

Serious browsers will love this history of American bookstores

In “The Bookshop,” Evan Friss offers lively profiles of booksellers and the stores they’ve overseen, from the 18th century to today.

 8 min    55



Review by [Michael Dirda](#)

August 1, 2024 at 5:29 p.m. EDT

Throughout “[The Bookshop: A History of the American Bookstore](#),” Evan Friss emphasizes that the most successful bookshops do more than sell novels, nonfiction and children’s literature. They thrive when they become community gathering places. As he writes about the early days of New York’s Gotham Book Mart: “It was a museum, art gallery, therapist’s couch, disheveled English professor’s office, grandmother’s living room, and Parisian cafe, all wrapped in one.”

Friss’s survey of the American bookstore ranges from the 18th century to the present, from Benjamin Franklin’s Philadelphia print shop to novelist Ann Patchett’s Parnassus Books in Nashville, with stops along the way in Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Washington and Miami. As a professor of American and urban studies at James Madison University, Friss can be expected to know his way around a research library, but he also proves to be an adept reporter. As a result, he has produced a work of popular history that is both entertaining and informative.

Consider the Old Corner Bookstore in mid-19th-century Boston. It was overseen by William Ticknor and James T. Fields, who made the shop a clubby haven for — and eventually the publisher of — New England’s best writers. Ticknor and Fields, with its offices inside the store, brought out such classics as Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Scarlet Letter” and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s “Uncle Tom’s Cabin.” Fields, who functioned as the acquisitions editor, did make mistakes, however. After skimming the manuscript of a novel by one eager author, he told her: “Stick to your teaching. ... You can’t write.” Fortunately for fans of “Little Women,” Louisa May Alcott didn’t listen.

Anyone in the least way bookish eventually visited the Old Corner, as it was called. It was here that typesetter and printer Henry Oscar Houghton met Harvard graduate George Harrison Mifflin, the two men eventually forming the publishing firm Houghton Mifflin. In later years, when the store moved to new premises, the young Christopher Morley worked on the floor during the Christmas rushes of 1913, 1914 and 1915, gaining some of the background knowledge he would need for his novel “Parnassus on Wheels” (1917). In that bibliophile’s classic, the 39-year-old Helen McGill abandons a life of housekeeping drudgery to take over Roger Mifflin’s traveling horse-drawn bookstore, Parnassus on Wheels. The two middle-aged book lovers eventually marry.

McGill was just one of the many women — the others real, not fictional — who found rewarding careers in bookselling. Marcella Hahner revolutionized the third-floor books section of Marshall Field's department store in Chicago, transforming it into a browser's paradise and, arguably, the best general bookstore in early-20th-century America. Frances Steloff founded the Gotham Book Mart in 1920 to promote modern and avant-garde literature, and was involved with it almost until her death at 101 in 1989. Today, Nancy Bass Wyden oversees the Strand in New York, continuing the work of her father and grandfather, Fred and Benjamin Bass, while also instituting changes — not all of them universally welcome — to keep the store vital.

In discussing the Strand, Friss relates the history of New York's "Booksellers' Row," the cluster of secondhand-book dealers located on Fourth Avenue between Eighth and 14th streets. When I first visited New York in the early 1970s, only a few of those shops still survived, but even then they were glorious places to browse. To this day, I remember one store with a dark, warehouselike second floor, usually not open to casual customers. There I found, and paid just a few dollars for, a jacketless copy of Elizabeth Bishop's "Complete Poems" (1969) and a first edition of Ford Madox Ford's "The March of Literature" (1938). I have them still.

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Many of these Fourth Avenue dealers regarded books as simply merchandise — and they weren't always careful about where their stock came from. Once, Benjamin Bass was taken to court for selling some stolen law textbooks. He pleaded ignorance of their provenance. After the case was dismissed, Bass congratulated the fellow bookseller who had defended him: "You were just wonderful. After you finished talking, I was almost convinced myself that I hadn't known that those were stolen."

As Friss repeatedly shows, young people who open bookshops, particularly specialty shops, tend to be visionaries, men and women on a mission. New York's Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop celebrated gay life, and Amazon Bookstore Cooperative in Minneapolis — named long before the advent of the online powerhouse founded by Jeff Bezos (who owns The Washington Post) — promoted feminism and women's liberation. Back in the 1930s, the Workers' Bookshop in Manhattan hoped to raise class consciousness among the masses, offering talks and seminars, as well as books and pamphlets, extolling Marxism as the answer to America's social, racial and economic inequalities. In the late 1960s and '70s, Drum & Spear, here in Washington, aimed "to encourage more Black people to read more about Black people." However widely they differed, these crusading start-ups shared the same purpose: They believed that books could help change the world.

These shops also came to share the same fate: They no longer exist. For a few years, their aims and the zeitgeist coincided, and they prospered. But times change. Over the last half-century, all "indies" have had to compete with superstores like Barnes & Noble and, more daunting still, the behemoth Amazon. As Friss states: "In 1995, there were roughly seven thousand independent bookstore outlets. Within five years, three thousand of them closed."

Some independent bookstores certainly continue to flourish; Washington's Politics and Prose, for instance. To a large extent, they do so by supplying more than just books. Author events, in-house coffee shops, reading groups, lectures and mini-courses, literary T-shirts, mugs, postcards and similar tchotchkes — all these, plus a good location and affordable rent, have grown de rigueur for any smallish shop hoping to last more than a few years. As Friss points out, buying from an indie is now also viewed by some shoppers as "an overt political act, signaling a set of values: supporting communities, small businesses, and maybe even the cultures of reading and democracy." Nonetheless, even the most prominent independent bookstores often seem to need additional propping up: Would Parnassus in Nashville still be around were it not for the investment and the customer-draw provided by its owner, the beloved novelist Patchett? Maybe.

In general, Friss organizes his chapters around book people like Patchett, producing New Yorker-style profiles of the more prominent, replete with amusing anecdotes and plenty of photographs. The “Czarina,” as Hahner was called, once brought an elephant into Marshall Field’s. Craig Rodwell, who founded the Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop at age 26, was a former lover of the San Francisco politician and gay icon Harvey Milk. Friss even landed an interview with Len Riggio, who revitalized Barnes & Noble, and also talked with some of the sidewalk book vendors, most of whom were Black, who set up tables on New York’s Sixth Avenue in the 1980s and ’90s. Sometimes, though, Friss leaves you wanting to know even more about people like Walter Garland, the Black manager of the Workers’ Bookshop, who served in the Abraham Lincoln Battalion during the Spanish Civil War.

Despite its high degree of anecdotal liveliness, “The Bookshop” slowly grows quietly, unavoidably elegiac. Almost every chapter follows the same arc: A bookstore is established, succeeds for a while — or at least finds its niche — and then gradually declines and eventually goes out of business, often shortly after the founder dies. These days, one can’t help but wonder if all brick-and-mortar shops are on the downward path of that bell curve. Fewer people read printed books, and many read no books at all. Friss is clear-eyed about American materialism and what he calls our “ill-begotten fantasies of achieving happiness through consumption.”

Sigh. Over the years, walk-in bookshops have evolved and mutated, always reflecting the dreams of our changing society, but their place in the age of screens and social media now seems increasingly uncertain. Still, there’s at least one reason, even if it’s a bit starry-eyed, to remain hopeful: Like Aladdin’s Cave of Wonder, bookstores are magical, and don’t we all need some magic in our lives?

The Bookshop

A History of the American Bookstore

By Evan Friss

Viking. 403 pp. \$30

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