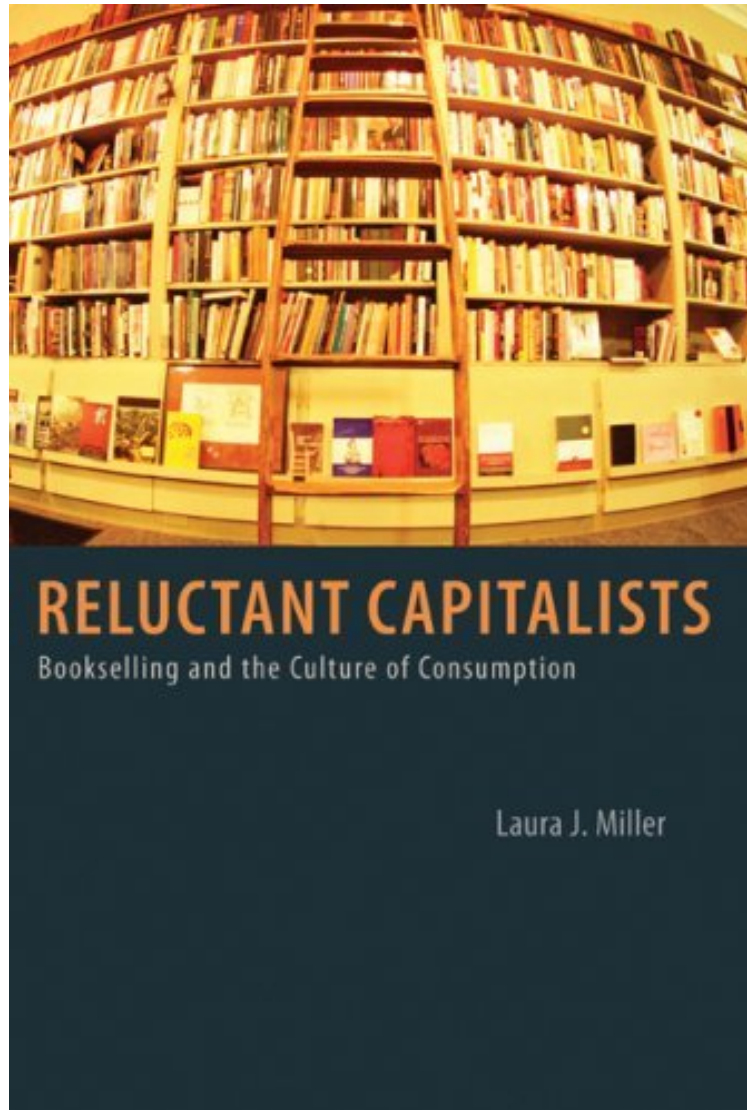


(Download pdf) Reluctant Capitalists: Bookselling and the Culture of Consumption

Reluctant Capitalists: Bookselling and the Culture of Consumption

Laura J. Miller

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helpful. Bookstores and culture - a fascinating analysis! By Sharon K. Yntema I have worked in bookstores for the last 30 years, and it's so interesting to find out that what I have experienced fits in perfectly with the themes of this book. It looks at the history of bookstore culture and its intersection with capitalism. It isn't brand new, but it does feel dated in the least. Important themes and ideas.....Everyone who works at a bookstore (or library), or owns a bookstore or is even thinking about owning a bookstore will learn something from this book. If bookstores are to survive, this is the kind of information that will help in decision-making along the way. 5 of 7 people found the following review helpful. A very interesting view By Michael Brook The author looks at bookselling and especially book buying from a very sophisticated standpoint taking many economic, social, and cultural factors into account. The idea that the book both is and isn't a commodity like any other is examined up down and sideways. One interesting point: the rise of giants Borders and Barnes and Noble has made buying a book an entertainment experience (e.g., people go on dates at Borders!).

Over the past half-century, bookselling, like many retail industries, has evolved from an arena dominated by independent bookstores to one in which chain stores have significant market share. And as in other areas of retail, this transformation has often been a less-than-smooth process. This has been especially pronounced in bookselling, argues Laura J. Miller, because more than most other consumer goods, books are the focus of passionate debate. What drives that debate? And why do so many people believe that bookselling should be immune to questions of profit? In *Reluctant Capitalists*, Miller looks at a century of book retailing, demonstrating that the independent/chain dynamic is not entirely new. It began one hundred years ago when department stores began selling books, continued through the 1960s with the emergence of national chain stores, and exploded with the formation of "superstores" in the 1990s. The advent of the Internet has further spurred tremendous changes in how booksellers approach their business. All of these changes have met resistance from book professionals and readers who believe that the book business should somehow be "above" market forces and instead embrace more noble priorities. Miller uses interviews with bookstore customers and members of the book industry to explain why books evoke such distinct and heated reactions. She reveals why customers have such fierce loyalty to certain bookstores and why they identify so strongly with different types of books. In the process, she also teases out the meanings of retailing and consumption in American culture at large, underscoring her point that any type of consumer behavior is inevitably political, with consequences for communities as well as commercial institutions.

From *Publishers Weekly* Though independent booksellers may believe they already understand all that there is to know about maintaining the delicate balance between economic success and cultural integrity, those who dip into Miller's impressive examination will find their curiosity well rewarded. Miller's historical analysis reveals, for example, how independent booksellers' opposition to mass market competitors has shifted dramatically. Nearly a century ago, when department stores and five-and-dimes began selling books, the owners of established bookstores insisted that large commercial enterprises couldn't guide customers to suitably uplifting reading material. As the cultural elitism behind this argument became unpalatable, the indies changed their tune, claiming that superstores were laying down homogenized inventories that stifled intellectual diversity. Miller also discusses the internal pressures that led the American Booksellers Association to adopt a more activist stance toward the chains in recent years. One of the book's few disappointments is a closing chapter on consumption as political choice, which never quite explains how such choices operate. But that's a rare ambiguity in this otherwise carefully articulated investigation. (Apr.) Look for PW's upcoming qa with Laura J. Miller. Copyright copy; Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. "This detailed account of the bookselling industry makes clear how difficult it is to maintain a moral boundary between local commerce and the rampant commercialism of retail websites and chains. Laura Miller shows that with books, as with every other commodity, the culture of consumption is shaped more by marketing strategies than by Americans' desire to read." --Sharon Zukin, author of *Point of Purchase: How Shopping Changed American Culture* "From beginning to end, this book is a pleasure to read." *Reluctant Capitalists* is the first good history of American bookselling to appear in a very long time. Here, Laura Miller provides a fascinating analysis of conflicts within the book industry between the understanding of bookselling as a capitalist venture, and an almost diametrically opposed view of the same venture as something higher and worthier by virtue of books' content and place within our culture." --Elizabeth Long, author of *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life* "Laura Miller's *Reluctant Capitalists* is a compelling account of the complex world of bookselling, focusing on the persistent dynamic between the book as a commodity and as a form of expression antithetical to market principles. Miller discovers that today's conflicts between independents, chains and Big Box stores have historical precedents, and how despite repeated episodes of consolidation and price-cutting, readers and sellers remain passionate about the book's extra-commercial status. In addition to producing a top-rate study of bookselling, Miller has provided a fascinating framework for thinking about consumer culture more generally, by highlighting the ever-present tensions between commodification and singularity, sentiment and consumer rationality, emotion and economics." --Juliet B. Schor, author of *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture* -- Juliet Schor

(12/19/2005)"Though independent booksellers may believe they already understand all that there is to know about maintaining the delicate balance between economic success and cultural integrity, those who dip into Miller's impressive examination will find their curiosity well rewarded. Miller's historical analysis reveals, for example, how independent booksellers' opposition to mass market competitors has shifted dramatically. Nearly a century ago, when department stores and five-and-dimes began selling books, the owners of established bookstores insisted that large commercial enterprises couldn't guide customers to suitably uplifting reading material. As the cultural elitism behind this argument became unpalatable, the indies changed their tune, claiming that superstores were laying down homogenized inventories that stifled intellectual diversity. Miller also discusses the internal pressures that led the American Booksellers Association to adopt a more activist stance toward the chains in recent years. This . . . [is a] carefully articulated investigation."--Publishers Weekly

Books are different. Commodities, to be sure. Bought and sold, no doubt. Yet in the world of commerce, books retain a certain mystique. That regard has held true, traditionally, for booksellers as well, notes Laura J. Miller, a Brandeis University sociologist. In *Reluctant Capitalists: Bookselling and the Culture of Consumption*, she uses the bookstore wars between independents and big chains to explore the ambivalence toward business values in the world of books and wider concerns about consumption and highly 'rationalized' systems of retailing. Traditional booksellers felt stressed long before the first of the 'superstores.' From the end of the 19th century to the 1960s, Ms. Miller writes, department stores took a heavy chunk of bookstore sales. Five-and-dimes and similar outlets also joined in, putting pressure on bookshops and making one commentator in 1954 fume that booksellers 'must now compete with everything from delicatessens to whore houses.' A major jolt would come with the expansion of chain stores in the 1970s and 80s. Early on, writes Ms. Miller, chain bookstores tended to be small sites in mall locations with a focus on popular titles. Their discounts, previously rare in bookshops, threatened independents, but they had little in the way of selection. With superstores, things changed. The first superstores, opened by Crown Books in 1990, seem modest by later standards: 6,000 to 8,000 square feet, with 30,000 to 40,000 titles. By 2002 Borders stores carried 62,000 to 209,000 titles. Tracing the chains' growth, Ms. Miller shows how they centralized and standardized selection, ordering, and other procedures while attracting a new public previously intimidated by bookstores. Among her topics are the standardized design of superstores, with their mix of gentility and flash and their tactics of display. Just as in supermarkets, prime positions are for sale. Publishers with big marketing budgets, she says, can purchase good real estate for their titles, such as on the end of a row of shelves facing the aisle. While some books are promoted, others, especially those more esoteric or from smaller presses, may end up as 'wallpaper,' there to create ambience but not pushed to sell. Ms. Miller describes how independent booksellers, still feeling a mission along with the pinch, have fought back by transforming the American Booksellers Association into a champion for independents, pursuing lawsuits against trade practices they claim favor the big chains, and seeking support from an often fickle reading public."--Nina C. Ayoub, *Chronicle of Higher Education* -- Nina C. Ayoub

"*Chronicle of Higher Education*" (05/12/2006)"Chain superstores, notes Laura J. Miller's fascinating new study *"Reluctant Capitalists: Bookselling and the Culture of Consumption,"* are the latest manifestation of a centuries-old struggle between bookselling Davids and Goliaths—a battle over where Americans actually shop versus stores with, Miller tartly notes, 'a style of retailing that Americans at least profess to miss.'" -- Paul Collins *"Voice Literary Supplement"* (05/23/2006)

From the Inside Flap

Over the past half-century, bookselling, like many retail industries, has evolved from an arena dominated by small independent shops to one in which chain stores have significant market share. And as other retail fields, this transformation has often been a less-than-smooth process. But this has been especially pronounced in bookselling, argues Laura J. Miller, because more than most other consumer goods, books are the focus of passionate debate about commercialism. What drives that debate? And why do so many people believe that bookselling should be immune to questions of profit? In *Reluctant Capitalists*, Miller looks at a century of book retailing, demonstrating that the independent-chain dynamic is not entirely new. It began a hundred years ago when department stores began selling books, continued through the 1960s with the emergence of national chain stores, and exploded with the formation of "superstores" in the 1990s. The advent of the Internet has further spurred tremendous changes in how booksellers approach their business. All of these changes have met resistance from book professionals and readers who believe that the book business should not be captive to market forces, but should also embrace more noble priorities. Miller uses historical data and interviews with bookstore customers and members of the book industry to explain why books evoke such distinct and heated reactions. She reveals why customers seek out certain bookstores and why book professionals identify so strongly with different types of books. In the process, she also teases out the meanings of retailing and consumption in American culture at large, underscoring her point that consumer behavior is inevitably political, with consequences for communities as well as commercial institutions.