

# BOOKSELLER REDISCOVERS VIRTUE OF SMALLNESS

Paula Brook



HE large cut-glass “Innovation Award” dominates the cash desk at Mary Trentadue’s Edgemont Village bookstore. The Haida-motif trophy, presented to the bookseller last month by the North Vancouver Chamber of Commerce as part of its annual Business Excellence Awards, is an outsized tribute to smallness. You basically have to look through it, and down, to find the diminutive bookseller behind her cramped desk.

This is the secret to the success of 32 Books (Trentadue is 32 in Italian). Being small allows her to think outside the big box. Indeed, if Heather Reisman had even heard about Mary Trentadue, she might envy the 36-year-old North Van bookseller with her tiny stock and her thin ledger book filled with hopeful black ink.

Reisman, Toronto-based head of the Chapters-Indigo juggernaut, saw her national chain of 92 superstores and 174 mall outlets rack up more than \$30 million in losses in its last quarter, down 35 per cent from the same period last year. This is not unusual in the big-box book biz. American mega-retailer Barnes & Noble posted a \$34-million US loss in its most recent quarter, while its rival Borders is trading at less than half its 1998 peak share price.

You could say the mess created in the book industry by these big boxers comes down to a squabble over the word innovation. A decade ago, selling books in a box seemed a bold innovation — though really it wasn’t. It was a case of marketing moguls bringing the same logic to the book biz that had worked so well in areas such as food and hardware. Through bulk buys, wholesale discount could be passed along to the consumer for whom price, the marketers assumed, was everything.

And it was everything, when it came to iceberg lettuce or a box of nails. Writing in *Salon* magazine a few years ago, Sallie Tisdale wrote about a hellish epiphany she had in the frozen pizza aisle: “This is the future we have been careening toward, slouching toward, buying for ourselves — this world of too much and nothing good enough, this future foisted upon us and paid for dearly.”

Tisdale hightailed it to her corner market, and she was not missed by Costco or Home Depot or Wal-Mart, who seem to be immune from pesky



issues of loyalty, taste and spirit. The big boxsters must have figured they, too, would be immune.

But that's not innovation, it's imitation — and it hasn't worked very well with books. Mary Trentadue had a hunch it wouldn't, and she put all her money, and a good deal of the bank's, on that gamble. ● On April Fools Day, 1998, she opened 32 Books at the corner of Lonsdale and 14th Street. With no advertising budget, she spread the word by talking to any book club that would have her, then by helping dozens of others to get launched — and keeping them stocked with books.

She cropped up at every other book fair, author signing and reading, becoming known among publishers as the bookseller who never said no. She was willing to gamble with her own “cheap” time to sell anywhere from 85 books at a Pamela Wallin luncheon to a paltry two at a Pierre Berton bust.

She became an expert in small-biz survival techniques, such as just-in-time ordering and a nimble cash-flow two-step. When 14th Street proved not quite small enough, she downsized to the 700-square-foot shoebox on Edgemont Boulevard. Close to a third of her sales are special orders, which the big retailers won't touch because the margin isn't there.

A specialist in fiction and lifestyle, she can get her hands on anything, and fast. *Mein Kampf* is on order for a customer, but Trentadue wouldn't stock it because “it's old, it's not well written and normally no one asks for it.” She loves that in a tiny store this is considered discretion, not censorship.

She has seen her business grow every month since she opened. The chamber of commerce calls all this “innovation,” but it's really a

return to the roots of the book trade, according to Trentadue. “Survival, for me, is based on relationships I have with my customers,” she tells me over tea at The Bakehouse around the corner. “I know what they like, I love books, they love books, and it goes from there.”

It sounds easy, but isn't. The mega-stores have pretty much spoiled the market for both small and medium-sized retailers, their monopoly tactics spreading greed like a hungry virus all the way down the food chain. Buying up entire print runs of bestselling authors, for example. Then shipping as many as 50 per cent of them back to the publishers a few months later — often damaged and still not paid for.

Strapped publishers pass the squeeze along to smaller booksellers, who pay the price. “They turn around and call me for money they can't get from Chapters. It's ridiculous!” says Trentadue, who has at most, 60 days to pay for books while Chapters was often given up to a year. She has never been allowed to return damaged books, and has never shipped more than 20 per cent back unsold. That would be bad business, she says.

“I don't blame Chapters. I blame the publishers. Why were they making deals like that? How did they think Chapters was going to sell so many books, so quickly? They got greedy, then they cried for help when their one big customer went broke.”

If there's one thing that bothers her more than taxpayers bailing out publishers, it's taxpayers bailing out booksellers. She is a believer in free markets, competition and the merit principle, and as president of the 80-member B.C. Booksellers Association she is privy to the (usually good) reasons why retailers go under. Poor business practices, lack of niche market, failure to nurture a clientele.

Before opening 32 Books, she was advised by old timers not to bother. At that time, Chapters was a rumour of things to come in B.C. Trentadue hoped she would have at least a three-year window to grow her little business, but within two an Indigo opened 10 minutes north in Lynn Valley, and early this fall another one sprang up five minutes south on Marine.

She looks at her big-box neighbours with a mixture of rage and dismay. She believes they are doomed, but saves her pity for the untold little retailers they'll take out on their death march. Because the big guys have unbeatable

prices and an endless capacity for debt, they have made her job much, much harder than it should have been, she says.

But there's a silver lining to that cloud, and she sees it every time a customer walks in the door, shaking his head, vowing "never, never again" to shop the box. And she credits it for the daily calls from readers who want her top picks for their book clubs, and ask her to order them. They come in and say, I like these five authors. Who else would I like? That's actually the best part of bookselling — finding the right book for the right person. It makes it so worth it. It makes all the other awful parts forgettable.

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*Depression, Woodcut by Leonard Hutchinson*