

Ye ol' bookstore

A bunch of unique bookstores in New York City fight the battle against chain stores and the Internet to keep the joy of selling books alive.

Text **Maria Giovanna**

What Los Angeles is to the US film industry, New York is to the book business, in whatever form it might be evolving to at present, with all the changes that the “big-box stores” (large national chains) and new reading devices (Kindle, Nook, iPad, etc) have brought.

New York was a dream destination for bibliophiles. From old tomes about obscure Civil War battles or Mario Vargas Llosa’s early novel *La Casa Verde*, we had it all. At one time, the city had enough demand for books *en Español* to support not one, but

two Spanish-language bookshops only a few paces away from each other on West 14th street.

But over the past decade there has been a drip-drip-drip of independent bookstores in Manhattan closing down. Often, they couldn’t compete with the low prices and volume of titles offered by the large chains and online booksellers, even though this is a city of readers, writers, editors and academics.

You might have seen that scenario on screen in *You’ve Got Mail*, a popular

rom-com starring Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks. The two face off when Hanks’ chain opens a multi-storey bookstore near the storefront children’s bookshop Ryan inherited from her late mother.

And yet, New York City has remained the place for very special, and specialised, independent bookshops. Now, maybe there’s only one or two dedicated to a subject, but they have strong ties in their neighbourhoods and have figured out how to keep customers engaged. Here are some noteworthy ones.



▲ In 1927, Ben Bass opened Strand Book Store on Fourth Avenue, home of New York’s legendary Book Row. One of the original 48 bookstores, today, Strand is the sole survivor.

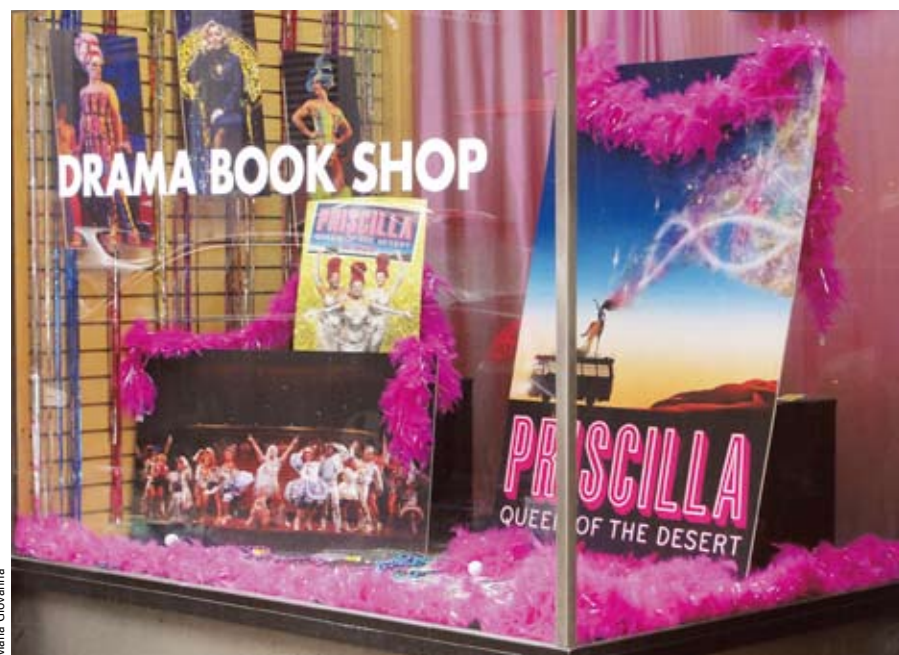
**The Complete Traveller (199
Madison Ave)**

This is the destination for the reader seeking only vintage editions of specialised travel books. Located just steps away from the Morgan Library and Museum, and only a street or two from the Empire State Building, The Complete Traveller is at a perfect crossroads to be a serendipitous discovery for some NYC visitors, while others have known of the store (in business for 30 years) and planned a pilgrimage.

Notable shoppers in the past have included actors Johnny Depp, Guy Pearce, as well as a British Lord. Their large collection of Baedekers occupies pride of place among



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▲ Above: The first travel bookstore in the US, The Complete Traveller urges customers to combine their purchases of new guidebooks with editions of older classics.

Left and bottom: The Drama Book Shop has been around for over 80 years giving New York's aspiring playwrights and actors a place to meet and find excellent source material.

its inventory. The compact, red travel guides were indispensable to European travellers during the 1800s and the first half of the last century, and they have earned multiple mentions in the works of writers such as E. M. Forster and D. H. Lawrence. The store also has a notable selection of rare books on other subjects.

The Drama Book Shop (250 West 40th Street)

Since 1917, the Drama Book Shop has been a constant in the Theatre District. Though most of their stock consists of plays and books about the theatre, you can also find a selection about film, and technical books about lighting, costumes, set design, and biographies. General Manager (and actor and teacher) Nancy Reardon speaks fondly of the human element of the store. All the staff members are actors and writers, and on any given day, a fellow actor may come in asking "What monologue can I do for my audition? What's new? What's cutting edge?" and the staff will be happy to offer ideas. A recent event to celebrate a book about the musical *Hair* had some original cast members and some from the revival, singing together around a piano and sharing stories.

Books of Wonder (18 West 18th Street)

A popular destination for sisters and co-authors Nora and Delia Ephron, Books of



Drama Book Shop



Books of Wonder

Wonder served as their inspiration and then a model for the delightful children's bookshop that Meg Ryan lovingly tended in *You've Got Mail*.

Peter Glassman opened Books of Wonder 30 years ago when he was only 20. "I built the store that I wanted when I was a kid." He sums up reading trends saying, "Everything old is new again. There was a time when fantasy was out of fashion, and interest in mythology slowed down." Thanks to the Harry Potter and Percy Jackson books, both are in demand again. There is a weekly 'story time session' every Sunday at noon, and a stream of author events.

New York is such a city of foodies and restaurant groupies that it makes sense to have two thriving and different food-related bookstores.

Bonnie Slotnick Cookbooks (163 West 10th Street)

This cosy shop, decorated with potato mashers and egg beaters and nestled in an old tenement building, offers what owner, Bonnie Slotnick calls, "A very personal experience, the antithesis of shopping on the internet. I don't compete with the big-box stores. I don't sell what they sell and vice versa." The shelves are filled with out-of-print books on everything from Rhode Island seafood recipes, to Christmas cookbooks to vintage postcards. The store opened in 2000 and gets a steady stream of European and Asian visitors, who gravitate toward American baking and dessert books. Since American recipes contain measures by weight not volume, Bonnie will often point overseas shoppers



Bonnie Slotnick Cookbooks

to nearby stores where they can find measuring cups and spoons, so they can start baking when they get home.

Kitchen Arts & Letters (1435 Lexington Ave)

According to the Manager, Matt Sartwell, the 27-year-old store has welcomed chefs from as far away as Johannesburg and Kuala Lumpur, "Because we are a resource for people who make their living through food." Owner Nach Waxman believes that knowing their customers well, and devoting

▲ Above: NYC's oldest independent children's bookstore, Books of Wonder is famous for its Oz section — a whole bookcase devoted to L. Frank Baum and his successors.

Left: Bonnie Slotnick specialises in old cookbooks. So if you're looking for an 18th-century recipe, this is the place.

Below: On the face of it, Kitchen Arts & Letters may look like a small one-room bookstore. But it's their basement that's filled with shelves of their 13,000 titles.



Kitchen Arts and Letters

great effort to discovering books that “will expand their thinking and their interests” has kept his shop going.

“Whether it is uncovering works long out of print or finding stimulating new books published in other countries or in other languages, we set no limits in our pursuit of new material that will enlarge our vision and that of those who come to us,” he says. “Whether it is a study of rice cultivation in a Thai village, a history of the uses of fruit in literature, a text on the microbiology of cheese, or a cookbook on the food of Ladakh, no subject is too specialised. If we sell one copy a year of a book, that is ample reward for fully meeting the needs of our customers.”

Barnes and Noble textbooks (105 Fifth Ave)

Don't let the relatively small entrance fool you, this cavernous flagship store of the country-wide chain boasts of having “the largest used textbook inventory in the NYC Metro area.” There are a variety of other books up front.



Kitchen Arts and Letters

▲ Kitchen Arts & Letters are known for helping out customers with photocopies of recipes that are in their not-for-sale books.

Housing Works Cafe & Bookstore (126 Crosby Street)

The Housing Works organisation was started in 1990 to help the thousands of homeless men, women and children living with HIV and AIDS in New York. Today, there are 10 thrift shops around Manhattan selling designer clothes at amazing prices. Some 13 years ago, the bookstore and café opened in a gorgeous space on Crosby Street, in the heart of Soho (just recently, it was used for TV shoots by the shows *Gossip Girl* and *30 Rock*.) It soon became a place to pour over books, meet friends, hear a rock band and see a documentary screening. As Rachel Fershleiser, who manages events at the store, points out “It’s an oasis in the area, where you can get a coffee for \$1.50 and work on your manuscript.” All books have been donated, while many are new, direct from the publisher. All profits go to the Housing Works charitable organisation.



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Fact file

Getting there

Jet Airways has daily flights to New York from Chennai, Delhi and Mumbai.

Accommodation

Even though New York City has all kinds of places to stay for every budget, this time, you might want to try one of their elegant boutique hotels. Casablanca Hotel, The Dylan, The Library Hotel, The Muse and Tribeca Grand Hotel are all good options.

For more information

Log on to www.nycgo.com



▲ Above: In the '70s, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist George F Will wrote, “the eight miles worth saving in this city are at the corner of Broadway and 12th Street. They are the crammed shelves of the Strand Book Store.”

Left: The bookstore behemoth, Barnes & Noble were the first booksellers in the US to discount books by selling bestselling titles at 40 per cent off.

Strand Books (828 Broadway)

Just as you can't eat only one potato chip, it's equally difficult to walk into Strand looking for a specific title, and not come out with a bagful of books. The family-owned store has been around since 1927, offering a mix of new and used books. They have everything from \$1 books arrayed on carts in front of the store, to their most valuable book, a \$45,000 copy of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, signed by both the author

and the famous artist, Henri Matisse. Used books are purchased six days a week, so there's new inventory all the time. Eight years ago, the store expanded vertically, enlarging the already considerable art department, adding an elevator and air-conditioning. That same new floor houses the children's department and an events space, where past guests have included David Sedaris, Jeff Koons and Jhumpa Lahiri.

Co-owner Nancy Bass Wyden sums up the same sentiments expressed by several other shop owners, “People still want the tactile experience of reading, holding and admiring physical books. Collectors will always want rare books. And there is nothing like having a signed book by your favorite author in your library!”