

## Chapel Hill prepares for the final chapter of The Bookshop

Elmo stood watch at the door. On his hind legs, he stared skeptically at each new customer, in perfect position to pounce if necessary. He dared them to stare back and scoffed with disapproval when they failed to meet his gaze.

The musky perfume of well-worn books engulfed the entire store. Elmo, a gray tabby, purred softly as another visitor stopped to pet him. Secondhand books from all genres lined the walls: “Absalom, Absalom!”, “Heart of Darkness”, “Jane Eyre”, “One for the Money” and “Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone” are among the titles.

A man in a tan suit walked to the register. He was balding, tufts of gray hair sticking out on the sides of his head with a small earring gleaming in his right ear.

“I’m sorry to hear you’re closing,” the man said.

“Yeah, it’s sad, but we had a good run,” Martin Hall, the man behind the register, said optimistically. He was wearing a simple gray sweater that matched his graying hair. His wire-rimmed glasses reflected the computer screen where he was cataloging “new arrivals” to the store.

The man in the tan suit lingered at the counter in silence, his furrowed brow suggested he was thinking of what to say next.

Finally, the man said, “I’m from Washington D.C. I’m only down once a year, and I always stop in here. I’ll try to stop by tomorrow since it’ll be my last time.”

“Of course, come on in and see us,” Hall responded.

The man in the suit nodded, turned and walked out the door.

After that, a calm silence fell over the store. Red, another cat in the shop, meandered out from behind a shelf, finding a new place to people-watch between shelves of mystery books. Unfazed by the floors creaking behind him, Red fixed his gaze on a middle-aged woman perusing a Janet Evanovich novel. He watched this woman’s every move through the store until the gray-haired man behind the counter said they were closing shop for the night.

Hall ushered the few remaining patrons out the door and started his nightly closing routine: feeding the cats and closing the register. These tasks took him about 15 minutes and then he turned off the lights, locked the doors and went on his way. Only 186 days until he would be closing up shop for the last time.

### Background

The Bookshop, a rare and used bookstore, has been a long-standing establishment at 400 W. Franklin St. in Chapel Hill. Currently, it's the only secondhand bookstore on the town's main road. But, the building's owner said it's hard to maintain the old 1940s era building. The store owner, different from the building owner, lives in San Jose, California. He has opted not to renew the lease that runs out July 31.

So, The Bookshop will be closing its doors after a 32-year run and Elmo and Red will be moving into a new home with a former employee.

Bill Loeser, who opened the store with Linda Saaremaa in 1985, didn't start his independent book-selling career in Chapel Hill. He opened his first store in New Bern, but he said there weren't many books sold there.

"The secondhand bookshop that had been in Chapel Hill for a long time went out of business in 1981, so I moved to Chapel Hill and opened my individually owned bookshop," he said. Loeser's first store in Chapel Hill, Keith Martin Bookshop, was located east of Mellow Mushroom, and opened three months before Linda Saaremaa opened Bookends, a nearby competitor.

"We each owned bookstores, and it's the kind of business that people who own such businesses want to meet and talk shop with," Loeser said.

Eventually, the two formed a partnership, and opened The Bookshop in July 1985. Together, they started to grow what would become a collection of 80,000 books. For them, selling books is much more fun than selling clothes or groceries or really anything else.

"We wouldn't have had bookstores if we weren't interested in books or reading," Loeser said.

### **A Fond Memory**

For him, the best part of owning a secondhand bookstore was going out and buying books. One time, Loeser got a call from a woman who he assumed was about as old as he is now, 74. She said her mother had been a book collector many years ago, and that he should come take a look at what her mother had collected. So, he drove out to her small town and paid a visit. He followed her upstairs where she pulled down the attic stairs and disappeared momentarily. Minutes later, she came teetering back down with two enormous books in her arms. He looked at the first one, which was nothing remarkable.

Loeser, worried that he might go home with nothing to show, grabbed the second book. It was two feet tall and thick, and it was old. Loeser realized just how old when he saw the title: "National History of Carolina, Florida and the Bahama, Third Edition." This book, by Mark Catesby, was originally published in 1771, and this edition had enormous hand-colored pictures of alligators, Billy goats and other animals from the regions.

In a situation like this, the goal is to remain calm and not tip off the seller, but Loeser said he couldn't do that with this book.

"I regret to report, I said 'Oh my God!'" he said.

### **New Owner, New Management**

Loeser and Saaremaa owned and operated the store until 2007, when they made the decision to retire. That same year, a woman from San Jose, California who had recently moved to Mebane, North Carolina came into the store and saw "For Sale" signs. She then contacted her former boss, Eric Johnson and convinced him to buy the store.

The acquisition was the third bookstore for Johnson. He placed management of the store with Betty Schumacher, a woman who had always dreamed of owning a bookstore. In her 10th year as the store's manager, she said The Bookshop brings in about \$400,000 a year, but sales have been flat for eight years.

"I can't say it [the business model] doesn't work because it is a thriving business in one sense, it's just that the sales have been flat," Schumacher said. "The owner has two other stores in California that are doing much better, so he's trying to simplify his life."

### **Lasting Impressions**

Schumacher has seen 10 years of UNC students and people from all over the East Coast visiting the shop.

"It's the only one of its kind on Franklin Street," she said. "It's the only one of its kind, I'd almost say in the state."

But that's not what she enjoys most about the store. She loves to see young families come into the store with their children. Many kids come to play with the cats, but Schumacher is delighted when they come in to read. The store has a large children's section, and it brings a smile to Schumacher's face when children come in to look at the books, read them and sometimes buy them.

Schumacher watches out for one girl in particular. The girl, probably no more than 7 or 8-years-old, proudly walks into the store to give Schumacher recommendations.

"They were great suggestions," Schumacher said. "I would just write down everything she told me, and we would try to get ahold of them."

Johnson, the store's owner, said Chapel Hill and the Bookshop house a different community than in San Jose. Once, while in the store, he said an older woman came in and Johnson thought for sure that she came in to look at mystery or romance. But, Johnson said he was

shocked when the woman came to the counter and asked where she could find the academic books and told him what book she was looking for.

"It's refreshing and rewarding to be in such an academic community," he said. "The community that comes really wants us here."

As the owners of the building, Loeser and Saaremaa have gone from shop owners to landlords, and they have worked with Johnson and Schumacher for the past 10 years. About two years ago, Loeser said The Bookshop owners decided to renew their lease, without a key stipulation they had kept in the other renewals.

"The lease had a stipulation in it that they would have the right to renew the lease, and [this time] they did not ask for that revision," Loeser said.

Without this provision, there wasn't a guarantee the tenant would be The Bookshop when the lease was up, so Loeser and Saaremaa decided to put the building up for sale.

Meg McGurk, the executive director of the Chapel Hill Downtown Partnership, understands the value of bookstores in a college town. She said people in college towns like Chapel Hill, want places to learn and engage with creative thinking and ideas, and The Bookshop is that place. "It's place where students have sold books, where professors have had students go and buy books," McGurk said. "It was a local bookshop, and that brought a lot of value."

But its impact on the town or the smell of old books are not what Schumacher will miss most. She said she will miss the store itself the most because it was the closest to owning a bookstore she will ever get.

"I'll miss the smell, I'll miss the books and I'll miss buying books and seeing all the new stuff that comes in, and talking about books with the customers. I love to make recommendations when people say they're stymied and they need something good to read. I'll miss it all," Schumacher said.

Loeser compared the closing of the bookshop to losing a family dog. He said he couldn't choose what he would miss most because that's like asking what you'd miss most about having a dog. He hopes someone will open a new store, like the one he opened back in 1985, but he'll have to wait and see.

"Just the idea of there being such a place around, makes life a little bit better," he said.