

Pittsburg State University

Pittsburg State University Digital Commons

Essays

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg Collection

March 2023

Read Globally, Shop Locally at The Raven

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/cm_g_essays

Recommended Citation

Mirriam-Goldberg, Caryn, "Read Globally, Shop Locally at The Raven" (2023). *Essays*. 40.
https://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/cm_g_essays/40

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg Collection at Pittsburg State University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Essays by an authorized administrator of Pittsburg State University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact lfthompson@pittstate.edu.

Read Globally, Shop Locally at The Raven
by Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg, Merc Member

Not so many years ago, I was one of several hundred people who gathered in one of the Douglas County fairgrounds halls to discuss how a beloved local business – and a community-owned one at that – was threatened with extinction due to competition from a national chain. That business was the Community Mercantile, and that meeting, which was part of a turn-around effort to save the Merc, netted thousands of volunteer hours and community dollars, all of which had a profound effect on preserving the Merc in the years it competed head-to-head with Wild Oats.

What I remember most though was how little it took for a large number of people to collectively preserve one of the traditions of our community: we were asked to spend \$5 more each week and to volunteer several hours a month. Dozens of people were so committed to saving our local food co-op that they would do anything from scrub display cases to buy an extra jar of pickles each week.

The effort paid off: it kept the Merc around long enough for Wild Oats to decide to take its wares elsewhere, and although the Merc lingered in critical condition for those months before Wild Oats announced it was leaving Lawrence, the efforts of this community were enough, just enough, so that now we have a flourishing, financially-stable and community-education-minded center for natural foods in this town, one of the few food co-ops still alive in this country of increasing Wal-martization of every business from movie theaters to clothing stores.

This community has a long tradition of bucking national consumer trends. For many years during the mall-ridden 80s and 90s, we were the biggest town in America

without a mall. While corporate chain coffee shops exist in Lawrence, so do far more locally-owned coffee shops, many of which are often packed every morning or evening. And our downtown continues to be largely locally-owned with our own community-nuanced choices of clothing, kitchen wares, used records and pizza toppings.

Yet as I write this, one vital institution to a town that prides itself on education and diversity is facing increasing economic threats: our locally-owned bookstore, The Raven, the only independent bookstore left in town. The reason is less obvious than just that chain bookstore a half-block away from The Raven: for many of us, it's right under our fingertips. Internet book stores, particularly Amazon.com, have hurt independent book dealers more than Barnes and Noble, and Borders combined.

The convenience of letting your fingers do the walking is surely appealing: discounted book prices, sometimes free or reduced shipping, and the product arriving at your home. But it's just a stone's throw away from the convenience of looking up a book on the web, and then picking up the phone and calling The Raven, which will order it for you and usually have it in stock within a week. And while you're picking up your book, that's where the value of locally-owned, and real – as opposed to virtual – becomes more apparent: those little stops at the store bring you in contact with friends, acquaintances, other books you might want to consider. The connections we make and find in our local businesses are an integral part of our social fiber, knitting us together.

Moreover, there's something immensely appealing about holding something in your hands before deciding to buy it. You can scan the pages, look at the photo of the author to see how goofy or credible he or she looks, read the book jacket, read a page or two. And you can talk to others, especially in a store like The Raven, who may have read

the book you're considering, thereby bringing literary discussions where they belong: among we, the people.

There's a whole other side to supporting our local bookstore: it's a way to support local writers who are often given a warm reception, some shelf space, and many times, a public venue for a reading, thanks to a store owned and run by people who live right here, know something about what we care about in this particular place rather than shopping by market survey data. A good many writers of all stripes and spots have found their way out to this community through the hundreds of readings and receptions organized by The Raven over the years. Amazon may have nifty features to read, but it's not the same thing to click a computer in your home as it is to sit among people from many walks of life, all brought together by an intense interest in mystery novels or bird callings.

Beyond the internet, right here in town, we probably have enough people who love reading enough books to support The Raven as well as the national chain nearby, not to mention the likes of our used bookstores and other resources for the lovers of paper things with many words on them. Yet it's important to remember some economic lessons that tell their own story. According to an economic impact case study in Austin, Texas conducted by Civic Economies and published in *Livable City*, \$100 spent at a chain bookstore creates \$13 worth of local economic activity, while that same \$100 spent at a locally-owned store generates \$45 for the local community. (And keep in mind that spending \$100 on the internet brings no dollars into our community at all!)

I remember the immense sadness many of us felt when we walked into Adventure Books or Terra Nova or other locally-owned bookstores for the last time, and I particularly remember my children crying in their car seats the day Adventure, with its huge children's section, closed. Keeping bookstores afloat is tricky business in this age,

but then again, holding onto anything distinctive, unique, imbued with local flavor and very much “ours” as opposed to “theirs” is always a challenge in today’s market economy. It doesn’t take much though – just an occasional purchase here of what you might otherwise buy virtually, just a real experience picking up a book you want in a real place on your way to one of the many downtown locally-owned coffee shops, or to the thriving Merc. If you’re getting ready to click “add to my cart” on some internet book site, just remember what that Poe-etic literary raven said: “Nevermore!” and pick up your phone instead.

Lawrence, Kansas has told another story in the realm of natural foods than the one written on corporate ledgers. Let’s do the same with the books we read.