

E-Books, Shmee-Books: Readers Return to the Stores

Julie Bosman

Facing economic gloom and competition from cheap e-readers, brick-and-mortar booksellers entered this holiday season with the humblest of expectations.

But the initial weeks of Christmas shopping, a boom time for the book business, have yielded surprisingly strong sales for many bookstores, which report that they have been lifted by an unusually vibrant selection; customers who seem undeterred by pricier titles; and new business from people who used to shop at Borders, the chain that went out of business this year.

Barnes & Noble, the nation's largest bookstore chain, said that comparable store sales this Thanksgiving weekend increased 10.9 percent from that period last year. The American Booksellers Association, a trade group for independents, said last week that members saw a sales jump of 16 percent in the week including Thanksgiving, compared with the same period a year ago.

At the R. J. Julia bookstore in Madison, Conn., sales of adult trade books in November rose 30 percent over last year, said Roxanne J. Coady, the owner.

"Last year was just depressing," Ms. Coady said by telephone. "It was the beginning of the e-reader, and we didn't know what that meant. Somehow, this year, people are back to thinking of books as an appealing gift." Considering the economy, she added, "Adult books being up right now feels crazy to me."

Sales are up 15 percent from last year at Next Chapter Bookshop in Mequon, Wis., the store's owner, Lanora Hurley, said, speculating that she may have been helped by the closing of a Borders store about seven miles away.

"We're just going gangbusters and having a great time," Ms. Hurley said, adding cautiously that she was concerned that it would not last. "I have to say, I'm worried about January. Everybody's going to open their electronic device for Christmas."

Analysts are predicting enormous sales for new e-readers and tablets from Barnes & Noble and Amazon in the coming weeks (despite mixed reviews of Amazon's new color tablet), a factor that has many in the industry concerned about the future of retail stores. The closing of Borders, the second-largest book chain in the country, is also expected to hurt publishers' overall sales numbers.

Jamie Raab, the publisher of Grand Central Publishing, said there was "no question" that holiday sales would be hurt by the loss of Borders. "That's like 650 stores that aren't here," she said. "The best way to get gift ideas is by roaming around stores. I think it's a really dramatic loss."

Nevertheless, booksellers and publishers said they were still hoping that there would be a healthy enough interest in print books that the two formats could coexist. They have been closely watching the performance of print books this holiday season, which so far has not produced a monster surprise hit like last year's "Autobiography of Mark Twain," the 500,000-word best seller from the University of California Press that was rushed back to press six times by mid-November.

But there has been a rich selection of nonfiction, some booksellers pointed out, praising publishers for the breadth of biographies, histories and quirky pop-economics titles released this fall.

Popular biographies include "Steve Jobs" by Walter Isaacson; the critically acclaimed "Catherine the Great" by the historian Robert K. Massie; and "Spencer Tracy" by James Curtis;

as well as memoirs from Diane Keaton, Regis Philbin and Gabrielle Giffords, the Democratic congresswoman from Arizona who was shot in January.

Books by media pundits like Chris Matthews, Bill O'Reilly and Glenn Beck have pushed to the top five on the New York Times nonfiction hardcover best-seller list. "Killing Lincoln: The Shocking Assassination That Changed America Forever," by Mr. O'Reilly and Martin Dugard, reached the No. 2 spot on the list for the week ending Dec. 3.

"This year so far, it's been the year of nonfiction," said Peter Aaron, owner of the Elliott Bay Book Company in Seattle, citing "The Beauty and the Sorrow," a history of World War I by Peter Englund, and "Thinking, Fast and Slow" by the Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman, an exploration of thinking and intuition. "What's extraordinary about the books that are out there is that they've been so well written and such a pleasure to read. Maybe people have an appetite for nonfiction right now, just for some sort of grounding in reality."

In fiction, titles that have emerged as popular holiday gifts are "The Dovekeepers" by Alice Hoffman; "The Marriage Plot" by Jeffrey Eugenides; "1Q84" by Haruki Murakami; and "The Angel Esmeralda," a story collection by Don DeLillo. Reliably bestselling authors like Michael Connelly, Stephen King, Janet Evanovich and John Grisham have all released novels in recent weeks, and Mr. King and Ms. Evanovich are second and third on the Times hardcover best-seller list for the week ending Dec. 3.

A handful of glossy, expensive hardcover books have emerged as sleeper successes. "Harry Potter Page to Screen," a \$75 book published by Harper Design, an imprint of HarperCollins, has been on best-seller lists for weeks, despite its intimidating price. Alberto Rojas, a spokesman for HarperCollins, said there were currently 140,000 copies of the book in print.

"Mountain," an \$85 photography book subtitled "Portraits of High Places," has been a popular item at the King's English Bookshop in Salt Lake City, said Anne Holman, the general manager, along with "The Louvre," a dazzling art book with a picture of every painting on display from the permanent collection of that museum. The store has seen its sales rise at least 7 or 8 percent over last year's holiday season, Ms. Holman said.

"One thing that we noticed a lot of this year is that there are a lot more big, beautiful coffee-table books," she said. "Expensive, \$50 and \$75 books that we're selling hand over fist." At the Tattered Cover bookstores in Denver, a surprise seller has been "The Art Museum," a \$200 survey of world art organized in "rooms" and "galleries," said Cathy Langer, the lead buyer, who has reordered from the publisher several times.

"I'm not seeing the price resistance that usually occurs," Ms. Langer said. "Maybe people are just tired of being afraid to spend money."

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