

Are Bookstores Going Out Of Style?

By: Michelle Cuttino

The last independent bookstore in South Bronx, New York, Books In The Hood, followed in the footsteps of the much larger Borders conglomerate and closed its doors in December 2011. With these and many more bookstores closing, their fate is being questioned. Will the ease of Internet shopping and e-readers run real bookstores out of business?

Books In The Hood, as with numerous other independents, closed due to financial problems. The owner doesn't blame the closing on location, as bookstores in more affluent neighborhoods have been forced to close as well. The main issue was support from the community. The various events, readings and functions the store hosted on an almost daily basis still weren't sufficient incentive for the neighborhood to spend enough money to help the owners make the monthly rent.

Using savings intended for retirement, the balance of the rent was met, but once those funds were depleted the closing was inevitable. This situation is becoming more common in the Internet age and many are wondering if bookstores can survive.

Both booksellers and publishers have reported a drop in sales of adult fiction hardcover books in 2011. The decrease in sales is due to a reduced demand, which is apparent with the surge in digital sales. E-book sales now account for more than thirteen percent of the adult fiction market and that number is steadily increasing.

Though some, like myself, still enjoy the feel of a paperback/hardcover novel, there are many who have embraced new technology and are avid fans of the Nook and Kindle e-readers as well as the various computer and smartphone apps. This is especially true because no matter the number of pages or format of each book, with an e-reader or electronic app, the weight and size is always consistent and compact.

There are many other benefits to e-readers, from discounted pricing to convenience, but nothing beats the actual bookstore experience. Be it the social aspect of it all, or the endless shelves of books – different genres and different sizes and colors – one can become lost within its walls. Also, the ease of skimming and going back and forth for reference purposes, or highlighting and writing notes in the margin of printed books are often reasons some refuse to be caught up in the digital revolution.

Bookstores are also becoming very savvy, understanding that the key to longevity is advancing with the times. Many have adapted a cyber-café or lounge-type atmosphere. They have boosted their efforts in promoting authors with increased book signings, meet the author and book release parties. Some are also catering to poetry, hosting slams and spoken word events.

Many will argue that the digital booksellers are also community-based, as they personalize ones shopping experience. They catalog purchases made and not only suggest similar books that the reader may enjoy, but advise comparable books that other people are reading. They provide online forums to chat and discuss books read, and also review space to rate and evaluate their selections. Although all of these options are beneficial, face-to-face human interaction is something that will never go out of style.

While I don't believe that all bookstores will survive the times, there are many that will. Those that adopt the cyber-revolution and commit in-store space for readers who still prefer an online and e-reader experience, and those that emphasize fun and bring an upbeat social atmosphere to their space will persevere and continue to thrive.

As long as there are authors cranking out novels on a daily basis, there will be a public looking to get lost in that fantasy world. Some will become introverted and choose to be a digital buff. Others will crave the in-person experience and support the printed book era, choosing to frequent their favorite bookstore.

In years to come, there is no certainty what businesses will survive the digital era. All we can hope for is that bookstores, like every other establishment, will become revolutionized and will transform into book odysseys that will survive the modernization of the book industry.