



OFF

THE

SHELVES

**7 LITERARY LESSONS
FROM AUTHOR-OWNED
BOOKSTORES.**

By Elizabeth Fishel



Who among us book-loving writers hasn't dreamed of owning our own bookstore? Turning strangers onto our favorite books, helping spread the word about gifted first-time authors, pulling old and new classics off the shelves to inspire ourselves, sharing book talk over a cappuccino at the adjacent cafe – what a delicious occupation and pastime (and maybe a marvelous excuse to put off our own writing).

Following in the footsteps of such literary lights as Lawrence Ferlinghetti (City Lights in San Francisco), Alice Munro (Munro's Books in Victoria, B.C.), and Larry McMurtry (Booked Up in Archer City, Texas), a new generation of writers has gone into the bookselling business while maintaining hot careers of their own.

Most of their stores opened in the last decade despite a host of economic pressures and fears that independent bookstores were going the way of hot type and the typewriter. But these writer/owners surged forward anyway, defying the odds. Each one has made its local literary community more vibrant, hand-sold beloved books by the armful, hosted innumerable author events (pivoting to Zoom during COVID's darkest days), given a boost to emerging writers, and provided an attractive platform for the author/owner's own work.

Here, booksellers around the country share what they've learned to make your writing sing and sell.

Parnassus Books

Nashville, Tennessee
parnassusbooks.net

In 2011, when Nashville's two main bookstores shut down, booklover and bestselling novelist Ann Patchett (*Bel Canto*, *Commonwealth*, *The Dutch House*) stepped into the void, paired up with publishing sales representative Karen Hayes, and opened a new bookstore, Parnassus Books. They found a space in a strip mall, behind Fox's Donut Den, and named the store for the mountain that was home to Greek mythology's muses. With its high wooden shelves, rolling ladders, and dangling stars, Parnassus has become a go-to community spot for local book aficionados more than a decade since it opened. Still other fans make the pilgrimage from miles away to catch a glimpse of the author/owner whose novels they cherish or get her book recs (lately, Louise Erdrich, Elizabeth Strout, and Colson Whitehead).

If customers get lucky, they might also get a tail wag from one of the shop dogs, Patchett's Sparky, whom the author calls both her muse and her emotional support animal. "You have no idea how hard he has to work," she says. "I really should get a second dog

so he could rest."

The literary hubbub at Parnassus, simmering like a welcoming pot of coffee on the stove, is exactly what Patchett dreamed of for her bookshop – what she calls "conversation that unfolds within these shop walls." What evolves may be two strangers becoming new friends over a table of paperbacks, a healthy debate springing up between customers in the checkout line, or a lifelong fan meeting an author for the first time at a signing.

She was a solitary girl, imagining a solitary life for herself, she writes in her latest collection of essays, *These Precious Days*, but going to graduate school at the University of Iowa gave her another model, a glimpse into how rich a community of fellow writers could be. As she explains, "That's what owning a bookstore has been like for me – it's reminded me of what I loved about grad school. I could use the tools I'd been given in ways I never knew they could work. I've made a soft place for an ever-expanding group of friends and strangers to come and exclaim and argue over books."

"I believe I've done more good on behalf of culture by opening Parnassus than I have writing novels," she adds. Her fans might debate that point, but her lesson is clear: *Writers need to gather in community for inspiration and support.*

Books & Books

Key West, Florida
booksandbookskw.com

When beloved, prolific, and notoriously frank children's book author Judy Blume (*Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* and *Blubber* as well as adult titles like *Summer Sisters*) first moved to Key West 25 years ago, there were six bookstores to tempt readers. Over the years, that number dwindled to one, and Blume and her husband, George Cooper, decided to take matters into their own hands. Key West was the heart of a famous literary tradition going back to Ernest Hemingway, Tennessee Williams, Elizabeth Bishop, and, more recently, Annie Dillard and Ann Beattie, among many others. The town also hosted the annual, well-respected Key West Literary Seminar. This legacy demanded a place where readers and writers could congregate, talk, and buy books.

A retail space opened up in an arts complex called The Studios, and Blume and Cooper jumped on it. It was the perfect spot with plenty of foot traffic and, above them, galleries, an auditorium, artist studios, and a rooftop terrace that turned out to be ideal for hosting outdoor author events during the pandemic. Books & Books opened as a nonprofit in 2016 – Blume is a founder, not an owner – and it's part of a flourishing, small chain of independent bookstores of the same name in Miami, Westhampton on Long Island, and the Grand Cayman Islands. The author works at the shop three days a week, juggling other projects like consulting on the upcoming movie of her iconic YA novel *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret*. Among the stacks



of beach reads (“It is Key West, after all,” says store manager Emily Berg), Blume stocks and hand-sells her own favorites, like Miranda Cowley Heller’s *The Paper Palace* and Jennifer Egan’s newest, *The Candy House*.

Being surrounded by books is the ultimate inspiration for this iconic writer, now in her 80s, and the lesson she passes on to writers starting out. “I once met a woman who wanted to write,”



she says. “She told me she’d read 72 books about writing, but she still couldn’t do it. I suggested that instead of reading books about writing, she read the best books she could find, the books that would inspire her to write as well as she could.”

That’s the message between the pages of Blume’s *Books & Books: Read and emulate the best books you can find to become the writer you want to be.*

An Unlikely Story Bookstore and Café

Plainville, Massachusetts
anunlikelystory.com

An Unlikely Story Bookstore and Café in Plainville, Massachusetts, is the brainchild of Julie and Jeff Kinney, whose other brainchild is the mega kids’ hit *The Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, a part diary-style, part cartoon-style series of books with more than 250 million copies sold around the world and a popular Disney movie franchise as well. In 2015, Kinney decided to take some of his profits from popularizing “pre-adolescent angst” and create a valuable gathering space for his community: a handsome three-story building to house a bookshop, café, and event space.

The original building on the site dated to the mid-1800s and was known as Falk’s Market after its general store owner, Merrill Falk; the Kinneys took care to honor its long history. When the original structure they’d bought turned out to be too dilapidated to salvage, they built a new one from the ground up, using reclaimed material from other buildings and striving to make the structure as environmentally friendly as possible. With a white clapboard front and a roomy porch with benches and chairs to sit and peruse a new purchase, it retains the charm of an old-fashioned general store. The shop also features colorful displays that use fruit and vegetable crates from the old market that once sat in the lot.

Even with the runaway success of his own books, Kinney has learned



Jeff Kinney, owner of An Unlikely Story

a lot about what makes other books fly off the shelves, too. First, he said in an email, “I’ve learned that great hand-sellers are worth their weight in gold. We have some very special book-sellers at our store that can turn your pair of books into a stack of five. I think enthusiasm is what sells books. That’s why shelf-talkers are so important.”

Second: Sometimes a buyer does judge a book by its cover. “What I’ve noticed is that a well-executed cover can help a book reach higher heights. A great cover becomes iconic, and you can spot it from across the room.”

What’s the best part of owning a bookstore for this project-juggling writer? “It keeps our lives interesting,” he

replies. “Every week, we have a handful of events with authors, and our lives are enriched in hearing about their stories. We’ve made some very unlikely friendships along the way, with authors such as Henry Winkler, Hillary and Chelsea Clinton, Judd Winick, Brad Meltzer, Kate DiCamillo, Gene Yang, and too many more to mention.”

He’s always said, when asked for writing advice, that new experiences of all kinds will inspire writers tremendously...and will likely make them happier, too. Owning a bookstore has jolted him into fresh modes of thinking, and he passes that advice along: *Having adventures, just doing something unlikely, will revive and refresh your writing, too.*

Birchbark Books and Native Arts

Minneapolis, Minnesota

birchbarkbooks.com

Looking for a worthy project to take on with her daughters, Louise Erdrich, the 2012 National Book Award winner (for *The Round House*) and the 2021 Pulitzer Prize winner (for *The Night Watchman*), opened Birchbark Books and Native Arts in 2001 in Minneapolis. Erdrich is a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa (known also as Ojibwe). The Ojibwe kept scrolls of their writing on birchbark, hence the store's name. Erdrich calls it "a teaching bookstore," dedicated to supporting and spreading the work of Native (as well as non-Native) writers, journalists, and historians.

The store also specializes in Native art and crafts, including quillwork, traditional basketry, silverwork, unusual dreamcatchers, and Indigenous paintings. To create the store, a team gutted a dentist's office, and now the shop's décor incorporates genuine birch trees, blown-down birches found in Wisconsin and transported by pickup truck to Minneapolis for authentic atmosphere. It may be the only bookstore in the country to feature a handcrafted canoe hanging from the ceiling above the table of "current and favorite books" as well as a confessional booth, improbably

"LITTLE BOOKSTORES ARE COMMUNITY SERVICES, NOT PROFITABLE BUSINESS ENTERPRISES."

rescued from a bar and bought from a salvage company. Writers sign the back wall, and the bathroom is wallpapered with poems.

"With a small bookstore, you get to encourage your eccentricities," Erdrich told the *Paris Review* in 2010, adding that, "Little bookstores are community services, not profitable business enterprises." She dreams that someday little bookstores will attain nonprofit status, as indeed Books & Books did in Key West in 2016.

In her slim, bookish 2003 memoir, *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country*, Erdrich speculates about three things she loves about books: being able to talk to other humans without having to meet them; rescuing her from boredom; and making sure she's never alone.

There's something else the books at Birchbark provide. When Erdrich finishes another book and returns from a book tour, she's convinced she'll never write again. "It's sheer emptiness," she says. But rummaging around Birchbark Books and among other used bookshops, she talks to the booksellers, breathes in the heady literary atmosphere, pages through well-loved favorites, and gets reinvigorated, rededicated. That's the advice she offers through her bookstore: *Books inspire writers to keep writing.*



Uncle Bobbie's Coffee & Books

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

unclebobbies.com

In front of Uncle Bobbie's Coffee & Books in Philadelphia's historic Germantown neighborhood sits a bench inscribed with the credo of what's inside: "Cool people. Dope books. Great coffee." Opened in 2017 by Marc Lamont Hill, the author of *Beats, Rhymes + Classroom Life* and *Nobody: Casualties of America's War on the Vulnerable, from Ferguson to Flint and Beyond* and a professor of media studies and urban education at Temple University, the store was named for his own Uncle Bobbie. It was this relative who ignited the young Hill's love of books and activism by sharing his huge home library and its social and intellectual ideas. Among Hill's academic missions is a literacy project that uses hip-hop culture to increase school engagement and reading skills among high-school students. The bookstore is another way to pay Uncle Bobbie's message forward.

A self-described book nerd, Hill has been selling books since his teens: first at outdoor tables in Philadelphia, later managing two stores in Atlanta. But

opening Uncle Bobbie's in this predominantly Black Philly neighborhood is his way to build a community hub and cultural center – as well as sell books. The store highlights titles in sections not often featured at other bookstores like "Third World Revolutions" and "Africana" and showcases the work of Black intellectuals from Frantz Fanon to bell hooks, as well as children's books, like Angela Johnson's *Joshua by the Sea*, Amanda Gorman's *Change Sings: A Children's Anthem*, and a bilingual edition of *Goodnight Moon*.

The community at large has responded with loyalty and support. When the COVID-19 pandemic forced the store to shut down, the manager launched a GoFundMe campaign, hoping to raise \$50,000; \$100,000 poured in. Another time, when the store was burglarized, it opened the next day to find a line of customers stretching around the block, making purchases all day long.

Whether it's offering a slice of sweet potato pie with its coffees or stocking hoodies that say "Books Saved My Life" or "Support Black Shit," Hill is proud of the welcoming space he's created that attracts diverse readers and customers. Its message works for all creatives: *Give to the community, and it will give back.*

PHOTO COURTESY OF UNCLE BOBBIE'S COFFEE & BOOKS

Books Are Magic

Brooklyn, New York
booksaremagic.net

While she was starting out as a writer, before she hit best-seller lists with novels like *The Vacationers* and *All Adults Here*, Emma Straub worked on and off at a bookstore in the Cobble Hill section of Brooklyn called BookCourt. When she and her husband, Michael Fusco-Straub, a graphic designer of book jackets and other things, and their two young children were ready to put down roots, they chose the Cobble Hill neighborhood to be close to the bookstore where she got her start. Then, bam, it closed. And the couple had a choice: either move to another neighborhood that already had a

bookstore or open their own.

Books Are Magic was their answer: the Brooklyn bookstore they opened in 2017, down the street from the shuttered place where Straub had once worked. They thought of it as their third child and set out to make it a neighborhood center, a beautiful space that would be welcoming and inclusive, reflect the values of the community, and showcase diverse authors, including, on their recent lineup, poet and author Ocean Vuong (*Time Is a Mother*), food writer Eric Kim (*Korean American*), and Japanese Breakfast singer-turned-memoirist Michelle Zauner (*Crying in H-Mart*). “We want people to feel in awe when they walk in,” says store manager Nick Buzanski. The outside, bright pink



neon sign flashing the store's name surely does just that.

As a working mother herself, Straub makes sure the store is especially child-friendly. Spinners

showcasing Golden Books and I Can Read books twirl invitingly, and there's a small octagonal structure that kids can crawl into, snuggling with or without a good read.

Even while working part-time in the store and overseeing the ordering, Straub is mightily productive, publishing six books in the past 10 years, all domestic dramas like an edgy, modern-day Jane Austen. She's about to launch her latest, *This Time Tomorrow*, a novel that blends a father-daughter story with a time-travel twist, and she's gearing up for a book tour.

When asked what's the best piece of writing advice she's ever been given, she's succinct: “Finish it.” The gleaming stacks of new books surrounding her testify to the authors who did just that.

Beastly Books

Santa Fe, New Mexico
beastlybooks.com

Game of Thrones author George R.R. Martin is a celebrated impresario of imaginary realms, so it's no wonder that after producing countless science fiction and fantasy novels, becoming the chief world builder of the immersive, multimedia experience Meow Wolf in Santa Fe, and owning a small cinema there as well, The Jean Cocteau Cinema, he opened a bookstore next door. He used to host author signings in the Cocteau's lobby, but when space ran out to display all the autographed books he'd collected, he realized he needed to expand his territory. The solution: Beastly Books, opened at the end of 2019 in a former hair salon and named after Cocteau's most famous film, *Beauty and the Beast*. “Hear us roar,” exults Martin.

The store's branding is full-on beastly: the logo, featured prominently on the door, shows a scary but lovable beast reading a book, and inside, costumes



from the *Beauty and the Beast* TV show are displayed. Collectible books are showcased, including autographed copies of all of Martin's books, with a \$10 fee added for his signature.

Beastly Books specializes in fantasy, science fiction, and speculative fiction, from classics of the genre written by Octavia Butler, Ursula K. Le Guin, and J.R.R. Tolkien, one of Martin's first influences and lodestars, to cutting-edge modern writers like Maggie Tokuda-Hall (*The Mermaid, the Witch, and the Sea*) and Nalo Hopkinson (*Brown Girl in the Ring*), who use fantasy to explore contemporary issues.

Among the store's treasures that draw devoted fans are the many, mostly signed books in the Wild Card Series, a sci-fi and superhero anthology series set in a shared universe. First imagined in 1987 by a group of New Mexico writers, and mostly edited and shepherded by Martin, the books, some story collections and some stand-alone novels, represent a friendship network of many collaborators. Beastly bookstore manager Twig Deluje calls it Martin's “baby,” because even with the demands of his numerous solo projects, he still makes Wild Cards an important priority.

What's the takeaway for this fantasy writer and bookstore owner? *Keep creating new worlds and enjoy mind-expanding collaboration when it's possible.* 🐾

Elizabeth Fishel is the author of five nonfiction books, including Sisters, Reunion, and Getting To 30 (with Jeffrey Arnett). Her favorite local bookstores are Mrs. Dalloway's in Berkeley, California, and East Bay Booksellers in Oakland.
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