

The final chapter?

A plea for patronage of some fragile institutions: queer and independent bookstores

By the time this column appears, one of my favorite queer bookstores—Boston's wonderful Glad Day Book Shop—will have closed. In business for almost a quarter of a century, the store is closing not because of financial difficulties, but because the space it's occupied for many years is being turned into high-end condos and the owner can't find a new space in a neighborhood overrun with Starbucks and Pottery Barns.

MY QUEER LIFE

BY MICHAEL THOMAS FORD

The story of the independent bookstore forced out by the ever-encroaching chains, online stores and rising costs of operating a small business isn't a new one. And when it comes to queer, alternative or women's bookstores, the casualties have been particularly high. But this is more than just a business issue.

I walked into my first gay bookstore a dozen years ago, when I moved to New York and discovered A Different Light, then located on Hudson Street. The store was a funky mix of books, magazines, T-shirts, posters and various other items devoted to queer culture. For me, newly released from a religious college and starving for anything gay, it was like walking into a candy store. I bought more books than I could read, just to have them on the shelves. I found out about ACT UP and Queer Nation meetings by reading the fliers pinned to the jumbled mess that was the community bulletin board. I met my first boyfriend there.

Now, A Different Light has moved to more upscale Chelsea, where it competes for business with a gigantic Barnes & Noble and faces an uncertain future. And the store is not alone.

Forced to streamline, diversify and shape up, many long-standing gay bookstores are finding themselves losing the battle for attention to younger, hungrier and more aggressive outlets.

As someone who makes a living from writing, I understand all too well the fragile financial web of buying and selling books. I know that small stores simply can't offer the same discounts, variety and instant gratification that chains can. And, yes, I've bought books online when I couldn't find them at my local independent store or when I just didn't feel like leaving

down everything that was in print; and long before mainstream publishers took any interest in gay books, there were small, queer publishers putting them out at great trouble and expense.

No, this isn't just about the books. You can get gay books pretty much anywhere these days. The disappearance of the queer bookstore is frightening for a larger reason. It used to be that these stores functioned as de facto community centers, information libraries and even pickup joints. Going into one, you felt that you belonged there: These were "your" books and

on through the security scanner, I was asked to step aside and open my bag for inspection. Having gone through exactly the same thing the previous year, I knew what they were looking for.

"It's an award," I said as I took out the Lammy nestled in the center of the suitcase and held it out for inspection.

The security guard doing the check took the award—which is a Lucite block with a medal embedded in the center—and stared at it for a minute.

"They thought it might be a bomb," she explained. Then she took a closer look. "Gay and lesbian book award?" she said, staring at me curiously. "They have an award for that?"

Yes, they have an award for that. And we have that award because we like to honor books by and about queer people and those people's lives. As more and more of gay culture is subsumed by the mainstream, it's easy to forget that our inclusion in that mainstream is largely dependent upon what the Man can get out of our culture. Our words stay in print as long as they make money, not necessarily as long as they're needed. Our voices are heard as long as what we say isn't too offensive.

So the next time you need to pick up a book, please consider taking a trip to your local queer store, if you have one. If you don't, please consider asking whatever store you shop to stock more queer titles.

As for the booksellers out there, my heartfelt appreciation to all of you working (often covertly) within the chains to make sure queer books don't disappear.

And finally, to the great folks at Glad Day—and to everyone who runs a gay bookstore—a big thank you for keeping us at least one step away from the jaws of assimilation.

■ MICHAEL THOMAS FORD's latest book, *It's Not Mean If It's True*, will be in stores soon. He can be reached at Shopiltee@aol.com.



This isn't just about books, although we need to keep in mind that long before Barnes & Noble and Borders made those little sections for "gay literature," there were small-bookstore owners making queer literature available by hunting down everything that was in print.

the house. Besides, my own books sell very well through those same outlets, so I can't complain too much. And I know that there are lots of people out there buying queer books online who would never buy them if they had to walk into a store.

But I think we need to look at what we're losing every time another store closes. This isn't just about books, although we need to keep in mind that long before Barnes & Noble and Borders made those little sections for "gay literature," there were small-bookstore owners making queer literature available by hunting

"your" people and "your" space. Browsing through the latest issue of *Out*, or reading the first chapter of the new Andrew Holleran or Dorothy Allison to see if it hooks you, just isn't the same when you do it at Barnes & Noble surrounded by 6 billion copies of the 15th Harry Potter installment, Oprah's latest pick and a stack of Dr. Laura's current abomination.


A few weeks ago, I flew to Chicago for the annual Lambda Literary Awards, where my book *That's Mr. Faggot to You* received a Lammy for best humor book. On the way home the next morning, when I sent my carry-

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