

Big Chain Versus Independent Bookseller *By Loreen Niewenhuis*

I've been to the **Tattered Cover Book Store** in Denver, and **Carmichael's Bookstore** in Louisville, and the **Elliot Bay Book Company** in Seattle. The lovely thing about each of these independent bookstores is that while I was perusing, I never forgot what city I was visiting. The big chains, Borders and Barnes & Noble (B&N), pride themselves on delivering a consistent book-buying experience whether you're in Dallas or Dubuque, Anchorage or Atlanta. And they consistently deliver this homogeneity.

Ten years ago, I moved to the town of Battle Creek, Michigan (Yes! Home of Kellogg's!). At that time, I had to drive twenty minutes to Kalamazoo (Yes! There really is a Kalamazoo!) to find a New York Times. There was no delivery of that paper here, and there wasn't a bookstore (big chain or independent) any closer. About five years ago, a B&N opened in our mall and changed my life. I would call Mary, my B&N bookseller, first thing on Sunday morning and she'd set aside a Times for me. I'd pick it up at my leisure (and take some time to peruse the books), then spend some time engaging with the wider world in the pages of the newspaper. B&N also brought the first Starbucks to this town and I could finally get a decent cup of coffee or chai tea latte. So, yes, I have a small amount of affection for this big chain that has made this small town so much more livable.

So, what does it matter: big chain versus indie bookseller? What does it matter to the publishing business? To the consumer? To the writer? Since getting my MFA, and after having met some publishers from the independent presses, and several agents during my graduate studies and at conferences, I've had time to give some thought (and do some research) into the different roles the big chains play versus the indies.

This is not a polemic, but, rather, an exploration into the subject. Hopefully it will foster some discussion and make you think a bit about where you buy your books. If you are a serious reader or a writer, you may have a larger stake in the situation than you are aware.

And what is the situation? Well, over the last ten years, about half of the independent bookstores in America have disappeared. Is this something we need to be concerned about as consumers? As writers? The box at the bottom of this page contains portions of the mission statements from the two major chain booksellers, Borders and B&N, and then from Powell's, one of the larger independent booksellers (based in Portland, Oregon). Read them over, and in the next installment we'll take a deeper look at the role of the independent bookseller in America.

BORDERS: Their mission statement is: "To be a headquarters for knowledge and entertainment." On their website, they list the 'personality' of their stores as "engaging, spirited, inspiring, and sincere..."

BARNES & NOBLE: Part of B&N's circuitous mission statement is: "Our mission is to operate the best specialty retail business in America, regardless of the product we sell. Because the product we sell is books, our aspirations must be consistent with the promise and the ideals of the volumes which line our shelves. To say that our mission exists independent of the product we sell is to demean the importance and the distinction of being booksellers...Above all, we expect to be a credit to the communities we serve, a valuable resource to our customers, and a place where our dedicated booksellers can grow and prosper."



The mission statement of Powell's is: "We have a social responsibility to the community and to our industry to fight censorship, promote literary awareness and **encourage authors and their works.**" [emphasis added]