

Letter from America

Autumn 2013

After more than a decade, being single had become my signature thing. One might even have said it was my thang. When my status changed, it was as if Lassie or the Statue of Liberty had gotten a boyfriend. We guessed it was possible, but no one, myself included, saw it coming.

Howard and I met at Atomic Books, a local independent store where I often attended readings and then hung around afterward with the owners and anyone else who didn't leave. We'd all carouse in the back room, throwing a few dollars into a fishbowl to help out with the beers that Benn Ray and Rachel Whang, the owners, kept in a cooler. As it happened, the other lingerers were often single people or couples with no children. We had shared interests not just in books, but also comics, music, food, sports, and busting each other's chops (i.e. taking the piss).

The store became, for me, a Cheers kind of place, except with a Baltimore flavor, more tattoos and punk rock. I could text Benn and Rachel and drop by after hours to keep them company while they played Rock Band. Sometimes, it would be just the three of us, and sometimes there would be seven other people, too. That's how Howard and I kept running into each other and how we were both there the night Benn suggested that some of us ought to go to Baltimore Comic Con. As it turned out, there was nothing to bring two lovers together like a convention center full of twenty-somethings in homemade space helmets and ass chaps. The rest is nerd history.

Two years later, Howard and I are about to move in together, and Atomic Books has literally doubled in size, taking over the space next door. There's now a used books section, and the store houses a record shop. The biggest change, though, has been the transformation of that back room of the original store into a bar. Benn and Rachel obtained a liquor license, and the Atomic Bar officially opened a few weeks ago. "One of the reasons why we thought a bar would be something that we could use is that it seemed obvious to us that people wanted to 'hang out' more in the store" Rachel told me. "Talking about books or what's happening in the neighborhood, those are things that a bookstore is a perfect place for...but that doesn't pay the bills. The reality is buying books might be the last thing on a person's list for why they love bookstores!"

A March article in The Christian Science Monitor ("The Novel Resurgence of Independent Bookstores") suggests that, nationwide, independents have become healthy again, perhaps for the same reasons that Atomic has been successful. The stores are intertwined with their communities. The article cites as an example Bank Square Books in Mystic, Connecticut. It might have fallen victim to Super Storm Sandy if not for the neighbors and other fans of the store who evacuated 400 packing crates and saved 30,000 books from rising water. It's hard to imagine anyone doing that for a Borders or a Barnes & Noble. But I can imagine people doing it for Atomic. I certainly would.

At a time when news in the publishing industry is all gloom and doom, the American Booksellers Association reports that sales at independent stores increased by eight percent between 2011 and 2012. In addition, the American Booksellers Association has grown its membership for three straight years. Between 2009 and 2013, the AMA's more plentiful membership went from owning 1,651 bookstore locations to 1,940 locations. There are many

theories about the factors that have contributed to the changes. There has been the dwindling of the big chain stores (and we could theorize even further about the causes of that). Some believe the “buy local” trend may be benefiting independent stores, while others say social media allows small businesses to advertise widely without gigantic advertising budgets.

Still, one wonders if the sales growth at independents in the US is actually from books. Thomas Wright, owner of the Battery Park Book Exchange and Champagne Bar in Asheville, North Carolina, is quoted in the CSM article as saying, “My business is great. My book business is not...It’s a meeting place. We basically sell conviviality. For the most part, our books are probably viewed as wallpaper.”

Rachel shares a similar perspective when she discusses the decision to open an Atomic bar. “People talk about bookstores as community centers but the bottom line is that it’s a business, and yet most of what we provide – information, conversation, access to books, AC, shelter from the rain, etc – is free.”

It turns out that there are more bookstore bars than one might imagine. A quick search brings up the Book Bar in Denver, The Library Bistro in Seattle, and Kramerbooks in Washington, D.C. If we really think about it, booze and the written word have long been intertwined. We have lost a few notable writers to drink, including F. Scott Fitzgerald, Truman Capote, and Baltimore’s own Edgar Allen Poe. But just imagine – what if booze also turns out to be the written word’s savior?

“I think that both activities are connected,” Rachel says. “Taking time out for yourself, for reflection, and sharing stories.”

When Howard and I finally bought our new house, we had spent months searching for just the right place. It had to have room for our ageing parents to visit. We had to be able to house all of our combined books. And it couldn’t be too far from Atomic. After all, we needed to be able to stumble home.

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