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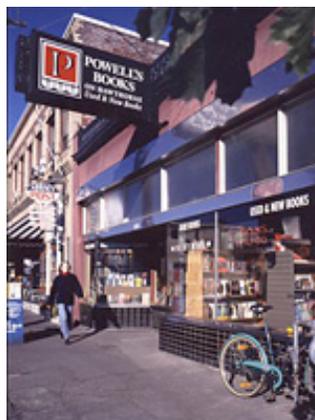
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## What Are Independent Bookstores Really Good For?

Not much.

By Tyler Cowen

Posted Monday, May 15, 2006, at 6:08 AM ET



Powell's City of Books

K-A-F-K-A. That was for a Borders information clerk. "Ghana, is that in South America?" Another superstore sales assistant had never heard of the *Village Voice*.

Ever since the rise of the book superstore in the 1990s, we have been flooded with lamentations for the rapidly disappearing independent booksellers—cool hang-outs where the staff knows something about literature, the owners sit at crowded coffee tables, talking about Jack Kerouac or the latest translation of Tolstoy. Thanks to the indies, it is thought, high-quality but inaccessible books can slowly build their reputations through reader word-of-mouth and

eventually take the literary world by storm. This is what people fear is disappearing forever; just last week the famed Cody's of Berkeley announced it is shutting down because of Internet and superstore competition. But does this idealized vision ring true? What exactly are we losing with the passing of the independent bookstore?

Laura J. Miller's recent *Reluctant Capitalists: Bookselling and the Culture of Consumption* starts from the premise that "the debate over bookselling is not a trivial or isolated event ... [but] can be understood as reflecting certain dissatisfactions with individual and communal well-being." She wishes to make the bookstore into a political arena. By patronizing the indies, consumers can protest excess commercialization and the proliferation of

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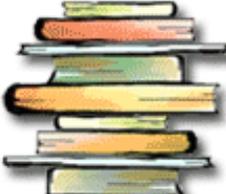
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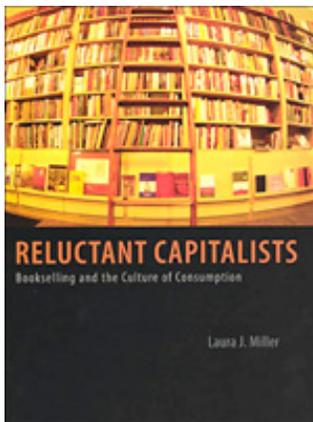


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Miller admits and even emphasizes that the dilemma of the book superstore is not new. In the 1920s and 1930s drugstores were the new purveyors of cheap commercial books. The Book-of-the-Month Club was perceived as a villain in the postwar era. The 1960s and 1970s brought the first chain bookstores to shopping malls. At every stage a more commercialized alternative has pushed out previous means of bookselling. All the while, literacy and book availability have continued to rise. Nonetheless, Miller feels that added consciousness of our alternatives will do us some good. But how much good? I confess I am not inclined to grant culture-changing status to the indies too quickly.

Our attachment to independent bookshops is, in part, affectation—a self-conscious desire to belong a particular community (or to seem to). Patronizing indies helps us think we are more literary or more offbeat than is often the case. There are similar phenomena in the world of indie music fans ("Top 40 has to be bad") and indie cinema, which rebels against stars and big-budget special effects. In each case the indie label is a deliberate marketing ploy to segregate, often artificially, one part of the market from the rest. But when it comes to providing simple access to the products you want, the superstores often do a better job of it than the small stores do: Borders and Barnes & Noble negotiate bigger discounts from publishers and have superior computer-driven inventory systems. The superstores' scale allows them to carry many more titles, usually several times more, than do most of the independents; so if you're looking for Arabic poetry you have a better chance of finding it at Barnes & Noble than at your local community bookstore.

Clearly, though, what Miller and others fear is that the culture of literacy that indie bookstores help cultivate and nurture—the eccentric interests, the peculiar niches—will be lost in the routinized world of the superstore. Part of the value of indies was that they helped introduce us to new titles; Shakespeare & Co. in lower Manhattan features different books than does Barnes & Noble. But with the advent of the Internet, the literary world has more room for independence—if not always in its old forms—than ever before. Amazon reader reviews, blogs such as Bookslut, and eBay—the world's largest book auction market—all are flourishing and are doing so outside the reach of the major corporate booksellers. Print-on-demand technologies and self-publishing are booming. Along with Google and other search engines, they will allow niche titles to persist in our memories for a long time to come. This is the flip side of the same computerization that elevated Wal-Mart and Borders: Information technology brings more voices into book evaluation and supply.



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Unfortunately, many virtues of the new order are relatively invisible. Consider the used-book market. It was much easier to find a good used bookstore 20 years ago. Yet it has never been easier to buy a good used book, with the aid of, among others, Abebooks, a superb central depot for used booksellers.

The real change in the book market is not the big guy vs. the little guy, or chain vs. indie stores. Rather, it's the reader's greater impatience, a symptom of our amazing literary (and televisual) plenitude. In the modern world we are more pressed for time, and we face a greater diversity of cultural choices. It was easy to finish Tolstoy's *War and Peace* when there were few other books around and it was hard to find them. Today, finishing it means forgoing many other options at our fingertips. As a result, we tend to consume ideas in smaller bits, a proposition that (in another context) economists labeled the "Alchian and Allen theorem." Long, serious novels are less culturally central than they were 100 years ago. Blogs are on the rise, and most readers prefer the ones with the shorter posts. Our greater access to books also means that each book has less time to prove itself. A small percentage of the books published account for a large share of the profits, thus setting off a race to track reader demand. Many customers want very recent best-sellers, often so they can feel they are reading something trendy, something other people are talking about. Of course, that's its own kind of affectation—and not an entirely pleasing one.

But bolstering the indies will not reverse any of these trends, nor are the chain stores to blame for their spread. The indies themselves aren't always paragons of cultural virtue, either. One indie owner quoted in *Reluctant Capitalists* notes that he keeps book prices high "not from greed but as a way of reflecting what he sees as their worth as cultural artifacts." (On that basis, how can he possibly sell a paperback volume of Proust for \$15.00?) Many of the smaller indies have financed themselves by selling, in a separate part of the store, pornography; indie stores are not all intellectual powerhouses like Powell's in Portland, considered by many to be the best bookstore in the United States. For better or worse, they are commercial entities just like the superstores. In this case, being David to the superstores' Goliath doesn't always mean that they ought to win out.

If you don't like the superstores, it is easy enough to expand your viewing horizons through other means. Just go to new sections of your superstore (the best popular book on geology, gardening, or basketball is *very good*, whether or not you like the topic). Stoop or stretch to slightly uncomfortable levels. Use the stool. Peruse books randomly. Look at other peoples' discard piles. Spend more time in public libraries, which offer many of the best features of indie bookshops, including informed staff, diversity, and offbeat titles. Of course, public libraries aren't exactly atmospherically "cool." The clientele is often young children, women over 40, and retired men. I visit five public libraries on a regular basis, and each one makes me feel old. But they deliver the goods.

*Tyler Cowen is professor of economics at George Mason University. His book [Good and Plenty: The Creative Successes of American Arts Funding](#) was just published.*

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Independent bookstores tend to be located in community centers. Books Inc., for example, has eight small but incredibly well-stocked and well-curated stores scattered throughout the Bay Area, all located in the middle of communities that have a lot of readers. Green Apple is in the heart of the inner Richmond, near neighborhood markets and restaurants. "I've got nothing against e-books, really. But, as my 10-year-old, child of digital everything, consumer of all things electronic except electronic books, says, "I like real books a million times better." Read Alter's article, "The Plot Twist: E-Book Sales Slip and Print is Far From Dead." This post was first published on my blog for writers, Sans Serif. Want my Weekly Writing & Publishing Tips? Sign up here. Some thought the superstore's collapse would bring better tidings for smaller shops. But what's really happened since the chain filed for bankruptcy? AP Images. There was a time when the independent bookstore seemed fated to die: In the early 1990s, chains like Borders and Barnes & Noble began their impressive rollout, and their guiding principle of bigger-is-better drove many independently owned shops out of business. But now, about two decades later, Borders is the one bowing out in dramatic fashion. After suffering from declining sales and missed payments, the 40-year-old chain "Print books are really that perfect thing." And by Professor Raffaelli's calculations, today's independent bookstores have evolved to something special through a kind of natural selection "the ones that have survived may be the fittest in a Darwinian sense. "I think not only are they the fittest, but they've also been sensitive, and had the ability to adapt, and reactivate some of the values that were there that may have been muted in a race towards trying to have the cheapest and largest inventory," Raffaelli said. "But do you realize, if what you&apo