

Reading between the lines

Online retailers may have devoured the lion's share of the book market, but independent bookshops are going from strength to strength. Their secret weapons? In-depth knowledge of their customers, eclectic stock and resident dogs, says Emma Hughes

ON a cheerless October night in 1949, Helene Hanff, an American author living in a tiny Manhattan bedsit, sat down at her desk with a copy of the *Saturday Review of Literature*. Ringed in pen was an advertisement that had been placed by a bookshop several thousand miles away—Marks & Co on London's Charing Cross Road. It specialised in out-of-print classics, something for which Hanff had been fruitlessly scouring her home city. 'I am a poor writer with an antiquarian taste,' she informed manager Frank Doel, enclosing a list of titles. 'If you have clean second-hand copies of any of the books... will you consider this a purchase order and send them to me?'

Thus began an affectionate correspondence that was to last for 20 years, and which would eventually become *84, Charing Cross Road*, a book that was turned into a BAFTA-winning film starring Dame Judi Dench and Sir Anthony Hopkins. Before long, Hanff was writing not only to Doel, but also to his wife and the rest of the shop's staff. They jollied her along when her plays failed to impress Broadway producers and, horrified by their tales of rationing-era privation, she sent them a whole ham for Christmas and eggs of the non-powdered variety at Easter. Every couple of weeks, a slightly battered parcel containing Austen or Chaucer or Donne would land on her doormat, filling her one little room with 'the England of English literature.'

Of course, you say, it could never happen today. Now, we place our orders with online behemoths that only remember your name if you've signed up to their mailing lists. But things aren't nearly as bleak as they seem. Although the face of bookselling has

undoubtedly been changed forever by e-commerce, the independent shops that have survived the past decade are in no danger. In fact, they're thriving, because they offer their customers so much more than just shelves stacked with the latest throwaway bestseller. It's the difference between grabbing a pack of cut-price Cheddar from the supermarket and spending a happy hour sampling the wares at a deli's cheese counter before making your purchase.

This very personal approach to doing business is exemplified by John Sandoe, a gloriously higgledy-piggledy emporium just off London's King's Road. Its window display gives a flavour of the enterprise's spirit—*With The Hunted*, the selected writings of largely forgotten 1920s novelist Sylvia Townsend Warner, is flanked by a slim biography of Pamela Mitford and Artemis Cooper's *Patrick Leigh Fermor: An Adventure*, as well as the latest offerings from Edna O'Brien and Salman Rushdie. Inside, tens of thousands of books cover every available surface, but the ethos here couldn't be further removed from pile 'em high and sell 'em cheap.

'As an independent bookseller, you have to do more than simply process a transaction,' believes director John de Falbe. 'If that's all you see yourself doing, you won't be in business for very long. It's about fitting the book to the individual.' He came to John Sandoe straight from university, and has spent the past 26 years really getting to know his clientele. 'Every minute that a buyer spends talking to somebody on the floor is worth an hour on the internet,' he says.

Mr de Falbe also feels that independent bookshops play a vital role in championing those writers who,

because they haven't been longlisted for any prizes, are at risk of falling off the radar. 'Some 90% of the books we sell are books we've read. Earlier this year, I picked up Samantha Harvey's novel *All Is Song* and loved it, so we've sold a lot of copies.' He likens himself to an art dealer: 'People come to us because they share our taste.' And although he admits to having shifted 20 copies of critically mauled erotic novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* this summer, he points out that, during the same period, John Sandoe sold 16 editions of a book on Ottoman culture that costs £145. 'Knowing that a book like that exists, and knowing who we can sell it to—that's why we're here.'

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At the other end of the British Isles, Stromness Books & Prints has chiselled out an impressive niche for itself on the craggy coast of Orkney. Its proprietor of 35 years' standing, Tam McPhail, believes independents shouldn't waste their time trying to compete with internet Goliaths. The business of online retailers, as he sees it, is to provide customers with exactly the book they're looking for, whereas small, local bookshops are better placed to show them things they didn't even know they wanted. Serendipitous discoveries are the order of the day.

'We evaluate things in a completely different way here,' he explains. 'The layout isn't very organised because we don't want people to come back and stand in the same place time after time. And it's a two-way thing—we get archaeologists visiting Orkney, and I've learned a lot from them.' In a town with a population of less than 2,500, his role seems to be a cross between librarian and water-diviner. 'When a customer comes in on Christmas Eve and says "What should I get my father as a present?", there's an accumulation of knowledge you can draw on.'

Another institution right at the heart of the community is Stow-on- ➤