

Publishers Weekly

What Cold Snap? Minnesota's Northern Lights Beat the Market

BY CHANNING JOSEPH, PW DAILY FOR BOOKSELLERS -- 1/28/2003

Arriving at the next stop on our alphabetical telephone tour of the nation's booksellers, *PW Daily* recently spoke with Anita Zager of Duluth, Minn.'s Northern Lights bookstore. While in recent months, we have focused on handselling, we now turn our attention to what the nation's booksellers are doing to combat the recession.

Zager has had to "return more hardcover fiction than [is] normal" and that sidelines have "been a mixed bag," accounting for only about 10%-15 % of sales, she said. To combat these trends, Zager said that she was doing "more institutional sales with businesses and schools."

In general, however, business for Northern Lights has been looking up. "The last week before Christmas, we saw a nice increase," Zager said. "We were up 8% over 2001 and 4% over last Christmas [and] we attribute that to a having a very strong local author community that had some great regional titles," she said. She also credited the small size of her staff, which consists of just four part-time employees. "I don't feel we're hunkering down," she said. "We staff very conservatively, so I feel that we can weather the slow period. We pay nicely above minimum wage, so we've had good long-term employees."

In fact, Zager feels confident enough about Northern Lights to consider expanding the 1,750-sq.-ft. store by adding 100 more square feet in floor space and another 100 in storage. "We feel lucky," she said. "We're in a prime tourist location, so we're getting things in shape for the winter and thinking ahead to the spring market."

The only cutback the store has undergone, Zager said, is to stop serving free coffee to customers, and this step was taken only because a coffee shop opened next door. In fact, the new café has spurred Zager to plan to increase her advertising efforts, taking advantage of the potential business brought by the new cafe next door. "We're rather excited about the coffee shop," she said.

She also plans to send booklovers' coupons to her top customers and hold discount drawings for in-store shoppers during February. In honor of Valentine's Day, customers will draw for red or silver Hershey's kisses. If they pull out a red kiss, they will receive a 20% discount; if they get a silver one, they'll receive 10% off their purchase.

Zager is also planning a "smashing" Harry Potter party in June, which will be held at a Victorian railroad depot with an extensive collective of antique locomotives and cars. At midnight, she said, the new Harry Potter books "will arrive on the back of a caboose," adding that only "the people who have made reservations will get invitations."

Zager said that store bestsellers include regional and book group titles. "It's a good time of year for book groups," she said. For example, one of the groups chose Karen Armstrong's *A History of God: The 4,000 Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Ballantine, \$15), which is now selling well.

Reflecting the tense mood in much of the country, many of her customers seem to want books that offer "information and solace," she said. For instance, she has been handselling lots of copies of *A Book of Grace* edited by Margie Preus and Ann Treacy (Sourcebooks, \$12.95), a collection of prayers from many faith traditions. "[Since] it appeared on the cover of our newspaper," Zager said, "it seems to be really hitting a note with people who are struggling with

current events. They want their children to be exposed to other faith traditions, [and many of them are] looking for something meaningful."

"I think that's why [Thomas L.] Friedman's books have been really popular," she continued, particularly *Longitudes and Attitudes* (FSG, \$26)

Zager added that recent books that pay tribute to September 11 had not sold as well, probably because "the emotion is still too raw. It's difficult to spend 40 bucks on something that's painful."

The late Minnesota Senator Paul David Wellstone's *Conscience of a Liberal* (Random, \$23.95) had also been selling well--and even had a waiting list.

Other titles that have been moving include:

- Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (HarperCollins, \$13.95)
- Roger Allan MacDonald's and Roger Welsch's *A Country Doctor's Casebook: Tales from the North Woods* (Minnesota Historical Society, \$19.95)
- Louise Erdrich's *Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse: A Novel* (Perennial, \$12.95)
- Janis Amatuzio's *Forever Ours* (Midwest Forensic Pathology, P.A., \$19.95), the story of a forensic pathologist in the Twin Cities and her experience with the survivors of deceased loved ones.
- Ann Patchett's *Bel Canto* (Perennial, \$13.95)

As for upcoming titles, Zager is enthusiastic about Mary Casanova's *One-Dog Canoe* (FSG, \$16.50), which comes out in February. She predicts that it will be the "hot children's picture book for spring and summer."

Considering her store's relative success in the down economy, she said, "I'm cautiously optimistic. We can't retreat too much, [and] we have to be smart about how we spend."

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