



Dave Killen/The Oregonian
Powell's City of Books in Portland has partly reopened since shutting down earlier in 2020, with shorter hours than before the coronavirus pandemic.

Oregon bookstores adapt amid pandemic

By AMY WANG
The Oregonian

For independent bookstores, 2020 is a story that hasn't ended yet.

Emily Powell, owner and president of Portland's biggest and best-known bookstore, Powell's Books, had one word to sum up 2020: "excruciating."

Powell expressed gratitude for community support last year, but didn't mince words about the coming year. Following the holiday season surge, "we expect our sales will drop off a cliff in January, and we will have to contract our business again," she said.

When the coronavirus pandemic began last spring, Powell's Books had five Portland-area bookstores, about 580 employees, and, according to outside estimates, roughly \$45 million in annual revenue. Now it has three stores, after shutting down its Portland International Airport outpost in July, and its Home & Garden store on Hawthorne Boulevard in December. It's down to "a little shy of 200 employees" and its sales were down 80% for 2020, Powell said.

Her goal for 2021: survival.

Brian Juenemann, executive director of the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association, said the experiences of the association's 133 members in five states, including about 44 in Oregon, were all over the place in 2020.

"The spectrum was unbelievable, from people who just locked their doors and walked away to go think what they were going to do, to people who were on the fly setting up an online mechanism they'd never had before," Juenemann said. He saw everything from "tiny stores making all the right moves to giant stores unable to move quickly and unable to respond as nimbly."

Stores that had a solid core of dedicated customers and a focus on physical community events, Juenemann said, were the most appealing. Some turned to social media sites or live streaming, like Powell's, an Astoria bookstore that launched an early 2020 livestreaming mission. Independent bookstores are more than just a place to buy books.

As for the future, Juenemann said, "if the level of support continues, then they

"No one opened a bookstore to do mostly online sales," Juenemann said. But a robust online presence maintains a connection with customers and sets up bookstores to "funnel back into a healthy physical relationship with communities again."

He cited Broadway Books, in northeast Portland, as an example of a bookstore that pivoted successfully during the pandemic. Among other things, it launched a "Year of Reading Toni Morrison," held a virtual holiday-season chat about books the owners love, and set up an appointment system for in-store shopping. Co-owners Kim Bissell and Sally McPherson "just kept evolving and tweaking as they went," he said. "They just got better and better at what they did. It was remarkable."

Juenemann also cited three Northwest bookstores, including Paulina Springs Books in Sisters, that teamed up to host the virtual Books in Common NW speaker series. That gave readers "something to tune into" and reduced each store's workload for hosting events while simultaneously tripling the customer base, he said.

Then there were the delivery and curbside pickup programs, "each with their own little flavor," that bookstores created to keep putting books in customers' hands, Juenemann said.

Bookstores are also looking for ways to stay motivated and engaged. Some are offering gifts in Oregon, and the pandemic was "a challenge" with no one in the store, she said. Walsh found herself in a similar situation, but she posted a selection of books on her website.

Walsh also began livestreaming two to three times a week, which she discussed books and other products. She started out with nine people watching, but now she has 40 to 50 viewers. "I sell off that," she said. "People still want to have that community connection and to talk about the books. The livestreams were a lifesaver for us and a real lifesaver."

Walsh expected her January numbers to be great, she said she did not expect the December. And she recently got help from the Oregon City in the form of a tour that she used to reconfigure the store for socially distant browsing.

Living in a toxic household

Dear Annie: I have been with my husband for almost nine years. We have been married for three years. His family was nice to me before the wedding, but after, they became aloof. His daughter is horrible. She has no respect, not even for my husband.

My husband has a lot of money — a few million dollars. He has never told me this, but his friends did. I also found paperwork showing that he has about \$2.5 million. We live in a rat hole, to say the least, and with the coronavirus pandemic, I lost my job of 46 years. Before we married, I had my own house, car and life. Now I rent my house; my car is in the garage; and my husband is a recluse. I have no money, and the unemployment agency keeps saying I owe them money for the past 10 months. I thought they were supposed to pay me money!

My husband is a Scrooge. He's 68 years old and acts like he's 98. He does not want to do anything or go anywhere and complains about money all the time. Asking him for grocery money is like pulling teeth. He knows he has me in a rut, as I'm not working.

My daughter-in-law has never given us a card, a gift or a kind word in the nine years that we have been together. My husband thinks she's a goddess and treats her like a queen. My husband's ex-wife went with his brother and divorced him and took him for a pretty penny.

I now know that his family is upset because they think I will get some of his money and they won't get a dime. I'm pretty

sad, as I can't even get grocery money. He always said he was leaving his daughter everything. I made a huge mistake, and with COVID-19 and no money, I will lose everything.

My daughter-in-law comes over. She has two horrible little kids who won't sit still in a restaurant or at home. When the kids were diaper age, she would leave dirty diapers around, leave dirty towels on the floor and never bring us anything, not even at Christmas or on birthdays. My daughter-in-law only thinks about herself and only buys clothes, haircuts, cars and houses for herself. Her mother lives near us, and she came for her mom's birthday, yet she has never given a card for my husband's birthday. She tells us what she buys her mom. It's heartbreaking. He never sees his friends and my friends. I have many friends who think he's weird and that I should go.

I'm going crazy. I need help but have no medical coverage at the moment. I'm dying inside. Please tell me what I can do. — *Living With Scrooge in Las Vegas*

Dear Living With Scrooge: I'm sorry that you are living in what sounds like a very toxic house. Focusing on your daughter-in-law's and her children's faults and how horrible they are does very little to dissipate the toxicity. It sounds like there is a lot of blame and anger to go around, including on your end. It is time to consult a professional marriage counselor. That is the best way to figure out whether this marriage is worth saving. You should feel more alive with your partner, not like you are dying inside.

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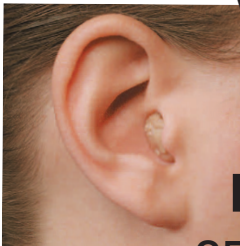
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