

Independent Bookstores Have One Thing that Big Tech Beasts Never Will By Colleen May

There is something sentimental about the burlap exterior of a 1946 hardback, its worn pages clinging together after decades spent migrating from one home's bookshelf to another. It sits among its friends- old and new- waiting to be discovered by the avid book-lover with an eye for character. Meanwhile, hushed jazz melodies radiate through crowded aisles of fine-print words and colored spines.

A bookstore instills memories through the senses. It's a place to get lost in words, a place to sit and stay awhile. Step into "You've Got Mail," where The Shop Around the Corner beckons regular customers with twinkle lights, and magic radiates within the pages of fairy tales and fables. But pay no attention to the Fox Books superstore down the block that boasts of half-priced deals and cappuccinos.

Today, there's a bigger enemy in the book-selling business, and its name is Amazon. Being the "Fox Books" of 2020, it shows no mercy in sucking up power from local mom-and-pop joints across the country. And with the addition of a global pandemic, Amazon and its big-name companions are only growing stronger.

According to an article by Publishers Weekly, when Amazon entered the online book business in 1995, the company posted revenue of \$511,000. Today, Amazon is the largest Internet company by revenue in the world, with its net profit surpassing \$5 billion.

From March to June 2020, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos gained nearly \$48 billion in wealth, putting his net worth at nearly \$183 billion. Meanwhile, a CNBC article reported that business shutdowns due to COVID-19 continue to rise with a 34% increase in permanent closures.

In spite of the world turning more virtual by the hour, some Alabama independent bookstores are proving that business is more than a money game.

Community Counts in Independent Bookstores

Barnes & Noble's membership offers exclusive in-store and online offers, free shipping and 10% off everything in the store. E-readers and tablet users receive their own special discount. Meanwhile, Books-a-Million's website welcomes you with premium discounts and automated promises that "you can't get it faster anywhere else."

Community is critical for independent bookstores. Chain stores and online markets may find you the quickest deals but with minimal human interaction. In a time when social distancing is the norm, loneliness brews. Human connection is vital. Sometimes, all it takes is a fleeting conversation with the grey-haired, grinning store manager to brighten up an afternoon.

Brick-and-mortar independent bookstores around the country rely on literary connoisseurs and author relationships to stay in business. With COVID-19 still making its rounds, small businesses are fighting back in more ways than one. These five Alabama independent bookstores are embracing the true meaning of community.

Auburn Oil Booksellers

149 E Magnolia Avenue Suite A, Auburn, AL, 36830

Auburnoilbooksellers.com



Auburn Oil Booksellers

Photo by Colleen May

After nearly a decade without an independent bookstore in sight, Auburn Oil broke the streak on October 26, 2019, opening its doors in the heart of downtown. Owners June and Mike Armor manage the business from Greenville, South Carolina, where their first bookstore, M. Judson Booksellers, resides.

Along with its vast selection of poetry, crime, fiction, nonfiction and children's classics, Auburn Oil offers a series of "blind date" books for those looking to be surprised. Angela Wilhite operates the store alongside her team of avid book-lovers and baristas.

With Amazon lurking in the shadows, bribing readers with slashed prices and fast shipping, Auburn Oil takes full advantage of interpersonal connections.

"Amazon's not gonna tell you about this cool book they read the other day. And we're gonna do that," Wilhite said. "You really get to know people. It's not just our job. It's what we love."

Community is essential for Auburn Oil. Before COVID-19, the store was building relationships with local schools. Wilhite said she hopes they can host events in the near future in which a percentage of proceeds would benefit Auburn City Schools.

In spite of physical restrictions, Auburn Oil uses technology as a way to build greater connections with customers and local authors. The company's home delivery service gained popularity at the height of lockdown, Wilhite said. They also offer virtual book clubs which allow participants to make connections with one another from the safety of their homes.

A free service after hours allows customers to rent out the store to browse books and sip wine by the glass. For those looking for a safer alternative to in-person shopping with minimal contact, this provides them the opportunity. Folks can sign up on their website at auburnoilbooksellers.com.

Read Herring Books
105 S Court St, Montgomery, AL, 36104
Readherringbooks.com

Known as "The Birthplace of Civil Rights," Alabama's capital is nothing short of historic. Nestled between the Rosa Parks Museum and Civil Rights Memorial lies Read Herring, a one-of-a-kind bookstore known for its vast array of Southern History and Civil Rights titles. As the only person working directly in the store, Mike Breen fills every position- from customer orders to pricing and putting out displays. Events cater to what they know best- and that's history. Peggy Wallace Kennedy, daughter of former Alabama Gov. George C. Wallace, showed up just last year for a book signing.

After the pandemic hit in March, Read Herring faced hard readjustments in terms of event planning. "We had a lot of stuff that just kind of fell through," Breen said. "We've tried virtual events. They just haven't really worked out for us. They're really hit or miss."

Breen noted the added challenge of making a book sale through a screen. Order distributions during the onset of COVID-19 brought about further trials. Breen set up a personal delivery service to make sure customers received the books they requested. Upon the store's reopening, mask mandates and social distancing policies ensured the safety of all customers.

Breen said online markets are his greatest competitors in the bookselling business. In a time when online shopping is deemed the safer option, smaller businesses like Read Herring are seeing the impact.

"When it comes to the Amazon marketplace, it just feels almost like they have a stranglehold on the bookselling business right now, especially with COVID," Breen said.

While Amazon may promise delivery to your front door in two short days, they lack the interpersonal networks that play an essential role for local booksellers. According to Breen, connections with local authors and publicists are especially important. Read Herring encourages local authors and book club members to rent out their space free of charge.

“Community is of the utmost importance- in particular, for Read Herring,” Breen said. “We try our best to leave our doors open for anyone who is willing and ready to come in.”

Reed’s Books and Museum of Fond Memories
2021 3rd Ave N, Birmingham, AL, 35203
Jimreedbooks.com



Reed’s Books and Museum of Fond Memories
Photo by Colleen May

Whether you are looking for some used records, a 500-year-old novel or a life-sized Tin Man cutout, Reed’s Books has it all. If you intend to get the full experience, plan to stay longer than one day. Big-name chains and online markets are no match for the hospitality you’ll find off 3rd Avenue North.

About 40 years ago, Jim Reed decided that he wanted to control his own universe. His bookstore is a collection of oddities and stories that date back centuries. Reed said the store means nothing to him if it doesn’t have a reason.

“If you turn somebody onto a book who didn’t intend to ever read another book in their life, you’ve done something that day,” Reed said.

When COVID-19 forced his storefront to close temporarily, Reed said his greatest challenge was to keep going. “Everything died overnight,” he said. But after implementing safety measures, business continued.

Reed noted the influence of Amazon in the book industry is incredible. “It changed the way we do certain things, but it hasn’t changed the basic thing that we do,” he said. Amazon’s annual fees and taxes are masked by the promotion of good deals. Everything gets paid for, but the big tech company knows how to present it right.

Despite being a killer to local businesses, Reed said he uses Amazon to his advantage. “Amazon wants our books, because they don’t have books. They’re making money off other people’s books and getting a percentage,” Reed said. “So we use the enemy to help us continue making a living.”

The Alabama Booksmith
2626 19th Pl S, Homewood, AL, 35209
Alabamabooksmith.com



The Alabama Booksmith
Photo by Colleen May

The Alabama Booksmith sets itself apart by carrying only signed, hardback copies. Nearly 22 years ago, they became one of the first U.S. bookstores to sign up with the American Booksellers Association, a non-profit trade organization helping independently owned bookstores grow and succeed.

“I think the exciting part is meeting new people. It’s not a one-and-done. Folks who prefer signed books usually come back, and if they find a place that has signed books, they’ll come back on a frequent basis,” store owner Jake Reiss said.

Renowned American journalist and Pulitzer Prize winner, Rick Bragg, had nothing but good things to say about his dear friend, Mr. Reiss, in “My Bookstore,” a collection of 84 authors’ stories paying tribute to their favorite brick-and-mortar stores:

“Jake Reiss is winning, because he is making a dollar by making good books and authors available to people who love to read and love the people who make it a pleasure,” Bragg noted. “Maybe the reason I say Alabama Booksmith is my favorite is because Jake Reiss gives me hope that my craft will endure.”

Reiss said Amazon is no competitor to their business model. For the past seven or eight years, the store has been shipping signed copies worldwide. And their business thrives on connection. Fortunately, COVID-19 never wreaked havoc on Reiss’ store. With their entire

inventory online, folks can still browse their collection and purchase signed copies from the comfort of their home (www.alabamabooksmith.com).

According to Reiss, connections are critical in the book business, especially those made with individual authors, sales reps and publicists. But regular folks within the community make lasting connections as well.

“I’m speaking from history- the local, independent bookstore is the one who sponsors the kid’s little league team, and Amazon doesn’t do that,” Reiss said. “They’re a citizen of the community as opposed to someone far away.”

Well Red

223 Opelika Road, Auburn, AL, 36830

Wellredau.com

The coffee, books and wine sanctuary located off Opelika Road started as an idea between Crystal and her husband, Richard Tomasello, nearly 10 years ago. Inspired by Battery Park Book Exchange in Asheville, North Carolina, the Tomasellos wanted to open a place in Auburn where students and families could sit and wind down.

When the whole world locked down back in spring, construction was the one thing that never stopped, Mrs. Tomasello said. The store opened its doors on June 22, 2020. And ever since then, their parking lot remains packed from morning to night.

“You come in, [and] you get to know our staff. It’s a community that you get to be a part of and that Amazon doesn’t offer,” Mrs. Tomasello said. “You are gaining relationships that you wouldn’t get through Amazon.”

Well Red’s Instagram page updates coffee shop-goers on events, new releases and daily dessert items. Their meet-the-staff series allows customers to know the personalities behind the counter. For Black Friday this year, the company advertised a series of half-off and used books to promote the ‘shop local’ movement.

How Independent Bookstores Are Battling the Virtual World

Independent bookstores have a couple new weapons in the fight. Bookshop is an online bookstore with a mission to support local literature hubs. “The shop competes with Amazon prices. And it does give a small kickback to your local bookstores,” Mrs. Tomasello said.

Customers can search for any local bookstore registered with the company. By selecting a store at checkout, part of the revenue will go directly back to that company. The site will also notify you with the amount of money raised to help support independent bookstores.

According to one New York Times article, Bookshop is on track to exceed \$40 million in sales this year. The site offers an affiliate program for authors or book-lovers, which pays a

10% commission on every sale, and gives a matching 10% to independent bookstores (Bookshop.org).

Auburn Oil Booksellers started directing customers to Bookshop.org during the nationwide shutdown. "They have such a cool website that is setting itself up to compete against Amazon," Wilhite said.

The American Booksellers Association also works to help independent bookstores succeed in spite of online competitors. Reiss from The Alabama Booksmith said the company is pushing that independent bookstores are more than just a place to buy a book. "It's a place to meet folks from your community."

The Future of Independent Bookstores

Some businesses continue to thrive in spite of physical limitations and online competitors. Others aren't so lucky. According to one NPR article, the famous Paris bookstore, Shakespeare & Company, lost nearly 80% of its revenue since the first pandemic shutdown in France. Strand Bookstore in New York City recently sent out a cry for help after their store revenue dropped nearly 70% compared to last year.

Breen's outlook is one of hope and weariness. "We were on the upturn for a while there," Breen said. "I'm hoping independent bookstores will be able to pick up again once COVID is completely taken care of."

For Read Herring's store manager, it's the mystique of a bookstore that calls in the crowds. Jim Reed said accident draws a good chunk of his visitors. Auburn Oil's Angela Wilhite commented on the personal relationships and conversations that can't be matched elsewhere.

Jake Reiss said he thinks the future is looking bright for most independent bookstores. "I believe there's a different magnet at each store, depending upon their relationship with the community- the specific inventory that appeals to the specific parts of the community that they draw upon," Reiss said.

Books have no deadline. They don't light up with alerts. They don't buzz aggressively and demand immediate attention. Books sit with poise in the background, their pages eager to transport you into a world of their own at your earliest convenience.

Browse the children's section, flip open a page and sit around the fire with Frog & Toad. Hop over to the mystery section and get lost in Agatha Christie's words on page 42. Online markets can give you convenience. They can give you price cuts and rapid service. But they can't give you the basic need that is human connection.

The world may be going virtual in many regards, but bookstores throughout Alabama and beyond can count on one thing to keep them going, and that's community. Take away the books. Take away the furniture, the fancy mugs and the trinkets. All that remains is people.

