispensable to small presses, self-published authors, and women writers. Many of our respondents pride themselves on stocking books from smaller presses, and discovering and hand-selling books by authors that aren’t getting the promotional attention (and dollars) of an Evanovich or Baldacci. Laurie Stephens sums it up: “We want to sup-
Sister in Crime member Jenny Milchman is the author of the Mary Higgins Clark award-winning debut, Cover of Snow, and the follow-up thriller, Ruin Falls. She also unofficially holds the title for world’s longest book tour, so we invited her to give her author’s perspective on indie bookstores.

After a thirteen-year journey to publication, I set out with my family to visit bookstores across the country. What did we find during a total of eleven months and 55,000 miles on the road?

For one thing, leaving the city reveals a different side of the bookstore scene. In small town America, the local bookstore can provide a whole weekend’s occupation. A hurried stop in for a gift before a birthday party, an author reading that evening, a place to while away Sunday’s rainy afternoon.

Booksellers are an imaginative group of people to start with, but changing times have driven them to new heights. Lunches with the author, such as those held at Bank Square Books in Mystic, CT and Macintosh Books & Paper on Sanibel Island, FL, are popular, as is “Mimosas & Mystery” at Fireside Books in Shelby, NC. Stores can be even more creative. For example, Square Books in Oxford, MS combines its live radio show with an author reading. Amongst foot-stomping and banjo-playing, the author reads for fourteen adrenaline-charged minutes. Bookstores like Auntie’s in Spokane, WA and The Bookstore Plus in Lake Placid, NY integrate author appearances with in-store book clubs, ensuring a robust turnout and sales. The Booksellers at Laurelwood in Memphis, TN serve treats and Watermark Books in Wichita, KS stages events beside its gourmet café. Book Passage in Corte Madera, CA and Mechanicsburg Mystery in PA put on hugely popular yearly conferences for writers and fans.

Everyone is trying to address the perennial problem of getting attendees to events. At Flyleaf Books in North Carolina, we encountered a marketing group applying targeted strategies to boost attendance. For bookish people to become marketers is a challenge—whether you’re a writer or a bookseller. But when they do, people who learn of the efforts seem excited.

Perhaps of most interest to SinC members are the mystery bookstores, which draw top-selling authors from thousands of miles away, even overseas. Raven award winners Aunt Agatha’s in Ann Arbor, MI and Once Upon a Crime in Minneapolis, MN have museum-worthy collections of memorabilia in addition to packed shelves of books. Brand new mystery bookstores like Mysteriescape in Overland Park, KS and Mystery To Me in Madison, WI have hit the ground running. Event calendars at The Mysterious Bookshop, Seattle Mystery, The Poisoned Pen, Mysterious Galaxy, Murder by the Book, and Mystery People at Book People read like the New York Times bestsellers list.

Nobody has a crystal ball, and it’s hard to predict where anything in this rapidly changing world is going. But everywhere we went in this country of ours, we found a packed and bustling bookstore. There’s no mystery to that.
port small presses. We want authors to have more opportunities to publish books that aren’t necessarily seen as commercial by a traditional house. A small press will take a chance on a book that’s different. As booksellers, we need books that aren’t necessarily all the same, not formula . . . We need to offer more than the usual stuff to keep readers interested. That said, I want to support small presses, but I want the books to be good. The writing, the stories, the background, the research — everything about the books has to be quality or I lose confidence in the company.

“We’d have a limited selection of reading material at the whim of giant faceless corporate stooges who can’t respond to the needs of the local community [if there were no independent bookstores].”

Self-published authors would not find shelf space in a brick-and-mortar store if it weren’t for indies. The big chains—Barnes & Noble, Costco, Target, etc.—are not stocking self-published authors’ works next to the calendars or cases of baby formula. Slightly more than half of our indie respondents, however, welcome books by self-published authors, especially local authors (see sidebar about approaching bookstores on page 16). One has Local Author Saturdays where self-pubbed authors are welcome to sign their books alongside traditionally published local authors. Once again, bookstores are looking for material that will appeal to their customers, and sometimes that book comes from a self-published author. Not all indies, though, are as accommodating. Approximately a quarter of our bookstore respondents say they never or almost never carry self-published books. The Poisoned Pen’s motto for self-publishers is, “You publish it, you sell it.” Peters admits that not doing events for self-published authors nets some rancor, but it comes down to the customers. “Our customers are not interested in self-pubbed books. They are largely hardcover book collectors.”

Another group to whom indie bookstores are indispensable are women authors. It should not be news to anyone who is a Sisters in Crime member that the publishing business is biased in favor of men, from cover art, to what books get reviewed, to the books that get major awards, to, ultimately, the books that sell. (See SinC’s latest monitoring study report: http://www.sistersincrime.org/?Monitoring2014) Indie bookstores work to correct this bias, many of them quite consciously. We did not ask a question about gender bias on our survey, but we did bring it up in our in-person or phone interviews by referencing the Jodi Picoult interview with Britain’s The Telegraph where she critiques the publishing industry for its bias against women and its veneration of books by men, even bad books. (Read it here: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/11253940/Jodi-Picoult-Its-really-hard-to-love-America-sometimes.html ).
Michael Keefe of Portland’s Annie Bloom acknowledges that bias exists. “There’s a definite gender bias. And American publishing, in particular, encourages it. Books that might have gender neutral covers overseas are given more women-friendly covers here. And women’s fiction is often made to look breezier than it really is. In short, Picoult is right.” Otto Penzler and Ian Kern of New York’s Mysterious Bookshop echo those comments, although they believe “a good book is a good book.” Some of their customers say, however, that they will not read books by women. Often this preference is framed in terms of taste, as when men will not read “chicklit” or “cozies.” They also agree that sometimes publishers don’t package the cover and jacket copy appropriately, thereby handicapping the author in finding the right audience. When a chilling thriller gets a “soft” cover, the right readers won’t pick it up.

Mary Magers of Magers and Quinn in Minneapolis notes that more women seem to attend events than men. She hasn’t seen signs that publishers are favoring men over women; it’s the author’s track record or genre that has the most impact. She says she is sensitive to the issue. “We avoid recommending books for girls or boys or for grandmas. We don’t like to assume, so we make the effort to find out about interests, and say, ‘If you like volleyball, you’ll like this book.’” That approach seems popular with many of the bookstore owners we interviewed, although not all of them think there’s a problem with gender bias or that bookstores have a role in confronting it. Maryelizabeth Hart and Terri Gilman of Mysterious Galaxy in San Diego suggest bias is not as prevalent at the bookstore level as it is on the reviewer level. They say they don’t see it at all in their store. “It’s not our issue.”

Combatting bias is something some stores do consciously and others take on as part of trying to find the right book for the right customer. Keefe continues, “In terms of hand-selling across gender lines, I feel like that’s just one component among many involved in trying to figure out what a reader is looking for . . . I’m sure everyone on our staff would be happy to sell ‘women’s’ books to men, and vice versa . . . With mysteries, gender (whether author, protagonist, or reader) doesn’t seem to matter.” McKenna Jordan of MBTB agrees that Picoult’s take on the industry is accurate. However, MBTB tries to break through the bias “all the time—we give it a shot.” They are pleased when they convince a man to try a book by a woman and he comes back to say he’s been converted, albeit reluctantly. On a humorous note, Jordan says they have one male customer who reads a female author without knowing it. He doesn’t realize Val McDermid is a woman and MBTB doesn’t tell him.

Jim Huang, former owner of The Mystery Company and now manager of the Kenyon College bookstore, believes that bookstores have a role in
How Does an Author Get His or Her Books into Indie Bookstores?

We asked over a hundred bricks-and-mortar indie bookstores: “What advice would you give authors hoping to develop a positive relationship with you?” Here are the tips that came up again and again (and again), in order of frequency.

✍ Be a customer. More than anything else, bookstore owners want us to buy books from them before we try to sell books to them.

✍ Be professional. Know how the business works. (Hopefully, SinC members, who care enough to be part of a professional organization, don’t need too much instruction on this, but here are some reminders:
  - Write professional letters and emails. “Your first introduction to us should be polite, carefully, written, and show an awareness of our store. Nothing encourages us to ignore an author like poor spelling and grammar or a pushy or unfriendly attitude.”
  - Have your book available via Ingram’s at the standard discount.
  - Be able to explain why the bookstore should stock your book. Hint: The answer to that is not “because I’ve written the Great American Novel, something that every intelligent being on the planet needs to read.” The answer lies in your research of the store’s customer base.
  - Understand how consignment works, and what the standard split is (60/40).
  - Know standard terms and forms. Says one respondent: “Asking ‘What’s an invoice?’ will get you shown the door. (I’ve seriously had authors say that to me. More than once.)”
  - Provide an ARC, even if it’s a loaner.
  - Go to the store’s website before asking questions about stocking or events—the answer might be there.

✍ Be local. Many, many bookstores wrote about their willingness to stock the books of local authors, or authors who write about local lore, geography, events, etc.

✍ Don’t say the A-word. Whether it’s telling people at a signing that our e-books are available on Amazon, or suggesting that the bookstore could buy our discounted books on Amazon and then mark them up, or even having buy buttons linking to Amazon on our websites . . . invoking the behemoth that’s making life hard for the indies is never a good move. The bookstore owners aren’t asking us to give up selling through Amazon, just to recognize that if we promote Amazon ahead of indies, we need to dial down expectations that indies will support us. Hard to argue.

✍ Promote yourself. Although hand-selling is one of the most wonderful things about independent bookstores, owners were very clear that we shouldn’t rely on them to promote our books. The dream author drops off flyers, posters and display items, gets in touch with local press, shouts about the event on social media and brings a posse to any author events.

✍ Send readers to books, not books to readers. Many bookstore owners spoke about wanting us to help readers buy books from their shelves, in return for the shelf space. Again—hard to argue.
  - Put links to indie stores on our websites.
  - Don’t sell at a discount online or give books away at events in their store.
  - Encourage anyone who declines an invitation to your signing to order the book anyway and have it shipped.

✍ Remember you are one of thousands. That’s a direct quote from a respondent, but it was echoed in many different ways:
  - Don’t drop in and expect attention ahead of customers (and never drop in on a Saturday).
  - Don’t cold call expecting an order to be taken over the phone.
What is Edelweiss and Why Should an Author Care?

In six short years, Edelweiss has become a key tool in the ordering process for booksellers. The simple way to describe Edelweiss is as a platform for the digital delivery of new title information to stores; it supplements or replaces paper catalogs. The site lists catalogs from over 150 publishers and distributors, from the Big Five, to tiny independent publishers. Before an author signs a contract now, it is well worth enquiring if the publisher is on Edelweiss.

Anyone can browse catalogs by visiting the site at http://edelweiss.abovethetreeline.com. Because the site is organized by publisher and within publisher by catalog, it can be bewildering. One can quickly begin to appreciate the vast number of choices that a bookstore buyer faces, and start to see how Edelweiss can help buyers navigate those choices. In addition to the basic seasonal catalogs, publishers can readily put together special title groupings, such as “Carnegie Awards Longlist 2015 from Penguin Random House” or “Lonely Planet Top 50 Bestsellers.”

When you open up a catalog and look at titles, you’ll find a bar graph that measures Goodreads activity. Browsers can click on the bar and go directly to that title’s Goodreads page. This might suggest to authors that a robust and active Goodreads presence is worth the time invested. Similar graphs attempt to measure Twitter and blog activity. There are also icons for and links to Indie Next list write-ups, starred reviews at Publishers Weekly and other honors.

Edelweiss boasts 61,000 registered users, ranging from retailers to reviewers, and librarians to publishers. For stores, the real power of Edelweiss becomes apparent when logged-in. Stores can share their enthusiasm for a title with other stores: buzzy titles display a “Much Love from 12 Peers,” for example, and booksellers can see exactly who’s recommending a title. The “Much Love” feature suggests even authors who can’t travel widely for signing can benefit from having a good relationship and strong sales with their local bookstores. Publishers can make digital galleys available through Edelweiss and sales reps can share notes about a book indicating local interest, promotion and marketing, etc. Booksellers can build orders directly in Edelweiss, share the orders with reps, and then import orders directly into point-of-sale/inventory management systems.

Edelweiss services are free; publishers foot the bill for the site through listing fees. Booksellers can also subscribe to Treeline Analytics, a premium companion service that pulls sales and inventory data directly from bookstore systems. Treeline feeds this data into Edelweiss, so that stores can view stock and sales history for comparable titles alongside new title listings, helping bookstores order appropriate quantities. A separate Treeline Analytics site displays store data alongside all other Treeline participants. This makes it easy to identify titles others are selling that a store should consider ordering or reordering.

The company has recently announced a partnership with Ingram Library Services to offer analytical tools to libraries as well. The press release says that the new service will give “libraries access to the most accurate and up-to-date information available on library circulation, retail sales data, title data and much more:”

If this sidebar does nothing else, it should convince authors that the process of stocking a store is neither whimsical nor random. Buyers work with sales reps on Edelweiss, stores share info with each other and, especially for folks who’ve connected Treeline to Edelweiss, there’s data that goes into a buying decision. It is a process, and it takes a lot of time and discipline to make it all work properly. Edelweiss is big part of that process.
overcoming gender bias. “Part of what we do as booksellers is lead readers to books that they don’t know that they want, and I think that includes getting men to buy women’s books and women to buy men’s books—to put it in terms that I would not ordinarily use.” He goes on to assess the danger of not having brick-and-mortar bookstores, with relying too much on etailers. “It seems to me that the problem with moving so much of our marketing attention online is that online mostly just reinforces prejudices. Is there a more effective force for overcoming preconceptions than a good independent bookstore? That’s a serious question. If there’s another answer, I can’t think of it. Maybe good librarians do the same thing. Maybe. The good independent bookseller might not have much reach, but I don’t think we can deny that there’s power there to effect change. If bias is made up of little nudges then overcoming bias is likely to be a matter of little nudges the other way.”

Conclusion
Independent bookstores are indispensable precisely because they can administer those little nudges, one or two or more each day, with what they stock on their shelves, the events they host, and their interactions with customer. And after a few tough years, the resounding message from indies is, as Twain might put it, “The reports of our death have been greatly exaggerated.”
Survey Results

About the Bookstore Respondents

Focus

Eighty-seven percent of respondents own or manage stores with a general book inventory. Five percent of respondents sell primarily mysteries, and another five percent sell a mix of mysteries and at least one other genre. Only four percent had a non-fiction focus.

New vs. Used

Fifty-four percent of respondents sell all or primarily new books, with forty-five percent selling a mix of new and used or antiquarian books. Two bookstores had an inventory of primarily used or antiquarian books.
Almost half (forty-five percent) of respondents have been in business for more than 20 years. Twenty percent have been open 10–20 years, fourteen percent for 5–10 years, nine percent for 3–5 years, eight percent for 1–3 years, and the remaining two percent opened their doors less than a year ago.

In a related metric, twenty-four percent of current owners have owned their store for more than 20 years. An equal percentage have been owners for 10–20 years. Nineteen percent have owned their stores for 5–10 years, fifteen percent for 3–5 years, thirteen percent for 1–3 years, and four owners are newbies, buying their stores within the past year.
The greatest percentage of stores (twenty-three percent) are in the northeast or mid-Atlantic regions. Twenty percent are in the midwest. The south and west are right behind at seventeen percent and the mountains and plains region comes in at eleven percent. One bookstore identified its location as “other.”

Forty-seven percent of respondents have a store in a downtown locale. Eighteen percent identify their location as urban but not downtown, and thirteen percent call their location suburban. Nineteen percent do business in a rural area.
The majority of respondents, sixty-one percent, offer online sales, with an additional eleven percent planning to do so in the future. Twenty-nine percent do not offer online sales and have no plans to do so.

Forty-four percent of respondents offer ebooks through their website, with most of those (thirty-five percent of respondents) using the ABA/Kobo program. Eleven percent of respondents plan to offer ebooks within the next year, and almost half of respondents (forty-six percent) do not sell ebooks and don’t plan to in the future.
Sixty-two percent of respondents had sales of less than a quarter million dollars, with twenty-three percent bringing in revenues below $100,000. Nineteen percent raked in between a quarter and a half million dollars, with nine percent between half a million and a million. Seven percent of respondents exceeded the million mark with sales revenues.

Seventy-eight percent of respondents garnered more than seventy percent of their revenues by selling books. Fourteen percent took in between fifty and seventy percent of their revenues from book sales, while only six percent make less than half their money from book sales.
Keep in mind that these numbers include the responses of bookstores who primarily stock crime fiction. Sixteen percent of respondents made over half their sales on mysteries and thrillers. Eighteen percent made between twenty-five and fifty percent of sales in that category, with forty-two percent of respondents making between ten and twenty-five percent of sales in that genre. Nearly a quarter of respondents credit mysteries/thrillers for less than ten percent of their sales.

Close to half — forty-two percent — of the stores who took our survey had a return rate of less than five percent. Thirty percent of stores have a return rate between five and ten percent, with sixteen percent of stores having a rate between ten and twenty percent. Only five stores had a return rate exceeding twenty percent. As a comparison point, other retail outlets (big box stores, etc.) reportedly have a book return rate of around thirty-three percent.
Selecting Books for Inventory

When choosing books to stock on their shelves, bookstore owners/managers rated the following as most influential (from most to least): author’s reputation, the book’s reputation (i.e., it’s getting a lot of buzz), the author being local, and strong pre-publication reviews (although only half of respondents said these were “quite important” or “extremely important”). Also important, but less so than the above factors, were co-op support from publishers, recommendations from sales reps (slightly more than half of respondents cited contact with sales reps as a factor in choosing what books to carry), and enticing cover art. Covers being so far down the list is interesting since a Bowker report in 2010 identified covers as one of the top three factors customers consider when choosing a book [http://cymcdn.com/sites/www.sistersincrime.org/resource/resmgr/imported/ConsumerBuyingBookReport.pdf]. Several of the booksellers we interviewed in person said covers were vital, including Laurie Stephens of Mystery Lovers Bookshop in Pittsburgh who said, “Covers! They’re so important!” And urban legend in author circles certainly suggests that many a book has languished or died because of a cover that is either unenticing or misrepresents the book’s content.

Customer recommendations matter to almost all respondents. Printed material — catalogs and ARCS — were preferred over digital for selecting books. That said, slightly more than half of respondents used Edelweiss, a digital platform for publishers’ catalogs (see Edelweiss sidebar on page 17). A third rarely or never used it. Treeline, a sophisticated analytics service for bookstores, was less widely adopted, at least by our respondents. However, one of the publisher sales reps we interviewed said that almost all orders placed by his/her customers are done via Edelweiss.

**Recommendation from a Sales Rep**

![Graph showing recommendation levels](image-url)
**Author’s Reputation**

- Little or no importance (3)
- Some importance (14)
- Quite a lot of importance (67)
- Extremely important (27)

**Author is a Local**

- Little or no importance (1)
- Some importance (40)
- Quite a lot of importance (44)
- Extremely important (26)

**Strong Pre-publication Reviews**

- Little or no importance (7)
- Some importance (49)
- Quite a lot of importance (43)
- Extremely important (12)
**Pre-publication Review Sources (such as Publisher’s Weekly)**

- Rarely or never use (12)
- Occasionally use (38)
- Fairly often use (43)
- Almost always use (18)

**Buzz**

- Little or no importance (4)
- Some importance (29)
- Quite a lot of importance (54)
- Extremely important (24)

**Covers**

- Little or no importance (11)
- Some importance (50)
- Quite a lot of importance (38)
- Extremely important (12)
**Publisher Support**

- little or no importance (30)
- some importance (47)
- quite a lot of importance (28)
- extremely important (5)

**Printed Publisher Catalogs**

- rarely or never use (13)
- occasionally use (34)
- fairly often use (36)
- almost always use (27)

**Publisher Websites**

- rarely or never use (34)
- occasionally use (56)
- fairly often use (18)
- almost always use (2)
**TreeLine**

- Rarely or never use (73)
- Occasionally use (15)
- Fairly often use (10)
- Almost always use (9)

**Information from Authors**

- Rarely or never use (21)
- Occasionally use (59)
- Fairly often use (25)
- Almost always use (5)

**Customer Recommendations**

- Rarely or never use (1)
- Occasionally use (37)
- Fairly often use (46)
- Almost always use (27)
Almost 80% of respondents said they carry at least some self-published books, although many are selective about them and others have a primary focus on local authors. Four percent of bookstores surveyed never carry self-published books, and sixteen percent rarely do. If a store accepts self-published books, it is most likely to do so on a consignment basis with a 60/40 split. (See sidebar on page 16.)
In response to the question, “How do customers most often choose a book to purchase at your store, bookseller were asked to check no more than three of the available options. By far the most significant methods were browsing around on their own (80%), asking for a recommendation from staff (77%) and coming to the store with a specific book in mind (71%). Next were “responding to displays (21%) and “attending an author event and then making a purchase (19%). Curiously, only 2% of respondents said sales or special offers prompted their customers to buy books.
REACHING OUT TO CUSTOMERS

 Handselling titles to customers (108)
 Facebook account (99)
 In-store displays (96)
 Staff picks (75)
 Store newsletter (74)
 By supporting local charities (73)
 Through local media attention (61)
 Twitter account (55)
 Customer loyalty program (52)
 Paid advertising (49)
 Mailing list (48)
 Providing materials about the store in other locations (e.g., local library, community center) (41)
 Other (16)

 KINDS OF EVENTS

 Author appearances (105)
 Seasonally-themed events (46)
 Children's storytime (35)
 Workshops (34)
 Topical lectures (28)
 Art exhibits (27)
 Music performances (22)
 Open mic (11)
 We don't hold events (2)
 Other (26)
**Media Relationships**

- We get virtually no attention from local media (12)
- We sometimes get publicity, but it’s unpredictable (32)
- We have a good relationship with one or more outlets (63)

**Relationships with Authors**

**Number of Author Events**

- More than 50 (15)
- 25–50 (20)
- 16–25 (23)
- 1–15 (48)
- None (3)

**Support for Offsite Events**

- No (16)
- On average, once or twice a year (22)
- 3–5 times a year (32)
- More than 5 times a year (38)
Stores that charge either customers or authors for events are a tiny minority of the total.
Factors for Hosting Author Events

We asked stores to choose the top three factors they consider when deciding what author events to host. Authors being local, popular with customers, and writing books the store wants to promote were the top three factors in scheduling an event.
Bookellers seem, overall, guardedly optimistic about the outlook for independent bookstores. Only fourteen percent see a dim future. The least positive responses came from stores that had little in common other than that they were more likely than more optimistic respondents to be smaller stores with less than $100,000 in annual sales. Responses to open questions revealed some frustration with the current climate for independent bookstores, coupled with a strong belief that they matter.
Sources


Acknowledgments

The Publishing Summit Team wishes to thank all the booksellers who responded to our survey. We are also hugely grateful to the owners and managers who sat down to talk to us in greater depth about their stores and the bookselling business:

Annie Bloom’s—Michael Keefe, Portland, OR
Avid Reader—Alzada Knickerbocker, Davis, CA
Fountain Bookstore—Kelly Justice, Richmond, VA
Kramer Books—Sarah Baline, Washington DC
Magers & Quinn—Mary Magers, Minneapolis, MN
Murder by the Book—McKenna Jordan, Houston, TX
Mysterious Galaxy—Maryelizabeth Hart and Terri Gilman, San Diego, CA
Mystery Lovers Bookshop—Laurie Stephens, Pittsburgh, PA
Mystery Loves Company—Kathy Harig, Oxford, MD
Mystery on Main Street—David Wilson, Brattleboro, VT
The Mysterious Bookshop—Ian Kern and Otto Penzler, New York, NY
One More Page Books—Eileen McGervey, Arlington, VA
The Poisoned Pen—Barbara Peters, Scottsdale, AZ

We’d also like to thank the sales reps who graciously agreed to be interviewed, Kasey Pfaff of Penguin Random House, and “Sydney.”

We send a shout out and thank you to Sisters Lisa Alber, Stefanie Pintoff, Triss Stein, and Diane Vallere, for conducting some of the interviews for us.

Every survey needs a mailing list and several people (Sisters and Misters) helped pull this one together. Thank you to Karen Pullen, Gail Smith, Britni Patterson, Susan Shea, Rae Franklin James, Pat Morin, Camille Minichino, M.P. Cooley, Mary Heitert, Joan Collins, Patricia Camalliere, Robert Goldsborough, Elaine Orr, Susan Myers, Peggy Ehrhart and Dot Hayes.

Thanks to the booksellers who gave the survey a test run and made many helpful suggestions, including Pat Frovarp and Gary Shulze of Once Upon a Crime (Minneapolis), Kathy Phillips of Spencer’s (Boston), and Augie Aleksy of Centuries and Sleuths (Forest Park, IL).

Finally, thanks to designer Gina Harrison; Beth Wasson, SinC’s Executive Director; and Sarah Glass, SinC’s Social Media Director, for their part in making the final product gorgeous, and ensuring it gets to all our members, and onto our website.
Appendix A

Publishing Summit Team

**Micki Browning** is an FBI National Academy graduate who worked in law enforcement for more than two decades. She retired as a division commander leading the investigations, internal affairs and training bureaus. Her short story, “Wreckage,” was chosen as a top ten selection for the FWA collection, The First Step. She’s putting the finishing touches on *Adrift*, a mystery set in Key Largo. She splits her time between the Florida Keys and Colorado. [MickiBrowning.com](http://MickiBrowning.com)


**Barbara Fister** is an avid reader, an academic librarian, a columnist for *Inside Higher Ed* and *Library Journal*, and the author of a thriller, *On Edge* and the Anni Koskinen mysteries, *In The Wind* and *Through The Cracks* as well as an academic book on third world women writers.

**Jim Huang** has been involved in the mystery genre for over 30 years as a book review editor, specialty bookstore owner, director of the Independent Mystery Booksellers Association, Sisters in Crime board member (the first brother to serve on the board), and event planner. Since 2010, he has managed the Kenyon College Bookstore in Gambier, Ohio, where he also continues his life of mystery as a book publisher. His publishing program, Crum Creek Press/The Mystery Company, recently celebrated its 25TH anniversary, and his books have earned two Agatha Awards, three Anthony Awards, one Benjamin Franklin Award and two Macavity Awards. Find him at [www.statelyhuangmanor.com](http://www.statelyhuangmanor.com)
G.M. Malliet is the Agatha Award-winning author of the St. Just mysteries and of A Demon Summer, the 4th Max Tudor novel, currently nominated for an Agatha Award. She has been nominated for multiple Agathas and for three Anthony awards, a Macavity, and Left Coast Crime, IPPY, Daphne, David, and Dilyx awards; the audio version of her second St. Just novel was a 2014 Anthony nominee. Her short story “Home for the Holidays” appeared in 2014 in Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine. She lives in the Washington, DC, area. GMMalliet.com

Nancy Martin is the author of fifty popular fiction novels in four genres, including her award-winning Blackbird Sisters mysteries. Nancy has served on the board of Sisters in Crime and is a proud, three-time member of the summit team. She is a founding member of Pennwriters.

Catriona McPherson is the author of the Agatha, Macavity and Bruce Alexander winning Dandy Gilver series of 1920s Scottish detective novels. A Deadly Measure Of Brimstone (Dg No. 8) is shortlisted for a third Bruce at time of going to press. Her first contemporary standalone, As She Left It, won an Anthony award and an IndyFab Gold, and the second, The Day She Died, is currently an Edgar finalist. Catriona emigrated from Scotland in 2010 and now lives in northern California. She is the 2015 president of Sisters in Crime.
Appendix B

Interview Questions

Tell us about your bookstore (size, time in business, type of merchandise, etc.)
Who do you think you serve?

What’s the single worst thing about Amazon?

Where do you see your store in five years?

How does a book get onto your shelves?
How does a book get off them (i.e., how do customers find books)?

How do you know you can sell a book?

Is there a gender bias in the books that you recommend to your customers?
How do you react to Jodi Picoult’s characterization of the industry?
Do bookstores have a role in combating gender bias?

Do events help sell books? Beyond sales, what is the value of an event?

Describe a typical day—how much time spent on various activities, etc.
What are the Three Biggest Challenges?

(1) Reaching new customers. (2) Publicizing ourselves and our events with little to no budget. (3) Competing with Amazon's pricing.

(1) It is extremely hard to get a 'big-name' author to come to a bookstore located in a town of 10,000. (2) Amazon being able to sell books at the same price and I purchase them. (3) Not have enough money to order books in bulk in order to save money.

(1) Amazon (2) Ebooks (3) Showrooming

(1) Time to read—or just time. (2) Working with the diverse business terms/practices of publishers (3) Balancing operating costs with cash flow.

(Just 1) The underhanded short selling of Amazon of print & e-books at a loss to build traffic.

(Just 1) We have a limited square footage, so book selection is our biggest challenge.

(1) Shrinking readership and buyer-ship of books (which is a reflection of both eroding literacy and of the competing demands on our time and our dollars in a world glutted with options). (2) Changing economic realities of book eco-system driven by Amazon's rapaciousness, the increasing corporatization of the publishing world, and the voluminous increase in the number of books published with the advent of relatively inexpensive self-publishing and print on demand. (3) Consistent lack of capital in world of rising rents, collapsing margins, and shrinking market.

(1) Not being able to provide the same deep discounts as online retailers, and hearing frequently that someone will just order it online because it's cheaper there. (2) Not being able to carry the same number of titles, or have as much backstock available as online retailers, and having people choose to order directly from an online source rather than place a special order through us. (3) Being able to keep up with all the new releases & predict what will sell well.

(1) Competition from electronics for readers' time. (2) Competition from Amazon for readers' money. (3) Increasingly aggressive price increases from publishers.

(1) Customer perception about book pricing (2) Lack of marketing budget to increase awareness through paid advertising. (3) Keeping good staff without having high salaries.
As old age claims more of our long-time customers, it’s increasingly hard to find a cost-effective way to make younger potential customers aware of what we have to offer. Going through the publishers’ catalogs of new releases, the percentage that we or our customers can get excited about seems to be going downhill. A lot of our customers are very loyal to the mass market format (and price), and a lot of the books our customers would buy in mass market are not coming out in mass market.

Customer awareness, word of mouth is always the best advertising. But we still have people tell us that they didn’t know we existed. The media focus on “the death of bookstores.” We often have customers (or non-customers) telling us how we will fail. That negative attitude is poisonous, but we do our best to point out that we are doing very well and so are indie bookstores in general. Customers that only buy online without thinking about where their money goes or how it affects their community. Despite the extreme business tactics of our online competitors, it comes down to our customers being educated about their spending habits.

Maintaining an adequate inventory given our limited storage space. Determining which books/games/toys to carry. Attracting younger readers.

Keeping up with new technologies and how they impact readers buying habits, and adjusting accordingly. Bringing new customers to the store. Building loyalty.

When thinking about the role of bookstores in our culture, what about them matters most? Without them, what would we miss?

We are emporia of knowledge. The cultural heart of our communities.

Independence! Variety! Paths for new authors to mature and grow.

We’d have a limited selection of reading material at the whim of giant faceless corporate stooges who can’t respond to the needs of their local community.

Indie bookstores can help customers pick out books in a way no online sales force can. We can tailor recommendations directly to the person, we can keep track of trigger warnings, or just things the customer hates. Amazon can’t tell you to skip chapter 10 because the puppy dies.

Density of knowledge, ideas and dreams

Independent bookstores are the place to browse when you don’t know what you want. Without them only the biggest name authors would be profitable.

A community gathering-place for people who love the physical book. Part of that community is having knowledgeable booksellers who recognize customers and are able to recommend books/authors, etc.

Community, exchange of ideas, valuing literature in our lives

I think you would lose a lot of personality, a conversation center and an information center.

Someplace to go and smell good books (yes, smell!)

The ability to find something you didn’t know you wanted to read

Literature could be whitewashed into just the bestsellers or Amz recommendations.

The choice to read an author that is good, but not necessarily popular. The experience of discovering new authors.

In addition to their significance as community gathering spaces and information centers, which are critical, collectively they provide the greatest diversity of voice and content and choice; without them we lose access to the margins and the marginal, the local and the individual, the common place and the uncommon, the new, the unexplored, the undiscovered. In other words, they are essential sites and sources of community and discovery, in an increasing atomized and monolithic world.

We are a cultural hub for our small community (21,000 people). We are also a resource for vacationers who want local info and have lost their own bookstores. We know that there is much generosity embodied in a book and do lots of literary outreach—from local to international.
To be a center for readers and fans to find their authors, to find new authors, and to have a place to feel at home with books. Lastly, as a place for readers and writers to interact.

Bookstores create community

Marginalized voices—feminists, women of color and queer folks and first authors

Freedom of thought because no independent bookstores would mean no variety of books available to the public

There is no one who nurtures new and midlist authors like an indie bookstore. The publishers don’t do it, and certainly not Amazon or the chains.

We are a neighborhood center holding, not only author signings, but literary lunches, writers workshops, topical lectures, and wine seminars. We are a source of entertainment for the community and our customer base.

Many feel that a local bookstore is an ‘anchor’ for their downtown.

We would lose the ability to view books that are a bit off the beaten track as supermarkets etc only carry top sellers.

It’s not just bookstores but all small businesses that matter. Do we really want to be a world of warehouses and delivery trucks? That’s just a small portion of the problems we would have if local businesses dwindle.

Support and promotion of local books and authors. Specialized and knowledgeable assistance tailored to community book clubs and readers. Another business that contributes to the local economy (job creation, paying taxes, etc.).

A venue for authors to present their work, a hub for readers and writers to interact, a great place to drop by when you want to talk about books, a great place to drop by when you don’t want to talk to anybody and just look at books, a reliable ally in literacy efforts, a great place to work for booklovers, a place where people are nice about letting you use the bathroom and get a drink of water, a safe place to let your kids go alone, etc.

Without independent bookstores, things would be harder for new and midlist authors. We introduce those authors to our customers, and many of them wouldn’t find those authors without us. We host author events—when was the last time an online seller did that? We often our customers unique and thoughtful choices they might not find with just an online search engine.

Community centers, places to gather with other intelligent people to talk and share ideas, Museums of culture and fantasy and the mind. The archival nature of books also helps us shape and remember our history. Educates our children, spreads a love of reading and art and literature to generations. Bookstores are places to deplug and relax. Society desperately needs bookstores.
We would lose face-to-face communication about what people like. This communication is what promotes books and authors. We would not know how others feel about books and why they are drawn to certain books or genre.

The culture that allows literacy to be a discovery, a relationship with written material—the culture and community of bookstores.

Personal service for the present and future generations of readers. Personalized recommendations (as opposed to algorithm recs) Support of local and new authors

Readers count on browsing our shelves to find their next read ... without physical bookstores the serendipitous discovery of books would be greatly curtailed.

We would lose a bricks and mortar forum to discuss books, share the love of books, and open someone's eyes to new titles and new authors. I love to discuss books with kids and get them excited about reading. In addition, we would lose another place that promotes community.

Socially connecting people who love to read with others who are like minded, including authors.

Keeping awareness of a huge variety of books out there, not just the big hits.

Community. Bookstores are all about community. We host book clubs where people meet others in their community passionate about reading. We host author events where author and reader can come together and forge a lasting relationship. We will take a reader by the hand and introduce them to authors and titles that will mean something in their reading experience. And bookstores are fun!

Culture, sense of community and gathering for various groups ... women/teens/seniors, inspiration for readers and writers, inspire young people to read/learn, healthy entertainment

It would be sad if there was not a place to meet with friends who share the same passion for printed books. I would miss the interaction.

One of the biggest things that I think we provide is a sense of curation & recommendation that is based on human tastes, versus a sales algorithm.

This is true of libraries as well, but sometimes a title that is on the same topic or in the same vein as a specific title someone comes into the store wanting to buy can actually be a better fit, and wouldn't have been discovered if it wasn't physically available in close proximity to the original title.

We're also able to provide an *experience*— from the smell and sight of books, to offering a chance to interact with an author, to that sense of discovery with an unexpected book I mentioned earlier, there are experiences that a bookstore can provide that other sources cannot.
There's also a sense of risk that an indie can take, with taking a chance on an unknown author that bigger stores (online & brick-and-mortar) can't always do, and we can champion a book to customers in a way that those other retailers cannot either. Word of mouth & personal recommendations are still extremely effective ways of selling a book, and indies can do that very well.

We would lose a personal connection between readers and books. Buying a book off a website is not the same as going to a store and picking it off the shelf. No matter how advanced they get, a computer algorithm is not the same as a good bookseller who knows their stock. We host over 200 readings a year. If we were not here none of those would happen and both readers and authors would be poorer for it.

Real bookstores offer the real joy of reading through the “happy accident” of finding a new book or author—something no algorithm can do.

We would lose the only people in our community who actively seek out compelling books about our state and region, the only people in town who actively bring authors to our island community and the only people in town who match customers with materials that will enrich and delight them.

Like a good pastor, a book shop should comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

We’ve seen a pattern over decades where a new author comes along, hand selling by independent bookstore introduce many people to the author, and eventually the author’s books are in Walmart, Sam’s Club, Costco, Target, etc. at heavy discounts and nobody will pay full price to buy their books from independent bookstores any longer. Deep selection and informed recommendations are key to independent bookstores.

Literary community. Random selection. The appreciation for tangible objects. Exposure to excellent books that need a push to make it through the white noise of louder more established publishers.

The community center that a bookstore creates is most important to us. We know our customers and they know that they can depend on us to offer what they want and need. Our store has also created an anchor for the downtown shopping area and we are partnered with our neighbors in helping the local economy grow.

1) Community center, meeting place, idea exchange. 2) The home of the real, breathing cultural animal. 3) Interaction with others of like interests. 4) Resource for local artists and events. 5) Tourist attraction/escape to another world. 6) Browsing. 7) Multiple sensory experience.

Culture—I believe that independent bookstores provide a dynamic, cultural space for our communities. It is a place of dialogue and engagement which benefits both the literacy of a community and also its overall community involvement. Without independent bookstores, individuals become more isolated and less participatory.
An outlet of tangible art and future. A meeting place of ideas and entertainment.

Continuity with local and regional cultural and societal values. Big box and online stores are good at creating a sort of national unity, bizarre as that idea seems, but making the James Pattersons etc. universal, while independents make regional authors like William Kent Krueger successful.

Reading is personal, but not meant to be a lonely activity. Reading also leads to an exchange of opinions and ideas, best shared when face to face. A bookstore provides a platform for that. A true reader also covets the touch and feel of a book—it’s a whole package experience. A bookstore also provides an outlet for that. Independents do not need to answer to the demands of a corporate office on what to stock and sell. They are basically folks who are passionate about reading and truly care about literacy and their customers.

It would be a literary desert or landscape similar to a “Levittown from of 50s” of books that are all the same depending on the “trend.” We would lose the ability to learn more and what we won’t to know about. Not just what a survey or “trend-line” says we should be reading.

We would lose the gift of discussing books at length with customers and the thrill of having someone come and say, “I loved that book you recommended.”

Neighborhood cultural outposts. Walking into a bookstore is liking walking into an art gallery. Your mind and intellect becomes engaged.

I think we would lose a variety of voices and opinions, different booksellers will like and promote different books and authors. We may uncover some quirky author and push them and make sure our customers read them. We aren’t going to just go for the already established. I think the bookselling world would be more streamlined, more predictable—I see it when I fill in my NYT bestseller report. The big bestselling books are almost all predictable, when I fill in my write-in selections, they turn out to be quirkier, smaller titles. We need the array to make every reader happy!

Diverse markets promote a healthy and diverse literary culture.

I have been in the book business for nearly thirty years. I am able to ask new customers what they’ve read lately that they liked, and make suggestions based on those answers. I am able to suggest titles to established customers, based on their reading history. I am not afraid to tell people that a specific title sucks, and advise them to save their money. I have lived in my bookstore’s neighborhood for over thirty years. Just about every real bookseller I know has pretty much the same background. We know books because we love books. Our knowledge of books and the publishing industry as a whole goes back decades and will not be found in Amazon or a chain bookstore. And we are part of our neighborhoods. We support our neighbors whether they are businesses or private individuals.