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The Holiday Season: So-So Is O.K.

BY JOHN MUTTER, KEVIN HOWELL, EDWARD NAWOTKA AND CHANNING JOSEPH -- 1/2/2003

Holiday sales ranged from flat to down 11% at most bookstores polled by *PW Daily* today. Although those kinds of results would have caused profound gloom just a few years ago, most booksellers expressed relief. As Doris Blechman, assistant manager of the Anderson's Bookshop in Naperville, Ill., said, "We were down a little bit from last year, but not much. We still had a good holiday season."

One unusual bright spot was in Oberlin, Ohio, where the Ben Franklin Store had sales up at least 10%, according to Krista Long who sells a range of used and new books in the variety store. She attributed the gain to the increase in new books, which are discounted; the mix of used and remainder titles; and the apparent lack of success at a Barnes & Noble "just down the block."

Bad weather was a major factor for several stores. At Northshire Bookstore in Manchester Center, Vt., sales were down but "not way down," in large part because several weekends in a row of "bad weather or the threat of bad weather" kept many of the store's customers from the New York metropolitan area away, said head buyer Stan Hynds.

Similarly at the Tudor Bookshop and Cafe, Kingston, Pa., "nobody wanted to leave their homes" during three snow days, Barbara Schaffer said. As a result, store sales are "probably down."

An icy night in Abilene, Tex., on the night of an annual downtown event called City Sidewalks hurt sales at Abilene Bookstore, according to Deborah McClure. "If it wasn't for that night, we would have been up for the month," she said. The store's sales in the holiday period dropped 2%.

Burdened by the economy and the threat of war, shoppers were more picky than usual this year, some booksellers said. "People were shopping for deals this year instead of value," said Maryalice Hurst, owner of That Bookstore at Mountbanq Place, Conway, Ark. The store had more transactions than last year, but the average sales per transaction were down, dropping from above \$60 to below \$50. Core customers bought nearly the same amount, but "less-regular" customers were buying "significantly less."

Dave Kaverman of Million Story Book Co., Fort Wayne, Ind., noted that this year, people "left if they didn't find exactly what they were looking for." His store's sales were "down some from last year."

Tom Lowry, owner of Lowry's Books, Three Rivers, Mich., whose sales were "a little soft in comparison to last year," said that "customers were real conscious of what they were spending."

The relatively short selling season between Thanksgiving and Christmas probably hurt, too, several booksellers said. Because customers continue to shop more and more at the last minute, December 21 and 23 were many bookstores' busiest days of the year.

Most titles were easy to obtain. Still, Northshire had trouble getting enough copies of *The Life of Pi* by Yann Martel. Million Story Book Co. had trouble finding *The Conquerors* by Michael Beschloss and *Semi Homemade Cooking* by Sandra Lee.

Two booksellers reported that a surprise bestseller was *The Last Jihad* by Joel C. Rosenberg, which Dave Kaverman described as "a terrorist-themed thriller that got a blurb from Rush

Limbaugh." Abilene Bookstore ordered *The Last Jihad* "as a fluke," Deborah McClure said. "They all sold in the last three days before Christmas."

By contrast, a major seller at the Ben Franklin Store in Oberlin, Ohio, was Bill Maher's *If You Ride Alone, You Ride with Bin Laden*. Krista Long commented: "People, especially here in Oberlin, are looking for alternative points of view."

Several stores mentioned enjoying selling Alexander McCall Smith's *No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* and other titles in the series. The book was particularly popular at Anderson's in Naperville, Ill., and Abilene Bookstore handsold Smith's three books wrapped together.

Regional titles "did best" for Million Story Book Co. in Fort Wayne, Ind., Dave Kaverman said. Among the store's top 50 titles were a book about a local hockey team; a \$50 cook book by a former town restaurateur; a book called *99 Historic Homes of Indiana*; and *The Amish Cook* by Elizabeth Coblenz, who, sadly, died before her scheduled signing. "So there was a viewing instead of a signing," Kaverman said.

Some stores have been experimenting with product mix. Northshire Bookstore is "slowly increasing" its sidelines inventory, according to Stan Hynds. Abilene Bookstore is adding more children's books.

Booksellers are also trying to buy smarter. As Tom Lowry of Lowry's Books said, "With non-bookstores deep discounting the season's biggest titles, we buy less of those and focus on the stuff that they don't have. We listen to customers and look for breakout titles based on past sales. You're got to be versatile in your ways of finding those titles."

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