



COVER to COVER

INDIE BOOKSTORES
CAN READ IOWANS

[by CAROL BODENSTEINER | photography by PAUL GATES]



DO YOU HAVE

WINNIE THE POOH

IN LATIN?



“Ah, *Winnie Ille Pu*.” The associate at the Prairie Lights Bookstore service desk nods in recognition and turns to his computer. “Let me check.”

A few keystrokes later, he looks up. “I’m sorry. We’ve sold a lot of those and we’re out at the moment.”

“I’ll check back. I have time,” says the customer. “I figured if anyone would have it, it would be here.”

The shelves of Iowa’s largest independent bookstore teem with books on every imaginable subject by both well-known and obscure authors, authors who on any given day may actually be wandering the aisles of, or doing a reading at, the Iowa City store. Associated Press travel writer Beth J. Harpaz included Prairie Lights in her list of nine destination bookstores in the country. “Unique, distinct personality and approach . . . offering a snapshot of the town and region.”

The same description applies to many of the indie bookstores that dot the Iowa landscape. Small-volume sellers compete by serving unique niches, responding to community needs, and offering exceptional service. When Iowans are on a quest for books — books on unusual topics, books by little-known authors, books they can’t find anywhere else — they often head for a local, independent bookstore, where what they find is often much more than books.

PROVINCIAL PERSONALITIES

The Book Vine opened in 2007, joining a resurgence of businesses restoring old downtown buildings in Cherokee. Since its opening, the bookstore has become a focus of community activity, holding at least one event every week, from wine tastings to author signings.

Wine is an interest owner Mollie Loughlin and her husband share, so a temperature-controlled wine room in the middle of the store introduces customers to new wines as they pursue new authors. A balcony overlooking the rest of the store offers comfortable seating, where shoppers can relax amidst the works of local artists.

“We offer a nice rounded space for people to relax and enjoy and take in whatever — books, music, art,” says Loughlin.

The only bookstore within a 50-mile radius, The Book Vine holds a unique, regional position. Even the nearest Wal-Mart is 21 miles away. Still, service is Loughlin’s top priority. “I keep in mind that people can get big discounts other places,” she says. “I’m giving them what they can’t get anywhere else — me. And every book that goes out of here is wrapped up. We make book buying special.”

Iowa’s indie bookstore owners create spaces that not only respond to the reading interests of area book buyers but also reflect proprietors’ personalities and interests. The shops become welcoming destinations where customers appreciate both the books and the bookstore owners.

“Having a bookstore pulls the entire community together, gives people an identity. In a small town we support each other,” says Loughlin.



Her customers agree. “Molly is great to have here,” says Barb Lawton of Cherokee. “She’s an inspiration. A great help. I couldn’t wait for this store to open. She knows the authors people like. She makes you comfortable, like you’re family.”

Walk into O’Town Books in Ottumwa and you’ll find a store geared to equipping classroom teachers and catering to the interests of children. One area of the store is filled with math flashcards, markers, and reading aids — all the tools a teacher needs. Along the opposite wall, a counter is crowded with plush animals that match children’s book characters — bears and llamas, cows and cats, mice and elephants.

In addition to teachers and children, the store caters to adult readers with a fireplace and comfy chairs that invite customers to sit a while. Meanwhile, the check-out counter is lined with woodworking tools.

All of the elements reflect the interests of owners Bill and Donna Greenley. Bill is a retired railroad engineer who carves dog and Santa Claus figures when he isn’t discussing books and authors or the goings-on around Ottumwa with customers. Donna is a former schoolteacher. Both of them love books and reading.

Donna’s years as a teacher and contacts in the educational system led to a specialization for O’Town Books in items for teachers and books for children. “Each year, we ask teachers what they want and then we order around their interests,” says Donna. “Teachers email us with their book orders.” Through bulk orders and searching for the best deals, Bill reports they’ve saved the school district \$9,000 on book orders.

The extra-effort service the Greenleys provide to area schools extends to all their customers. “We call ourselves book tenders,” says Bill. “Like bartenders, except for books. We listen to our customers, do the searching, find what they want. Once we do that, we have a repeat customer. We’re a connection to the book world and to the community, and our customers appreciate that.”

Debra Ogren of rural Ottumwa and her book club meet by the O’Town Books fireplace on the third Friday of each month. “O’Town Books gives us a local place to buy books and talk about them,” she says. “The Greenleys are so friendly. They really know their customers. I can ask what’s new and what’s going on, and they can tell me — like family. And no one has to clean house!”

One of the oldest, continuously operating independent bookstores in Iowa is tucked in the middle of

a downtown Des Moines city block. In business since 1961, The Book Store has had just three owners. John Heitzman, owner since 1999, says his store’s books and hours reflect his downtown location. “My net is a six-block radius — people who work downtown or stay at local hotels and are within walking distance. Blocks are like miles downtown,” explains Heitzman. His store occupies less than 1,500 square feet, so instead of volume, he competes with a targeted collection and better customer service. “Since I serve downtown businesses, business books are up front,” he says.

A more eclectic inventory serves as a competitive advantage. Heitzman relates that one day a visitor from Cleveland wandered in looking for books on Italy. The man had been to several chain bookstores and always found the same two books. Heitzman offered several books on Italy, all different from the ones the chain stores carried. “As an independent store, I can offer a more esoteric selection.”

Twenty-five percent of The Book Store’s business is special orders, and Heitzman spends as much time talking with customers on the phone as in person. “There’s a real sense of loyalty among my customers,” he stresses. “They’re willing to wait a couple of days to get a book just to buy it here.”

Patrons of The Book Store appreciate the work Heitzman does on their behalf. One dubbed him a “concierge of books,” helping readers select from the thousands of titles published each year.





FICTION



Leo Tolstoy

WAR AND PEACE

Translated by Anthony Briggs
Introduction by Orlando Figes

All Town Reads 201

REBECCA WELLS
THE GIVER

RICO PO

CALLIE LILY PONDER

CALLIE LILY PONDER



READING THE MARKET SERVING UP SUCCESS

A bookstore aptly named for the space it occupies, Oskaloosa's Book Vault has served the community since December 2005. Previously housing a bank, the bookstore space makes the most of its local history, utilizing former vaults to house today's valuables: special collections — one for Iowa authors, another for mystery novels, a third for children's books.

Former librarian Nancy Simpson came out of retirement to run the Book Vault. In managing the bookstore, Simpson follows the advice she read in Warren Buffett's book *The Snowball*. "Buffett observed that life is like a snowball. The important thing is finding wet snow and a really long hill."

Like a snowball, the Book Vault started out small, then began growing larger and picking up speed as the business gained momentum. "We started out slowly," says Simpson, "one event every two or three months. Now we have authors in two to three times each month. The more you add, the more opportunities there are."

	Weeks On List	This Week
CT	83	1
by William P. Young. (Windblown A man whose daughter was abducted in a isolated shack, apparently by God. (†))		DEAR J \$7.99.) A idealist
WITH THE DRAGON TATTOO, by [unclear] (Vintage, \$14.95.) A hacker and a journalist the disappearance of a Swedish heiress.	26	2
Sapphire. (Vintage, \$12.95.) An abused, illiterate 17-year-old in Harlem meets a teacher who helps her live; the basis for the film "Precious"	17	3
NO TEACHER, by Janice Y.K. Lee. (\$15.) An Englishwoman in 1950s Hong Kong reveals devastating secrets from the years of the occupation.	5	4
NEW JERSEY LITERARY AND POTATO PEEL SOCIETY, by Mary Ann Shaffer and Annie Barrows. (Dial, \$14.) A journalist meets the island's old resisters.	33	5
RACING IN THE RAIN, by Garth [unclear] (\$14.99) An insightful [unclear] race car	28	6
		7*

One of those events is Cooking with Books, a cooking demonstration held on the second Saturday of each month in a kitchen area built especially for that purpose at the back of the Book Vault. Visiting cookbook authors may demonstrate recipes from their own books, or local cooks who specialize in some type of cuisine — ethnic or vegetarian, for instance — may demonstrate recipes from cookbooks the Book Vault carries. "We have had a cookbook specialty since we opened, and now it has expanded into a cooking show produced in our store by the local-access TV station," Simpson explains. "*Cooking at the Vault with Ruthi Rogers* had its first season in 2009 and people loved it. As soon as the season ended, our customers were asking what we'd have in the new season."

The store capitalizes on the food theme with a complementary inventory of kitchen-oriented accessories. Simpson estimates that one-third of Book Vault business is kitchen- and cooking-related.

The cash register receipts are also varied at Bookends & Beans in Decorah, where coffee is half the business. "Our loyal coffee drinkers are loyal book readers, too," explains owner Carrie Duranceau, who fulfilled a dream when she and her husband opened the bookstore and coffee shop in a big brick house soon after college graduation.

Customer Anna Linnell describes Bookends & Beans as a small town contained in a little room. "It's my sanctuary," she says, praising the store with a term of endearment — "enabler of addictions." "If we didn't have these little stores, we'd only be able to get what big book warehouses want to stock." Linnell says she may research books online, but then she orders them at the bookstore, a pattern for many Bookends & Beans customers.

The publishing trend toward consolidation could mean that fewer authors get a chance to reach a wider audience because chain stores focus on selling best sellers. Independent booksellers who know customer interests well and have the flexibility to order new books to match local reader interests provide good exposure for new authors, says the Book Vault's Simpson. "It's an unspoken mission of independent booksellers to find the next new author talent," says Simpson, who devours advance books in search of the next new voice. "Very seldom do you see national best sellers on our independent bookstore lists." But talented new authors who receive an indie nod often find



POETRY / RHYME



PICTURE BOOKS



MICHELLE KNUDSEN illustrated by KEVIN HAWKES



themselves gaining national attention. “*Like Water for Elephants* started out on the indie lists,” notes Simpson. Subsequently, it was reviewed in the *New York Times* Sunday *Book Review*. “That’s what we love to see.”

Independent bookstores also enjoy the flexibility to stock the writing of local authors when the chain stores may not. “In Iowa we take pride in our local and regional work,” agrees Linnell who appreciates the Bookends & Beans extensive local author section. “When someone from Iowa gets a book on the shelf, it gives us hope — that our story is important, too.”

Today’s readers can get any book in the world online. The fewer and fewer publishers focus on fewer and fewer big-name authors. And publishers give preference in discounts and supplies of new books to stores that take larger quantities. Books are available everywhere — from discount stores to grocery aisles — and often at deep discounts. Books can be downloaded to digital reading devices. It all begs the question of whether there is a future for the independent bookstore. “We keep our friends close and our enemies closer,” says Bill Greenley when he talks about online book

giant Amazon. “Instead of complaining about Amazon, we use it all the time. It supplements our inventory.” The Greenleys order from Amazon every day, acknowledging that a fourth of their business comes from orders filled through the Internet. Additionally, the Greenleys have many customers who don’t want to put their credit cards online. That’s a service O’Town Books provides for them.

When it comes to the trend to digital books, the Book Vault’s Simpson is philosophical. “When audio came out, some thought, ‘There goes the book,’ but no. Everything has a place, but I don’t see digital books being an answer for all readers.”

Duranceau shrugs her shoulders. “I’ve never had anyone request an electronic book. But our public tends to be on the older side. When the younger generation that is raised on electronics grows up . . . we’ll see what they will be reading. For now, our customers appreciate holding a book.”

Molly Loughlin agrees. “I don’t think you can replace the feel of sitting in a chair, holding, reading, enjoying a book.” ♣