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Weep Not for Borders

Michael Sean Winters | Jan. 21, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

The Washington Post has a front page article [1]this morning about the financial difficulties faced by the megabookstore chain Borders. They have evidently been unable to keep up with Kindles and Amazon.

The one tear to be shed is for the fact that Borders' impending doom will further constrict the market. Of course, this invites the old adage, what goes around, comes around. Borders and Barnes & Noble put hundreds of small, independent bookstores out of business in the past 20 years. In the process, they also radically distorted the publishing industry. The practice of highlighting certain books and leaving the rest as window dressing has resulted in the fact that publishers must hoard their cash to give the likes of Sarah Palin and Bill Clinton, Snooki and Donald Trump huge advances while people who write serious books are reduced to coolie wages.

The rise of Amazon is cause for a different kind of concern and it is why I never shop there except when absolutely necessary. The article in the Post notes, "Amazon built software that suggested other books to customers, based on their orders." That software, alas, is helping to rob our culture of one of its most precious qualities, serendipity. Sometimes, in a bookstore, you find the thing you were not looking for. As well, we moderns live complex lives, so while Amazon may know of my interest in religion and direct me to religious titles, it cannot know that I also am planning a trip to the UK and might want a travel guide, or that a friend's birthday is approaching and they do not like religious titles but enjoy a good cookbook. And Amazon, like Borders, is going to put forward the edition of a classic that meets their marketing needs, even if there might be a better translation, or a more thoroughly annotated one, available.

The most revolting sentence in the Post's article was a quote from a professor who penned a book about the publishing industry, John B. Thompson of Cambridge. He said of Borders, "They elevated book-buying to the same status as any core retail experience." Beg pardon? Elevated? Books are not potato chips and while I am delighted that chains in suburban malls brought more books to more people, the whole system of treating all commodities alike fills me with revulsion.

I am biased in this regard. As some of you know, for 17 years I was the general manager of Kramerbooks & Afterwords Cafe here in Washington. I actually oversaw the cafe side of the operation but learned something of the book selling business by osmosis. I know that Kramers has the best book buyer in all of Washington, D.C., Clinton Froscher, who always has the best translations of Augustine, the widest variety of serious books on politics, and a cookbook selection that would take your breathe away. Whenever I have a little extra money -- which, being a writer is an increasingly infrequent occasion -- I love nothing more than going to Kramers and buying books that perk my interest. There is nothing Amazon can do that Kramers can't. When the University of Chicago Press re-issued Churchill's two volume "Life of Marlborough" and I knew I wanted those volumes in hardback not paperback, Clinton ordered them for me and I had them within a few days. Perhaps Amazon could have gotten them to me a day earlier, but Marlborough has been dead for some time so I did not perceive the rush.

If you have ever been to Dupont Circle in Washington, you will know that Kramers is the center of that neighborhood's cultural life. "I'll meet you at Kramers" is a standard refrain -- what better place to wait than a

bookstore/cafe where you can browse the books while waiting for your friend to arrive or, if you are tired, retire to the bar for a cocktail. Everyone goes to Kramers. I first met then-Father, now-Bishop David O'Connell there when he was browsing the religion section. I first met Cardinal Stafford there when he was on a similar mission. I first met George Stephanopoulos there and Christopher Hitchens (scotch, please) and Peter Berkowitz and Leon Wieseltier and Maya Angelou (if it is after noon, she will take a gin and tonic!) and Barney Frank and E.J. Dionne and, well, you get the picture. Funny, I never met any of them on Amazon.

So, do yourself and the culture a favor. The next time you need a book, resist the urge to rush to your computer, block out a bit of time, and head to your local independent bookseller. Great independent bookstore do not only contain cultural treasures, they are cultural treasures. Can't really say that about Borders, can you?

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