

Postpandemic bookselling

News - International Wednesday, 26th May 2021

A look at how current events are changing the way US booksellers work



At yesterday's US Book Show (25th May), *Publishers Weekly's* Ed Nawotka discussed the challenges now facing bricks-and-mortar bookstores with a panel of leading booksellers: Nina Barrett, owner of Bookends & Beginnings in Illinois; Danny Caine, owner of Raven Book Store in Kansas; Bryanne Hoeg, manager of Powell's City of Books in Oregon and Kwame Spearman, co-owner of Tattered Cover Book Store in Colorado.

Raven Book Store, said Caine, has been closed to in-person customers for the past 440 days, having turned itself into a warehouse for online delivery and kerbside pick-ups during the entirety of the pandemic. They will reopen at the beginning of June, having spent the last few weeks totally reorganising the store, and plan to allow five people only into the (small) shop at a time and requiring masks to be worn.

Bookends and Beginnings and the Tattered Cover shops had all closed between late March and early July last year but had been open more or less continuously since then for in-person shopping. Bookends had had no safety issues, but the main Tattered Cover store had had to close due to a Covid outbreak in the autumn, which meant mass testing and had a knock on effect on the business.

One question for U.S. booksellers is how to handle the issue of masks. The rules say people who are vaccinated don't have to wear masks, but what do customers and staff want, and what about the issue of children who have not yet been vaccinated, with no sense yet of when that will happen? Spearman is encouraging his staff to get vaccinated and carries out regular temperature tests too to negate the need for masks, but conceded that the issue around children is complicated.

Nawotka wondered if the reported big increase in publisher back list sales had also been seen in independent bookshops. Barrett said her store had always been more of a backlist store, with local competition from B&N taking the bulk of frontlist sales. They have, however, come out of the pandemic with the local B&N having been closed, so they are now seeing more call for new titles too. Hoeg felt that there had been more interest in classics and the books that people always meant to read over the past year, but reported problems in getting stock of new books, with shipping and fulfilment delays and possibly also smaller print runs.

Caine had doubled down on social media over the past year, feeling a real need to explain to customers why it was going to take longer to get books to them. Despite this online sales were up 2,600% in 2020, and they plan to operate as a hybrid online/in person store in the future. "For a couple of weeks in the beginning we could get books to people quicker than Amazon", he said, "and had very good online sales in June/July and December. It won't continue like that, but we won't go back to our 2019 online sales level."

Barrett's online sales had also increased enormously – 2,500% over the past year. The real dilemma she's



having is the competition with Amazon, and the need to explain to customers why a book they sell at the cover price of \$30 is retailing on Amazon at less than half price. "All the other value propositions that we can make in normal times are less easy to make when we're selling online," she noted.

Despite their increase in online sales, the view was that the growth in book sales overall was not going through indie bookstores. Feelings against Amazon among this constituency continue to run high, and post-pandemic it was agreed that making the case for continued support of indie and high-street booksellers is going to be even more vital.

"What can publishers do to help?" asked Nawotka. The answers included think about their D2C operations, which were ramped up during the pandemic and are threatening to booksellers; think more about Amazon's pricing strategy: pushing down the value of books is clearly bad for the whole industry; providing Diversity & Inclusion (DI) information on authors – and supporting authors back onto the road, as Zoom events just don't benefit booksellers.

Pictured clockwise from top left: Danny Caine, Raven Book Store; Bry Hoeg, Powell's City of Books; Ed Nawotka, Publishers Weekly; Nina Barrett, Bookends & Beginnings; Kwame Spearman, Tattered Cover Book Store.

Source article: <https://www.bookbrunch.co.uk/page/article-detail/postpandemic-bookselling>