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Local bookstores scraping by

Lincoln Park, Lake View stores dealing with one-two punch

REAL ESTATE

NEAR LOOP

South Loop, Near West and West Loop

By **Aranya Tomseth**
Medill News Service

The big chain booksellers were once the nemesis of small, independent book retailers. These days, however, those smaller retailers are getting a one-two punch from the big box booksellers and the Internet. A sluggish economy only makes a bad situation worse.

WEST TOWN

Bucktown, Wicker Park and Ukrainian Village

"The chains have been killing off the independents at the rate of three a week for years," said Dan Poynter, longtime author, publisher and founder of Santa Barbara, Calif.-based Para Publishing Inc. "Now, the online stores are killing off the chains."

BOOSTER

Lake View, Roscoe Village and North Center

Eric Kirsammer, owner of Quimby's bookstore in Wicker Park and Chicago Comics in Lake View, fears online retailers may prove deadly for small, independent stores.

NEWS-STAR

Rogers Park, Ravenswood, Edgewater and Uptown

"That's been having a large effect on our business," Eric Kirsammer said. "I mean we do Internet sales, but not enough to offset the losses I think are attributable to the Internet [retailers]."



Chicago Comics, 3244 N. Clark, is one of many independent bookstores facing challenges from online retailers.
Bethany Vogelsberg/Staff

Amazon.com Inc. is a formidable foe because it offers a huge selection, competitive prices and the convenience of online ordering. But for small storeowners like Kirsammer, it does not make financial sense to offer online ordering. Kirsammer said his stores specialize in selling small "zines," rare magazines, comics and books that other stores do not carry.

"It's hard to compete selling \$1 or \$2 items against people who are selling \$50 items," Kirsammer said. "Most of the stuff we're selling is the hard-to-find stuff, but if there's a book that we carry that Barnes & Noble carries or Amazon carries, unfortunately, people are probably going to buy from them."

SKYLINE

Lincoln Park, River North, Old Town and Gold Coast

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METROPOLIS

There are some bright spots on the horizon for smaller book retailers. According to the American Booksellers Association, 115 new independent bookstores opened for business across 35 states in 2007. However, not one of the new store openings was in Chicago or even in Illinois.

CHICAGO JOURNAL CALENDAR

According to preliminary estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau, a relatively strong second half of 2007 resulted in bookstore sales of \$16.8 billion, or a 1.1 percent increase for the year. According to the data, this was the first time since 2005—the last time that a "Harry Potter" book was released—that bookstore sales increased for the year. In December, a month that was not particularly good at the chains, sales rose 2.7 percent, to \$2.1 billion.

NORTHSIDE CALENDAR

CHICAGO JOURNAL COMMUNITY GUIDE

Meghan Worrell, an employee at one of three Powell's Bookstores Chicago, each of which has more than 225,000 books, said the slowing U.S. economy has definitely made 2008 a challenging year for the Lincoln Park Powell's where she works. The stores carry quality used rare books that are primarily academic and scholarly in nature.

LOGAN SQUARE COMMUNITY GUIDE

"But we have good days and we have bad days," Worrell said.

CHICAGO JOURNAL ANSWER BOOK

Independent stores survive by offering specialty niche items that set them apart from the big chains, but they are still outdone and outmatched because the larger book retailers have created an inventory standard that is impossible to match on a smaller level, Worrell said.

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"Because of places like Barnes & Noble and Borders, people have certain expectations of what a bookstore should be, and we just don't have that kind of database," she said.

Feedback

While the current economic environment poses a challenge to even the most thriving big-box retailers, it can mean the difference between staying in business and calling it quits for local independent bookstores.

Special Sections

"The economy does affect us," said Kirsammer of Quimby's Bookstore. "April was not a good month at all-in fact it was terrible-but ... April was a bad month at a lot of places."

PHOTO STORE**Multimedia**

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Ed Devereux, owner of Unabridged Books in Lake View, said his sales have declined gradually over the last three years, and he estimates that sales dropped 1 percent to 2 percent in 2007. Devereux attributes the sales decline in part to the increasing success of online retailers like Amazon.com, but said he believes there are underlying sociological and cultural changes at the root of it all. People today are much more likely to surf social networking sites and check e-mail on their laptops than to read a book, Devereux said.

"The other big thing is just the nature of how our city is changing-it's sort of like the strip-malling of the city," he said. "I think the neighborhoods have changed. People used to live and shop in their own neighborhood, but now it seems like everyone has a car and ... there are all sorts of mini-malls. The idea of a walking neighborhood has changed, so I think, not only are people buying online, but foot traffic is down in general."

Still, Devereux said his store continues to attract a decent customer base with its vibrant shelf signs and well-stocked "remainder" sale sections that offer last year's hardcover bestsellers at rock-bottom prices.

"We still have healthy sales, and I think it's just a couple different things we're dealing with," Devereux said. "Of course, it's always nice when sales are going up, which they're not, but there's no danger of us going out of business."

Although big businesses are looking to online sales for future profits, smaller bookstores will continue to rely on the customers who want to enjoy the physical experience of going to a bookstore and perusing the shelves for hidden gems.

"If I were to choose one or the other, I'd rather have these [independent] books stores," Ravenswood resident Caden Howell said, while browsing at Powell's in Lincoln Park. "I used to live in Schaumburg where there was a Borders and a Barnes & Noble, and that was it, so it's nice to be able to come to stores like this."

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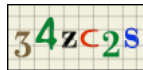
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