

# The Biblioracle: Indie bookstores on the rise

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As most of you likely know, the current culinary trend is the locavore movement. More and more we expect our food to be produced relatively close to where we're eating it.

Farmers' markets abound; the one in Logan Square near the home of brother and sister-in-law Biblioracle seems to grow exponentially each year. The local restaurants trumpet their fresh ingredients. We ate at Longman & Eagle on North Kedzie, and I don't think anything on the menu came from more than six blocks away. I swear I heard the lambs baa-ing outside.

I can't remember the last time I ordered a beer that was brewed more than 50 miles from where I was dining, and indeed, the Brewers Association, an industry group for craft brewers, tells me that 2013 saw an increase of 18 percent in sales volume from 2012.



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I'm wondering if there's a lesson here for bookstores.

Like craft brewing, indie bookstores are growing. The American Booksellers Association reports that the number of stores has increased by 20 percent from 2009 to 2014.

Is it possible that there's a burgeoning locavore movement in book retailing?

Why not? Much of the increase in independent stores is likely tied to the disappearance of Borders, with smaller, more nimble outfits coming in to fill the market void. Except that they're obviously not really filling the truly gigantic void that a defunct big box retailer leaves.

In theory, there shouldn't be a difference between bookstores, right? Unlike locally sourced ingredients, books are commodities, interchangeable, aren't they? The copies of "Killing Jesus" by Bill O'Reilly and Martin Dugard or Donna Tartt's "The Goldfinch" are identical, regardless of which store you buy it in.

Except that we have so many books that no store save Amazon can house them all — and the key to a good bookstore is selection. These thriving independent stores are offering something that Borders couldn't: personalization, curation and an experience that reflects the community it inhabits.

I experienced this phenomenon over the summer when visiting friends in Los Angeles and happening across Small World Books on the Venice boardwalk. It's about 1/50th the size of a Borders, but I could have easily walked out with a dozen books because everywhere I looked, I found something enticing.

As big a seller as O'Reilly is, as you might expect from the location of Small World Books, there were very few — or even any — copies of his books in stock.

Other local stores go further than just curation in crafting a local experience. They host readings and other events, or in the case of the Hub City Writers Project in Spartanburg, S.C., they become not just a bookstore, but a craft publisher and arts organization.

Modeled after the Depression-era Federal Writers Project, Hub City was established as a way to preserve literary culture in a struggling city. Over the last almost 20 years, they have not only established a thriving bookstore, but have also published more than 60 books focused on South Carolina culture. They provide grants and fellowships to artists, and host fairs and festivals. That once-struggling city is holding on thanks to Hub City. It's a place worth going out of your way to visit.

To me, it seems that book retailing's future isn't in the digital-era (alleged) virtues of speed and efficiency, but in the deeper pleasures of community. We don't need to depend on sacrifice or loyalty to see these places succeed because they will provide a genuinely meaningful experience rooted in a specific place.

Our books can be as fresh as the Slagel Family Farms meatballs at Logan Square's Longman & Eagle.

*John Warner's most recent book is "Tough Day for the Army." Follow him on Twitter @biblioracle.*