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The Marketplace of Ideas — Why Bookstores Matter

Being in a bookstore helps me to think. I find that my mind makes connections between authors and books and ideas as I walk along the shelves and look at the tables. When I get a case of writer's block, I head for a bookstore. The experience of walking among the books is curative.

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“Book stores are going away.” That is the conclusion reached by Mike Shatzkin, chief executive of Idea Logical Co., a consulting firm based in New York. Shatzkin offered his ominous prediction to *The Wall Street Journal* as that paper was reporting on the expected bankruptcy filing by Borders, one of the nation's largest book store chains.

That Chapter 11 filing came Wednesday, along with the announcement that the chain is closing about 200 stores — approximately 30 percent of Borders locations.

The decline and fall of Borders will be studied for years to come. The chain's management bears considerable responsibility for the crisis. They opened far too many locations, allowed many of their most important stores to grow old and unattractive, and reduced their inventory of titles. Beyond all that, the firm managed to miss out on the digital revolution, a branded e-reader, and the explosion of online book sales.

But even the best-managed book stores are in trouble. The emergence of Amazon as a vast, online book-selling machine with discounted prices and the sudden popularity of electronic readers and digital books have already changed the book business from top to bottom — and the revolution has hardly started.

Shatzkin offers a blunt assessment of the future: “I think that there will be a 50% reduction in bricks-and-mortar shelf space for books within five years, and 90% within 10 years.”

Seth Godin, a business writer, told the *Journal* that the travail of Borders is, as the paper reports, “the penultimate step in the demise of bookstores in general.”

The general wisdom seems to be that the bookstore will go the way of the record store and the video rental outlet. The bookstore may have been an important cultural asset in years past, many argue, but it has little place in a world of e-readers, online sales, and mega retailers like WalMart that deep-discount bestsellers.

Some go further and suggest that the demise of the bookstore is a signal of the demise of the book itself, at least as a printed product with pages between covers. That dystopian prophecy is almost surely overblown, but the book's survival in printed form does depend, to a considerable extent, upon the survival of bookstores.

The reason for this is simple. Printed books are physical objects that cry out to be handled even before they are read. The physicality of the book is important to the experience of the book itself. The arrangement and order of the words is supreme, but the appearance of the book and the feel of the book in the hand are also part of the reading experience.

Furthermore, the experience of handling the book is revealing in other important ways. The cover and front matter of books tell us something. We are informed by the “blurbs” on the cover and by the reputation of the publisher. We can



open the book and thumb through its pages, checking the table of contents, the index, the preface, and the dedication.

Mark Coker, chief executive of Smashwords Inc., an e-book company, told the *Journal* that when the physical space on the shelves of bookstores disappears, “it’s gone forever.” He added: “If you remove books from our towns and villages and malls, there will be less opportunity for the serendipitous discovery of books. And that will make it tougher to sell books.”

The loss of the bookstore will mean more than lost opportunities to sell books, however. For the last two centuries and more, bookstores and bookstalls have been centers for the dissemination of culture and ideas. The merging of the bookstore and the coffee shop brought two complementary cultural spaces together. Books are about ideas, and bookstores offer a rare context for meeting other people interested in ideas.

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I learn a great deal just by being in a good bookstore — and often even in a bad one. I have learned much by visiting a Maoist bookstore in Berkeley, Jewish bookstores in Brooklyn, the old Communist Party bookstore in central London, Muslim bookstores in Berlin, and the eccentric book shops of the Left Bank in Paris. I know cities by their bookstores. To visit Oxford, England without a trip to Blackwell’s is unforgivable — as is a visit to Oxford, Mississippi without a visit to Square Books.

You can learn a very great deal about a college or university by its bookstore and by the bookstores in its neighborhood. A walk through the Gothic Bookstore at Duke or the Seminary Co-op Bookstore at the University of Chicago is a walk through a feast of learning. The excellent bookstore on our campus is a vital part of our academic program and the learning experience. If the college you visit has a bookstore filled with t-shirts rather than books, find another college.

The rise and spread of the Christian bookstore has helped to fuel the explosion in Christian publishing. But, as with secular booksellers, much of the space in Christian bookstores these days seems given over to kitsch rather than to books. For many Christians, the local Christian bookstore is a lifeline to learning and growth.

Many of my most fruitful and important evangelistic conversations have occurred in bookstores. I frequent a few particular bookstores just because I know that a promising conversation about the Gospel might well happen.

I buy a frightful number of books from Amazon and other online booksellers. The ease of ordering and the convenience of home delivery are extraordinarily helpful. I have enjoyed the rise of the mega chains like Borders and Barnes & Noble. While these chains have faced criticism for pushing smaller stores out of business, they brought huge inventories that drew customers for good reason. I love the small independent bookstores, and I do considerable business with independent stores in Louisville precisely because I consider them to be important community assets.

My Kindle and iPad are filled with digital books, and the e-book will be one of the dominant book forms and formats of the future. When I need an e-book, a push of a button makes it happen. Who wouldn’t welcome that development? But the e-book is not the same as a physical book, and both the digital and the printed book have their own charms.

Mike Shatzkin thinks the handwriting is already on the wall — “Book stores are going away.” He may be right, but I hold out hope that he is not. If he is, it is far more than bookstores that we will lose.

I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler.

Mike Spector and Jeffrey A. Trachtenberg, “[Chapter 11 for Borders, New Chapter for Books](#),” *The Wall Street Journal*, Saturday/Sunday, February 11-12, 2011.

Jeffrey A. Trachtenberg and Paul Sonne, “[Borders’ Woes Help E-Books](#),” *The Wall Street Journal*, Monday, February

14, 2011.

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