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## The Bullies on the Block: What's Killing Secondhand Bookstores?

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Kristen Stedman

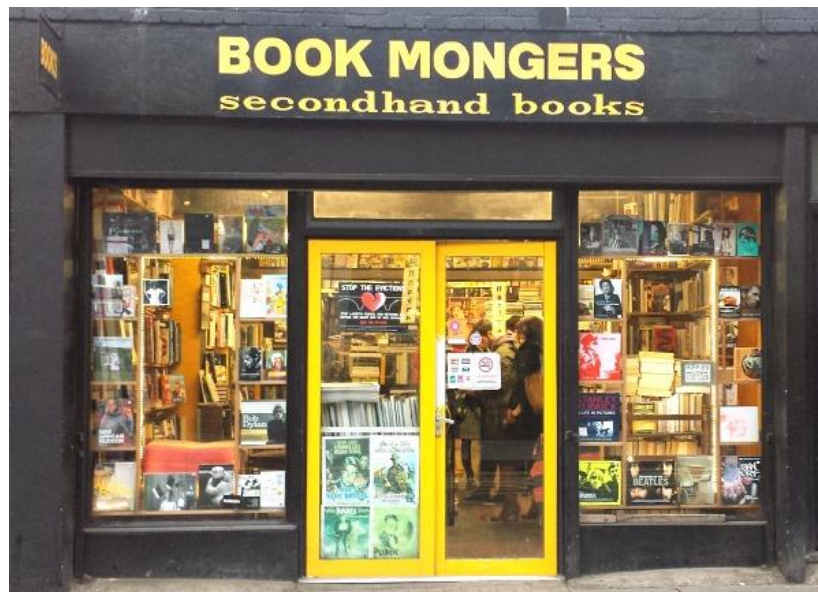
Véronique Mistiaen

Journalism: News and Feature Writing

Feature Article

### **The Bullies on the Block: What's Killing Secondhand Bookstores?**

It's a frigid, overcast autumn day on Coldharbour Lane in Brixton, most people are wandering back to the tube after a day at the market. What stops many on this street is a peculiar sight: a pitbull, lying comfortably in the window of a store called Bookmongers.



Walking into this secondhand bookstore, you skip the arduous commute and are instantly teleported home. Soft jazz music and conversation fill the room nearly as much as literature, and the number of people in the shop shows it is the busiest one on the street. There are no pristine “best-seller” tables to be found here, rather, the vast amount of books, which cover almost the entirety of the shop’s floor and wall space, are messily arranged into sections by genre. The walls

which aren't completely covered by books are plastered with vintage posters, such as an advertisement for the original King Kong, an Elvis Presley tribute, and countless flyers for poetry contests. At the back of the store lies a plush crimson couch where a man and woman chat energetically, a detailed mural of the shop which covers most of the wall, and a blue bowl of water for Rosa, the aforementioned pitbull. At the front desk, a customer speaks at length with the cashier about her recent obsession with short stories.



### **What Kind of Place is This?**

Despite the success this shop has enjoyed, the fact remains that Bookmongers is one of the UK's 987 remaining independent bookshops, with just 115 of those being located throughout London. Even fewer of those are secondhand stores, which exclusively sell used material. All secondhand bookstores are independent, but not all independent bookstores are secondhand. Nonetheless, both types of shop are equally in danger, they face the same pressures and threats.

The well-loved store was opened by Patrick Kelly and his first dog and business partner, Leo, in 1991. However, the man behind the counter today is Robert Coyne, 46, who has been working at Bookmongers for 14 years. With soft gray eyes and a peaceful air about him, Coyne is a very approachable person. Pertaining to this shop, he says, “I’ve always loved books, and I thought the atmosphere of this place was great. I was a regular customer before I got hired. It’s a little grungy, but there’s so much warmth here, and the people are nice. It’s just really been a dream job for me.” Even since Coyne’s days as a customer, people have found an inherent charm to the shop. Part of this could be attributed to its history with dogs, at which Coyne glances to the mural in the back of the store, painted by his wife. He points out Leo, and explains that though it was hard on Patrick to lose Leo, Rosa has brought in a lot of business due to her friendliness, in contrast to Leo’s grumpy nature.

Customers often give enthusiastic feedback, and there are a lot of regular visitors. One of these regulars, 26 year-old James Lowey, says: “I think a lot of other secondhand shops feel a little pretentious. You go in and feel like you don’t belong, like everybody’s looking at you. This place doesn’t make you feel that way; it’s really friendly.”



## **The Plight of Independent Bookstores**

Figures from the Booksellers Association revealed that in 2014, 67 shops closed, while only 26 opened. Coyne says: “We used to get a lot of competition from other bookstores. There was a really popular one by Elephant & Castle, but all of those stores are gone now.” The primary reasons for this decline is due to places such as chain stores and Amazon offering heavily discounted prices on literature, as well as an ease of access in finding what you need. “It’s a lot easier for people to buy books from chain stores, they’re all over the place and are a lot more organized,” says Coyne. Additionally, the economic downturn, combined with rent costs increasing 15.2% in the last five years (According to data from estate agencies Your Move and Reed Rains), put off new shop owners, while old ones find it difficult to get by.

Coyne details some of the issues facing South London bookstores in specific, and that he believes the closures are a result of Brixton’s rapid gentrification, stating that, “A lot of small shops have changed hands because of the rent. It’s a really big issue now that Brixton’s become more ‘fashionable’. Everything has changed so drastically in only five years.” However, Bookmongers has managed to thrive in this situation, with Coyne saying that, “In the short term, business has been really good here, but in the long-term, it’s worrying.” After a brief pause, he adds that, “A lot of people will stop in while walking to and from the tube or when they’re exiting the market. We’ve been lucky to get a lot of business because of that.”

## **The Biggest Threats**

On the issue of chain stores, 56 year-old author and journalist Alix Christie comments that the main distinction between secondhand shops and chain stores is that, “In supermarkets, you’ll only find popular fiction, the stuff on the bestsellers list.” Living in France for a number of

years, she adds that there were significantly more secondhand shops there than in London, “The high rent makes it hard to get independent shops in cities like London, for sure, but in France they don’t have supermarket bookstores. There are a lot of state subsidies, market protection through fixed book prices, and rent control.”

One of Christie’s closing comments deals with one of the greatest current threats to independent shops, “If we want to keep bookstores alive, people need to stand up to Amazon.” This issue may be clearest in the case of Linda Jones, owner of the Ibis Bookshop in Banstead, Surrey. The shop closed in March of 2014 after being in business for 76 years. She contends that Amazon killed her shop, which *The New York Times* backed up in an article including a survey taken by the Codex Group in October 2011. The survey revealed that 39% of people who bought books from Amazon in that month had looked at them in a bookstore first. In 2011, Amazon started a policy where they offered people a 5% discount through scanning an item using the company’s “Price Check” smartphone app, therefore giving customers incentive to purchase exclusively on Amazon, taking revenue away from secondhand shops.

### **A Light at the End of the Tunnel**

Despite the plethora of issues facing independent shops that only seem to be worsening, there is still hope for the industry. Though the physical book market has experienced some very severe declines, with a 9.5% decrease in the number of shops according to the Local Data Company in 2015 (As reported in an article in *The Telegraph*), in the last year, that number was only 1.6%, a drastic improvement. Additionally, in 2014, the Booksellers Association started a campaign to gather support for independent shops called Books Are My Bag, which included celebrities such as Lily Cole, Darn O’Porter, and Rachel Khoo. With an interest from notable figures in addition to public support, though the number of shops may still decline, these stores

will likely not go extinct. At the end of our conversation, Coyne says: “I keep thinking of record and vinyl stores, in that a few years ago everyone was saying they were completely extinct, but now they’ve started to make a comeback. I think the same goes for books, definitely.” Thanking him for his time, I purchase a book about the history of pirates, and exit this time-machine of a store what may be for the last time, with all of its quirks and imperfections, a remnant of how Brixton used to be.