

Publishers Weekly

A Pair of Aces: Mississippi's Lemuria and Square Books Remain Optimistic

BY CHANNING JOSEPH, PW DAILY FOR BOOKSELLERS -- 2/5/2003

Continuing our virtual road trip, *PW Daily* took the opportunity last week to head south where we spoke with a pair of the country's most famous booksellers, both in the state of Mississippi: Square Books in Oxford and Lemuria Bookstore in Jackson. The two stores seem to be surviving in the economic downturn and neither has made any drastic adjustments to its day-to-day business practices, though both said they are interested in offering more personalized service to their customers.

Lynn Roberts, manager of Square Books, which consists of two 4,000-sq.-ft. buildings in two locations, admitted that although the stores' profits have not decreased since last year, business has been "sort of flat."

"Christmas was fine," she added, "but, basically, we have not grown much in the past year." Roberts hopes that Square Books can compensate for this lack of growth, saying, "We're trying to be better. I think we're good booksellers [already], but we're trying to be more familiar [with our customers.]"

As part of this drive to serve customers better, the store began six months ago to provide free home delivery service within the city limits for purchases of at least \$25. It is also holding regular book signings and hosting a weekly radio show featuring authors and musicians that is broadcast live in the local area and re-broadcast across the state through Mississippi Public Radio.

Roberts said that although she believes the economic slump has probably affected everyone in her small, rural community 60 miles south of Memphis, Tenn., there hasn't been an increase in unemployment. She emphasized that the downturn seemed to be causing "a lack of growth rather than negative results."

Square Books has been able to stay afloat, she continued, because of the strong literary tradition in Oxford, which is the former home of William Faulkner, as well as the solid liberal arts program offered by the University of Mississippi, which hosts a visiting writer's program.

"A lot of authors live in town," Roberts said, citing Billy Collins and John Grisham. "Richard Howarth opened the store in 1979 and over the years has built up a relationship with publishers and many authors. We can sell books and publishers see that. An author can fly into Memphis, Tenn., and drive down and hit Oxford and then hit Jackson, Miss., and then head on down to New Orleans."

Roberts observed that although many customers have lately been coming into the store to find books to educate themselves on current events and politics, partly due to a window display on the subject that Square Books staff has put up "to encourage people to think about it," there are still lots of book-buyers "coming in for fiction to be entertained."

Lately, some of the titles that Roberts has been handselling include:

- Brad Watson's *The Heaven of Mercury: A Novel* (Norton, \$23.95)
- Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones: A Novel* (Little, Brown, \$21.95)
- Gould's *Book of Fish: A Novel in 12 Fish* (Grove, \$14) by Richard Flanagan.

"We did really well with [Flanagan's book] in the hardcover," Roberts said. "We were delighted to

have it in the paperback." She added that "local authors are [also] very popular because our local authors are really very good."

Some of the upcoming titles that Roberts said she is excited about include Jere Hoar's *The Hit* (Context Books, \$24.95) and Tom Franklin's *Hell at the Breech* (Morrow, \$23.95). "[*Hell at the Breech*] is a very exciting book," she added. "It's a lot like Cormac McCarthy's [work]...with a lot more action set at the turn of the [20th] century; [a] very cinematic book, kind of like [the film] *Unforgiven*."

Square Books will soon host a new play by Shay Youngblood, author of *Black Girl in Paris* (Riverhead, \$12) and *Soul Kiss* (Riverhead, \$13), which will be performed February 20-21. "We really try to be part of the community," Roberts said. "Bookstores are a little different from other retail stores because you're not just selling; you are also providing a place [for people]."

Less than 200 miles away in Jackson, John Evans's Lemuria Books has made fewer adjustments to the slowed economy. "I think we're addressing it a little bit," he said, "[but] I don't see a drastic change there. I've thought about adding DVDs [to our product mix], but I don't think we're going to. We're [just] going to try to improve our services."

Like Lynn Roberts at Square Books, Evans wants to make his store more community-oriented. "That's the one thing that it's so easy to be lazy about," he said. "The way you communicate with your customer is the strength of the independent [bookseller.] I don't think that my changes are aimed at economic impact."

In fact, Evans was skeptical whether the country is even experiencing poor economic times. "Four or five years ago, it was such good economic times, but it was all a fake," he said, referring to the recent fraud of several major corporations. "We don't have people working like we did, but they were working for hot air."

As far handselling, Evans mentioned mainly local authors, who are outselling others by leaps and bounds. A "local" book called *A Southern Palate* by Robert St. John and illustrated by Wyatt Waters (Different Drum Press, \$29.95) was recently reprinted and "has helped our traffic," he commented. He also mentioned another book by a local author, *Sweet Potato Queen's Big Ass Cookbook and Financial Planner* by Jill Conner Browne (Three Rivers, \$13.95). The store has sold 400 copies of St. John's title and 800 copies of Browne's. "There's nothing else that hot," Evans said, crediting both books with "helping our January traffic."

He is excited about several titles coming this spring, including:

- Robert Stone's *Bay of Souls* (Houghton Mifflin, \$25)
- James Carlos Blake's *Under the Skin* (Morrow, \$25.95)
- Nevada Barr's *Flashback* (Putnam, \$24.95)

He also mentioned that he is not overly-excited about the upcoming Harry Potter title. "I got a Books-a-Million across the street that'll be selling it at 40% off," he said, adding that it would be difficult to compete. "Harry Potter is not worth [it]," Evans said.

This article originally appeared in the February 5, 2003 issue of PW Daily for Booksellers.