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bound together

How a chaotic little bookshop united a community



The little bookshop that found strength in its community

Customers moved books, painted walls and rallied around owner Kate Toon through a disastrous year.

By Tahlia Whitfield



Books in a Bunnings trolley. Hundreds of them, wheeled 100 metres from the Book Nook's old premises to a larger home after a move beset by storm damage, building problems and delays. Load after load, strangers and customers ferried the shop's contents down the road; they painted walls, too, some of them having never even met owner Kate Toon. There are customer loyalty programs, and then there is whatever was happening here.

Toon had bought Umina Beach Book Nook, a small independent bookshop on the NSW Central Coast, less than two years earlier. It should have been a fairly straightforward move into large premises. Instead, severe weather and a protracted council dispute turned it into one trial and tribulation after another. But as the problems accumulated, so did the people willing to help.

For a business having an objectively terrible year, the Book Nook was discovering something enviable – a customer base willing to do far more than buy a book once and disappear. “I’ve always depended on the kindness of strangers,” Toon tells me, slipping into Blanche DuBois’ character as we both sink into the Book Nook’s sofa, adjacent to the romantasy section and a reimagined Narnia wardrobe.

The wardrobe leads into the Tolkien & Narnia Room, loosely modelled on Oxford’s Eagle and Child, the pub once frequented by CS Lewis and JRR Tolkien, and a place Toon would visit often as a child. It’s a space where customers can read in peace and, on occasion, a local JP uses the room for appointments.

A whim becomes a business

Before the Nook, Toon told me, she had worked as a senior producer at an ad agency in England. In Australia, she moved into teaching SEO and copywriting online. “I’d spent 10 years in a shed in my back garden, I was talking to hundreds of people but never actually looking at them,” she said, admitting she was craving human connection at the time.

Buying the book shop in 2024 was a whim. Toon had never run a shop; her only retail experience was at age 21, folding underpants at Burton in the UK. Suffice to say she had little understanding of how difficult running a bookshop might be. “I used to like to play ‘shops’ when I was little, though,” she said comically.

Toon remade the store with new fixtures, fittings and shelves, but the underlying business was still losing money hand over fist. She didn’t view the bookshop as a passion project or a commercial investment. “I really thought that I could just pop in a couple of days a week and play shops, have other people run it and run my other business. I had no idea.”

What soon followed was Toon’s own personality – candour and all – embedded in the business’s social media. Now with over 7000 followers on Instagram, The Book Nook’s latest chapter has contained enough plot for a considerably less plausible novel.



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anyone, because of my social media. That was all I was told.”

For Toon, it’s a contradictory circumstance, considering the group represents the needs of the business community in the area. “They don’t understand the role that social media plays. They think I’m dancing around on Reels just for fun. They don’t understand that it actually helps us and what a difference it makes.”

The complaint, the council and Margaret Pomeranz

After the storm’s destruction, The Book Nook was soon back on track with its renovations, but in late January, the shop’s progress was abruptly interrupted by an anonymous complaint to council concerning two partition walls. Toon had taken advice before installing them and believed the work required no development application, a view later supported by a certifier, engineer and architect. The council disagreed.

What followed was an expensive piece of municipal degradation that cost three months of rent across two premises, about A\$5000 spent defending the walls, and another A\$3000 on removing them. “It was purely just to put a spike in my tyre,” she said. “Look at the collateral it has caused.”

The timing had a certain bleak comic precision. Toon had just received the news and was preparing to close for the day when lauded film critic Margaret Pomeranz walked in wanting to buy a book. Toon began to unravel, and Pomeranz, whom she describes affectionately as “not the most touchy person”, gave her a hug and promptly offered to take up the matter with council. Lawyers soon volunteered advice, while architects assisted without charge. Toon eventually replaced the offending walls with bookshelves and concedes the result looks better.

Toon’s almost real-time broadcasting of the shop’s setbacks, frustrations and rawer moments clearly reverberated through the community, and what followed was a peculiarly Umina mixture of civic generosity. Locals rallied. Ocean Beach Tattoo staged a book-

The flood

Following Toon’s first year at the helm of the bookshop, she decided the Nook needed more room to breathe. She found it further along the same street in a former butcher’s shop with more space and subsequently launched a “Help Move the Book Nook” crowdfunding campaign to help pay for the relocation and renovation. Then the rain came.

Just short of a month after Kate Toon announced the Book Nook’s move to a new home in mid-December, the weather staged an intervention. This was no passing summer shower; the Central Coast was subsequently included in a Natural Disaster Declaration for the severe weather event, while emergency warnings put Umina directly in the path of locally intense rainfall and potentially life-threatening flash flooding.

By then, the renovation was already well under way and before the books had even settled into their new home, the storm exposed serious problems with the old butcher shop’s roof. “The front area collapsed. Water pouring into the kitchen and down the walls. Shelves damaged. God knows what happened with electricity. I’m devastated,” Toon wrote on social media at the time.

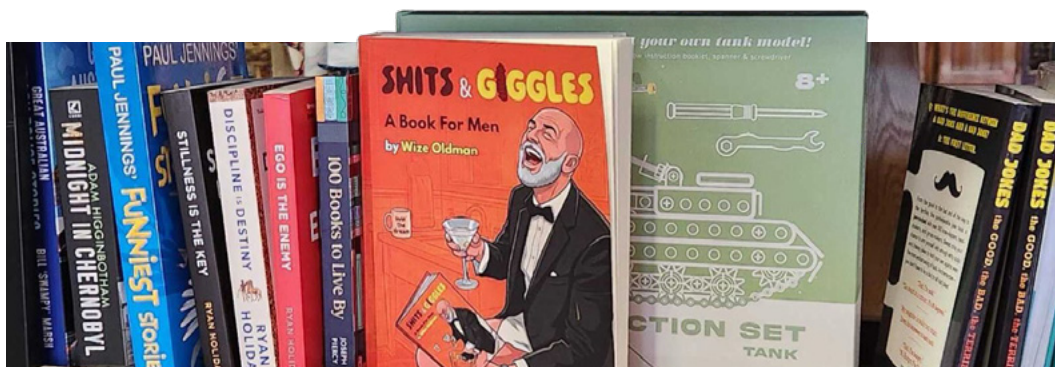
Goodwill and backlash

The fundraiser suddenly had another purpose; some of those funds would cover the storm damage. The community raised A\$12,000 but it didn’t come without its bit of contention. Toon said holding a fundraiser to keep a commercial business afloat was controversial. When one woman, whose own business had folded, commented that no one had helped her when it closed, Toon kept her reply simple: “You didn’t ask.”

Beyond the crowdfunding, community members also gave their time and elbow grease. “We had people come in and paint. We moved every book from that shop to this shop in a Bunnings trolley. We did maybe 350 trips. They were people from the community, people I’d never met,” Toon said.

The community’s response to Toon’s takeover was divided. Amid the warm reception, there was also resistance from the peninsula’s traditionalists. Toon revealed she was rejected by the Peninsula Chamber of Commerce, the local business fraternity representing the traders, shopkeepers and commercial interests of Woy Woy, Umina and Ettalong. “I think this is the first time they’ve ever rejected





themed flash day donating 60 per cent of proceeds, and customers were urged to buy books after the shop recorded its lowest-revenue month.

Now, the Book Nook is an integral part of her life. “I don’t know whether it’s causation or correlation, but as this has grown, my other business has shrunk. I’m no longer doing things that I did.” Instead, she created a shop that feels as much like a community hub as a bookstore. For Toon, creating that sense of community was always part of her plan. “If there’s one thing I’m good at, it’s building communities. That’s my thing,” Toon said. “I knew that this bookshop wasn’t going to survive by selling books alone. Really, the loyalty and the community are what’s keeping this place going. Absolutely.” By then, her “A Streetcar Named Desire” refrain about the kindness of strangers had become especially apt.

Three months on from the Nook’s grand reopening, the new shop is finished. A handmade leafy archway frames one half of the store, and out the back, a garden made for lingering and children’s activities is covered in murals, with a homemade signpost pointing towards fictional lands like Panem, Green Gables and Mordor. Toon is in her element running this book shop; she moves between customers, staff and the small exigencies of running a shop with easy confidence.

Retail as a gathering place

The events that take place in the shop consist of nine book clubs’ activities, author events, parties, “you name it,” she marvelled. “We just did Fairy Club, Knitting Club, and we’re starting a Lost Letters Club where we write letters.” Everything, she says, from the space, the couch, everything – it’s big.

The Peninsula is still finding its feet as an events destination, but the appetite is unmistakable: the community wants it. Locals are actively looking for somewhere to gather beyond the odd comedy show or pub trivia night. Toon says it doesn’t take much to buy a pack of cupcakes, get some wine and bring people together at the Book Nook.

The store attends to all ages, from lots of parents with young kids,

all the way up to Molly, one of the shop’s oldest customers, who is in almost every week buying something. “People say, ‘What’s the demographic?’ and I’m like, ‘Retail.’ We’ve become a hub for people from all sorts of different backgrounds, ages and everything to come here because everyone has that one thing in common: They like to read.”

Toon presents a physical case, which is unsurprising given the anti-algorithm era where people, particularly from the younger generation, desperately want to revive analogue. In April, Live Nation released ‘Love Song’, its largest study on Gen Z. It found the younger gen are embracing retro technology, physical scrapbooking and other offline hobbies, while 85 per cent said they were seeking deeper, more meaningful real-world connection.

“I think people are craving human connection and they’re craving real things. We live in a cold, hard, digital world, and we are losing our humanity,” Toon reflected. “Here, you can sniff the books, you can lick them, you can talk to other people, you can eat cake, you can sit on a comfy chair. It’s very visceral. It’s very sensual,” she said. “Not in a sexual way, but in the smell, the feel and the sound.”

Two weeks ago, Susannah Bowen, CEO of The Australian Booksellers Association visited Umina Beach Book Nook. “Chuffed to bits,” Toon posted alongside a selfie of the pair. It’s a full-circle moment, as Bowen had previously spoken to Inside Retail earlier this year about the enduring nature of independent bookshops. “They sustain Australian stories, and they create knowledge economy jobs. They are doing a lot of heavy lifting for culture and education.”

Bowen told me that Australian bookshops are in a stronger position than many people realise and that they are proportionally healthier than in other English speaking markets. “The community contribution is huge. And the experience of the shops themselves can’t be replicated online.”

A destination with no online sales

Despite all the indignities, there has been far more positivity than negativity toward the Book Nook. Alongside running the store with her staff, Olivia, Grace and Cara, its online presence is also pivotal. “These days, as a retail store, I do not think you can survive without being online. We do no online sales. Zero. We can’t compete with Amazon and we can’t do free shipping.” She says online is purely about building the brand and getting people to visit.

The Book Nook, then, has become a destination by design. “People come in and say, ‘This is like shops used to be. You don’t think you get shops like this anymore.’ They want their children to experience what they had.” You can’t buy that kind of customer loyalty.

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