Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Role of Independent Bookstores

Chiwan Choi · Thursday, November 15th, 2012

This past Sunday evening, I enjoyed another great night at the Roar Shack Reading Series. It was their first time holding the event at The Last Bookstore (walking distance for me!), after a the first few months at Stories Books in Echo Park. Not only was it a great line-up of writers—Lauren Eggert-Crowe, J Ryan Stradal, Caitlin Myer and a poet I consider to be one of the best I've ever encountered, Kim Calder—but there was the beautiful music of Mad Gregs.

Before the first reader went up, I got a chance to chat with a guy who works at Goodreads. He was impressed with the store, how as gigantic as it is it had a community feel. The crowd was able to congregate in the middle of the floor and get into the mood. This led to us talking about the role of small presses and independent bookstores, what each must do to survive.

To a customer looking to buy books, the neighborhood bookstore can't compete with Amazon, not in price, not in selection and in many cases, not even in customer service. If a bookstore doesn't adapt and serve the role of community and arts center, it is dead. Obviously, this is not to say that filling such a role will rule out the possibility of a store's closure. There are other factors at play—rent, neighborhood, economy and such. But if a store is not filling a role in its community that goes beyond selling books to readers, what is it betting its future on? Its neighbors' collective guilt? Our longing for the days of mom-n-pop stores? And at this point, is there a reason for the store to survive?

I think of it this way—I love going to the bars I go to and I will continue going to them and spending money (way too much money) even though it's drastically cheaper to buy a six-pack from the store and drink at home. A good neighborhood bar gives me something beyond the product that I am purchasing, in this case the booze. The crowd. The staff. The friendships and the lively debates/discussions/drunken arguments. There will be bonds made. Friends found. It gives me a social life that revolves around a common product but goes beyond and becomes part of the fabric of my life. Like church. But with less religion. And more flavor.

Relationship between small presses and indie bookstores have to change too. I touched on one aspect of it last week, how the only way it makes sense for us (the presses) to even put our books on the shelves is if we can demand a dedicated space within the store. But there are also other things to consider.

In most cases, because the stores don't believe they can afford to order copies of our books from our distributors, we end up signing consignment agreements where the store gets 40%. This is a standard split and I can accept it. But the fact is, most stores apply this same split even during events. These are events that we bring the writers to, bring the books to and promote. The events bring crowds who more often than not buy other books in the store in addition to our books. Yet

we still have to give up 40% of our cut because, well, because they provided a cash register.

During the Roar Shack reading, David Rocklin, the gracious host and author of *The Luminist*, encouraged everyone in the audience to buy books from the store before we left, to support a venue that had provided such a great environment—stage, staff, freedom to gather in the center of the floor—for the writers and the audience. And when people asked me if it would be better for Writ Large Press for them to buy our last book, *History of Butoh*, directly from us. I didn't think twice on this night about pushing them to buy the books through the store, even if it meant giving up a big cut, because the place provided something beyond books and it felt like a relationship, with give and take, and a relationship worth investing in to show support to the independent bookstore, to the community, and to ourselves.

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