

INDIES UNDER FIRE [Part 2]

By Loreen Nieuwenhuis

A documentary film by Jacob Bricca, *INDIES UNDER FIRE: The Battle for the American Bookstore*, explores the conflict between the big chains and three independent bookstores in California. I found this DVD at my local library (it is not currently available on Netflix). In the documentary, Bricca probes the health and role of the independent bookstore in America.

In the film, Bricca points out that half of the 5200 independent bookstores that were open in 1992 had closed by 2006. The situation seems to be stabilizing, though, as the film mentions that, “in the last five years the share of the book market claimed by independents has remained stable, suggesting that independents have begun to stem the tide of losses.”

What role do independent bookstores play? The documentary points out that the independents interact with the smaller presses in a way the big stores do not. The big chains generally deal with bigger publishing houses and well-known names. The big stores call themselves ‘booksellers.’ Their purpose is to sell books. They are not invested - as the independents claim to be - in developing authors or ‘hand-selling’ books (really trying to match books to readers), buying books for various regions, buying in small quantities from a variety of presses, or giving books more time on the shelves.

Kirby Gann, Managing Editor of Sarabande Books, says, “I suppose the biggest difference...is that the independent stores are typically more approachable and open-minded than the chains (i.e., they seem more willing to stock books by authors that are not well known yet, and publishers that may not have the money to promote their books as widely as the large houses do).

“Finally, I think the biggest difference between the two,” Gann continued, “is that independent stores, in theory, are willing to keep a copy or two of a book on its shelves for a longer time than a chain store -- thus giving an author's work much-needed time to find browsing readers. Chains return their unsold books at a much faster rate (however, this applies to titles published by large houses, too, not just small presses).”

Karl Pohrt, owner of the independent Shaman Drum Bookshop in Ann Arbor, Michigan says (in an online interview), “When we do our job properly, independent booksellers act as an early warning system for publishers. We help publishers launch books.” The larger chains watch what sells at the independents, then they buy those books for their stores.

What does this mean to you, the serious reader or emerging writer? Do you have a stake in the survival of America's independent bookstores? Do your future books have a stake in their survival? Finally, in the next article, we'll explore what you can do to support the independents.

CASE STUDY: *WATER FOR ELEPHANTS*

A Novel by Sarah Gruen

In the acknowledgments in *Water for Elephants*, Sarah Gruen thanked Craig Popelars at Algonquin saying that in her book he “...saw something special and made booksellers believe.” Popelars made the independents believe first, then the big chains followed once they saw the early sales figures.

Water for Elephants is a ‘hand-sold’ success story which went on to the *NY Times* best-seller list.

Is this novel a great literary masterpiece? No. But it is a good story, competently told, that the big chains didn't take seriously until the independents proved that it could sell.