

The Continuing Need for Gay Bookshops in the US and UK

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Abstract

The first gay bookshop opened in New York in 1967, and the bookselling industry has changed immensely since then. This study explains the needs fulfilled by gay bookshops historically and currently through exploring the concept of public space and its implications, the goals and achievements of gay-specific publishers and authors, the needs of gay readers, the book trade in general, and a case study of Gay's the Word, the last gay bookshop in the UK.

Research was undertaken to explain the decline in gay bookshops and emergence of gay publishers into the industry. It sought to illuminate the roles of gay bookshops, the ways gay publishing has changed since the late 1900s, and the likely futures of specialist gay book industry businesses. It was found that public space is essential to well-being, especially for minorities usually discriminated against. Gay publishers, authors, and readers are disconnected from gay booksellers in their goals and understanding of the industry. Independent bookshops across specialties and geographic locations are suffering from financial difficulties. Ultimately, gay bookshops are a source of public space for a persecuted minority not adequately served by gay publishers, but they are endangered like other independent bookshops.

Primary research centered on an interview and communications with the manager and assistant manager of Gay's the Word, Jim MacSweeney and Uli Lenart. Customers of independent bookshops were represented through surveys on book buying and fictional characters. Publishers' and authors' viewpoints were derived from existing literature, including transcribed interviews. Sales data was obtained from Nielsen BookScan.

The results of this study showed that gay bookshops are socially necessary but largely financially unviable. Possible solutions include government intervention, charity subsidies, and overhauling of the concept of bookselling and what an independent shop should look like and achieve.

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1. Introduction

The Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop (later changed to Oscar Wilde Bookshop), the first gay and lesbian bookseller, was opened in New York in 1967 by activist Craig Rodwell.¹ Rodwell named the shop after the author of *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, published in 1891. *The Picture of Dorian Grey* was widely censored based on obscenity laws such as England's Obscene Publications Act of 1857, and he was ultimately prosecuted on sodomy charges.² Just being gay was illegal, and Wilde's novel was perceived as tantamount to a written criminal confession.

By 1967, the selection of literary works written by openly gay authors was still quite small.³ The 1957 US Supreme Court decision in *Roth v. United States*, which found that "to be considered obscene, material must be judged in its entirety and not singled out for its content alone,"⁴ paved the way for invalidating bans on gay literature. Never the less, the bans were still occurring, only later to be overturned in court. Examples include a *ONE* magazine issue with a lesbian coming-out article that was seized by the US Post Office and *Howl and Other Poems* by Allen Ginsberg.⁵ Publishing literature with gay content was a legal and financial hazard, as well as a social hazard due to widespread homophobia.

Today, there are several publishing companies devoted solely to gay and lesbian authors and subject matter, such as the seasoned Alyson Books and newcomer Magnus Rising.⁶ Why, then, after this entrance into the marketplace of gay and lesbian publishers, did the Oscar Wilde Bookshop suffer from economic hardships for years, finally closing for good in 2009?⁷

The following research will show that, although they have an important social function, gay bookshops are no longer a viable business venture. Some argue they are no longer necessary⁸ while others lament the loss of a piece of the publishing "ecosystem."⁹ I sought to examine the relationship between specialized gay publishers and bookshops; however, the connection was surprisingly thin. Gay bookshops appeared before any gay publishers, and gay publishers seem capable of surviving in their near absence. The most obvious relationship arising from this study was that between gay bookshops and readers. Continuing homophobia, as well as segregation and marginalization of gay literature, make the lack of gay bookshops a detriment to gay people.

To get the full picture of gay bookselling, one must examine the publishers, the retailers, the authors, and the consumers, since each of these parties is necessary to bring life to a book. An important first step is to define these groups. However, terminology is difficult for this analysis because of negative connotations and a wide range of sexual identities. Taking a cue from Matt Houllbrook, vocabulary associated with a specific source

is left as is. In *Queer London*, he notes that “finding an appropriate vocabulary with which to discuss the historical organization of male sexual practices and identities is notoriously difficult”¹⁰ and chooses the term “queer” in his general discussion. Bronski also chooses “queer” in his *Queer History of the United States*.¹¹ I opt for the word “gay.” It is the term preferred by the majority of popular booksellers, such as Gay’s the Word, and therefore the best term to approach the topic. Here, “gay,” unless otherwise specified, will refer to homosexual men but, for the most part, will also include homosexual women. For purposes of scope, this research focuses on gay men and, only when the source does not differentiate, lesbians. Gender and sexual minority groups have very different experiences—historically, culturally, and socially—so, although there are many similarities between gender and sexual minority groups, it makes sense to focus on a more specific group. Where other gender and sexual minorities groups’ needs and experiences differ significantly from those of homosexual men, this paper will not pay specific attention to each group.

A gay bookstore is, on its face, a place that sells books “by, for, and about lesbian and gay people.”¹² It is owned or operated by gay people and stocks a variety of literature that might include, but cannot be limited to, pornography. Although there may be rare exceptions, books carried are penned by gay authors. This would be a writer who identifies as homosexual and whose work—all or some—contains gay themes. Customers and consumers of books from gay bookshops are predominantly gay as well. A gay publisher is a publishing company or imprint within a larger publishing company that is dedicated specifically to books by gay authors and/or containing gay themes. Gay themes include relationships between two people of the same gender, coming out, histories and sociological studies of homosexuality, and same-sex attraction. For example, a homosexual relationship may be at the center of the plot in a gay book, or at least a large part of it. Alternatively, one of the books’ characters may be in the process of embracing his sexuality and coming out.

Geographical focus is on the US and the UK. Because of the similarities in gay rights movements’ timelines in these countries, there are many parallels between them in the gay book trade. In fact, the sole existing gay bookshop in the UK today, Gay’s the Word in London, was modeled after Craig Rodwell’s shop in New York.¹³ The two shops also faced similar hardships keeping their doors open.¹⁴ I set out to study the Oscar Wilde Bookshop and why it failed but soon discovered the more interesting concept of Gay’s the Word and why it continues to operate.

At the heart of this study is the concept of public space, why gay people need their own spaces, what those spaces are, and how they operate. A gay bookshop is a particular sort of gay space, but there were already many in existence before the first gay bookshop. One benefit of a bookshop like the Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop or Gay’s the Word was the far less prominent focus on sex. The first gay spaces in London tended to be

clubs and bars used largely for meeting new sexual partners, but there was an obvious demand for platonic interactions between like-minded men who lacked the legal and social standing to openly congregate.¹⁵ Bookshops (not video stores or places to buy pornographic magazines) are places where “gayness” can be shared as an aspect of one’s identity and not just a sexual proclivity. Instead, the concept of “gayness” is defined as the state of being gay as well as characteristics that one interprets as his expression of his own gay identity. Jim MacSweeney, manager of Gay’s the Word, notes that “the range of people who come in [is] so different to a bar or club, so it’s full of surprises.”¹⁶

In other arenas of the book trade, gay publishers and authors have motivations that do not depend on gay bookshops and achievements based on completely different metrics. A gay publisher like Magnus Books, for example, would not want to depend on a single distribution channel for their books and use both mainstream and gay distributors. A gay author would not necessarily want to sign with a gay publisher because he may not write exclusively gay content or may be hoping for a larger audience than gay publishers tend to reach. The book publishing network is not self-contained; the gay book publishing network is even less so. Gay authors and publishers function, in part or completely, independently of gay bookshops, but gay bookshops depend entirely on gay authors and benefit from the existence of gay publishers.

A book is nothing without an audience. Although there are crossover titles and people interested in reading different material, the majority of consumers of gay books are gay readers. They have the same wants and needs as other book consumers but are not provided with the same level of selection as heterosexual readers when it comes to relatable protagonists and certain topics of interest. Specialized companies have the ability to target that deficit, but when those companies cease to operate, readers have other options, to be discussed in chapter 5. The options they choose can lead to wildly different reading experiences.

Bookshops have been in sharp decline, especially independents, for several years. In the US, independent booksellers’ market share fell from 24 percent in 1993 to 16 percent in 1999 to 13 percent in 2006.¹⁷ The international economic downturn, the rise of Amazon and other retail channels, and e-readers have contributed to this decline. Gay bookshops are affected by those same market drivers but also by the integration of gay culture into mainstream media. Deacon Maccubbin, one-time owner of the Oscar Wilde Bookshop and others, said in an interview that the work of gay bookshops is over because of the level of that integration.¹⁸

The main point of research surrounded the importance of gay booksellers, the consequences of their disappearance, and possible solutions for reviving and sustaining the specialist industry. This dissertation will explore the services offered by a gay bookshop that are impossible or difficult to find elsewhere. It will document the benefits

to publishers, authors, and readers and show what the market is losing. Finally, it will look at strategies bookshops have used to stay open and how these strategies could have applied to closed gay bookshops.

2. Literature Review

Because there are so few gay specialist bookshops, literature on the topic is sparse, almost limited to newspaper articles. Related literature examined includes that on gay rights, gay spaces, gay authors, the business of bookshops and publishers, and the changing marketplace. Articles about gay bookshops are often focused on closures or crises and contain an obvious bias toward the importance of such places.¹⁹ American writer David Bergman argues that gay literature has not had the same scholarly analysis as other genres such as Southern (USA), Jewish, and African American,²⁰ but his assertion seems to be a vast overstatement. It is true that, in a historical context, gay literature is a latecomer to academic research, but resources abound.²¹

2.1. Gay Rights

The Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop was born out of gay rights activism, so historical context is key to the study of gay bookshops. Michael Bronski's *A Queer History of the United States* and Tony Walton's *Out of the Shadows* provide different angles on gay history in the US and the UK, respectively. Bronski looks at a timeline that encompasses the whole of American history in a volume with an academic tone. He attributes his choice of the term "queer" to the US's unlikely mix of people and ideals. It is "a great country, an evil country, a place of tremendous generosity and welcome as well as pronounced disdain for foreigners and outsiders."²² Walton compiles a series of essays about gay social groups in the UK since 1968.

Both Bronski and Walton present a picture of increasing legal rights but clearly show the continued disparity in the legal and social treatment of homosexuals to date in the US and the UK. In the UK, homosexuality was decriminalized in 1968,²³ and by the late 1970s, twenty states in the US had repealed their sodomy laws.²⁴ Decriminalization, however, did not mean equal rights. What it does mean is that only in the latter half of the twentieth century was it even legal to be a gay author. Writing literature on the topic was equivalent to confessing to a crime. Openly gay writings, therefore, are new to the scene.

In fact, today in the US, gay men are still prohibited from giving blood on the assumption that they are at high risk for contracting HIV.²⁵ Only in 2003 (*Lawrence v. Texas*) did the US Supreme Court invalidate sodomy laws in several holdout states. Marriage equality remains an issue in the US and passed in the UK during the writing of this paper.²⁶ Northern Ireland struck down a gay marriage bill earlier in the year.²⁷

2.2. Gay Spaces

Cities and urbanization shape gay identity. Without cities, the gay identity and social sphere would not exist. In rural areas, farms were highly dependent on the heteronormative nuclear family unit. Socialization outside of the family was limited, and

being an unmarried individual living on one's own was a virtual impossibility. Houlbrook points this idea out in the context of London, where Gay's the Word stands today; the same applies to Greenwich Village, where Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop used to operate. Houlbrook's example of Cyril in 1930s London describes "the space for an active social life—access to the sites of public drinking, dining, and entertainment." However, he warns, "simplistic invocations of urbanization as a liberating agent or the city as a queer space efface very real experiences of the city as alienating, disruptive, and dangerous."²⁸

Bronski discusses San Francisco in the mid- to late 1800s as a place conducive to "nonnormative sexuality and gender" whose more permissive atmosphere was influenced by the majority male population (as much as 99 percent) and its economic success.²⁹ Like Houlbrook, Bronski recognizes that urbanization allows for gay social interaction and identity. The lack of women in San Francisco during that time encouraged nonconformist public socialization. Same-sex dancing and cross-dressing in entertainment venues were common. Not only are gay people able to live fuller lives in cities, they benefit from a society in which the heteronormative nuclear family unit is not an economic necessity. For gender and sexual minority groups, a free labor economic environment allows for financial independence for single men and women.

Academic journal articles helped in the understanding of public space as a concept. Cattell et al. used case studies in the article "Mingling, Observing, and Lingering: Everyday Public Spaces and Their Implications for Well-Being and Social Relations,"³⁰ and Goodsell's "The Concept of Public Space and Its Democratic Manifestations" sought to definitively describe public space and its forms.³¹ Cattell et al. informed on the importance of comfortable public spaces for minorities, and Goodsell helped to develop a concrete structure of a somewhat illusive concept. Specifics on gay public spaces and gay people's status as an underserved minority could be gleaned from newspaper articles and blogs, since there was no literature found specific to gay spaces.

2.3. Gay Authors

Gay Fiction Speaks, primarily a printed volume of transcripts from interviews with gay authors, presents some insight into the authors' viewpoints. The foreword, written by David Bergman, discusses what it means to be a gay author, to write gay literature. There seems to be an expectation on gay authors that they promote some kind of social activism. Some authors seem to embrace this idea while others, especially James Purdy, refuses to write literature "that treat[s] being gay like you were finally able to join such a comfortable club" and doesn't recognize the burden set upon gay people by society. Many gay novels, he argues, are "all subject; no content," written about gay themes instead of with compelling characters and insight into reality. The definition of a gay author is tenuous. "Even in the mid-eighties, editors were nervous about using such a term as 'gay author' ... because they were afraid their journals would be sued for libel."³² However,

there has been a change and writers were indirectly but significantly affected, according to Bergman; he does not go into detail regarding the nature of that change.

AIDS is a topic that arises often in Canning's interviews. "Homophobia may have created the category of 'gay writer' as a way of containing such representations, but AIDS has been the event that makes such a category salient."³³ The ban on gay male blood donation referred to in section 2.1 shows the continued stigma attached to homosexuality, especially homosexual males and how AIDS, decades after huge advances in research, remains an important aspect of a gay man's life experience. Even Levin's *In the Pink*, essentially a how-to for would-be entrepreneurs, has an entire chapter on "The Business of AIDS."³⁴ One would be hard pressed to find a general business book of the same extent (152 pages) devoting an entire chapter to AIDS. However, in the context of gay and lesbian entrepreneurship, Levin deems it an essential point.

A passage in Thompson's *Merchants of Culture* speaks to author motivations in general. "For many writers," it states, "what matters more than anything else is what other writers think." Thompson supports this assertion with a quote about authors inspiring authors, attributed to "one young writer in Brooklyn,"³⁵ which is arguably quite unconvincing. What he does manage to show is the disconnect between author motives and publisher motives, from which one might gleaned that gay publishers may not be the champions of gay authors which I initially expected to be the case.

2.4. The Business of Bookshops and Publishers

Levin dedicated a large portion of the first chapter of *In the Pink* to the success of Deacon Maccubbin, proprietor of Lambda Rising and one-time owner of the Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop. Fast-forward to 2010, and both places are out of business.³⁶ Business know-how is clearly not enough to keep a specialist gay bookshop open. Nor is it sufficient to keep many other independents open. The business of publishing, and therefore bookselling, in the US and the UK has changed immensely in the past few decades. *Merchants of Culture* goes into the detail around those changes and, in the last chapter, "Trouble in the Trade," the author announces he will step away from the objectively factual tone of the book to expound on his own judgments on the direction of publishing, but his views are quite clear throughout. For example, he describes the decrease of independent bookshops in the 1980s and 1990s as "precipitous" and "much lamented."³⁷

Thompson's book directly corroborates many of my findings in terms of the decrease in independent bookshops. Between the opening of Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop and the establishment of Amazon, independent bookshops were decimated. He also addresses the switch to "short-termism"³⁸ in publishing and bookselling, where the focus shifted from a steady backlist to a quick-selling frontlist during the same time period as the shift in retailers. *Merchants of Culture* also goes into legal avenues used by

small bookshops, but lawsuits against Amazon, the major chains, and the publishers accused of price discrimination were largely unfruitful. The Robinson–Patman Act, US legislation passed in 1936,³⁹ was used in court to argue that publishers and chains were engaging in practices that limited competition by entering into more favorable deals than the smaller shops could acquire. The American Booksellers Association sued several publishers under this logic, as well as major chains Barnes & Noble and Borders. In all cases, the publishers and chains settled with the American Booksellers Association out of court, but no one admitted to any wrongdoing and the monetary gains were unsubstantial.

Bradley's *The British Book Trade* is a collection of transcribed interview extracts. Although full of valuable anecdotes, it is somewhat disjointed in structure. That makes sense, since the book is identified as “an oral history.”⁴⁰ Interviewees reflect on decades of their own experience, and paint pictures of a very different world of publishing than the one we see today. From a new employee struggling to navigate wholesaler Simpkin Marshall's massive warehouse in 1952 to an editor's musings on how Amazon might have been a benefit in selling embarrassing titles, *The British Book Trade* provided a less structured and purely anecdotal contextual backdrop for the changing face of book selling.

3. Methodology

Initial research was approached with a broad scope. At the proposal stage, the Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop was at the center, but I sought to delay cementing objectives until extensive reading and a visit to Gay's the Word. Taking advantage of the UK's sole remaining gay bookshop to shape my reading and realizing that the most salient aspect of this topic surrounds success and not failure, the focus quickly shifted to Gay's the Word. The two shops are intricately related, so both were studied.

Gay rights movements in the US and the UK were similarly timed and have had many commonalities. Internationally, there is a broad range of legal and social acceptance of homosexuals—from Denmark, where gay marriage has been legal since 1989,⁴¹ to Uganda, where lawmakers seriously considered a bill proposing the death penalty for homosexuality from 2009 to 2012.⁴² The US and the UK vary significantly regarding gay rights and attitudes but are both far behind Denmark in legal recognition and, fortunately, miles ahead of Uganda. To explore the print media and bookselling in gay communities worldwide would present an undertaking beyond the scope of this research, so for the most part, this paper is geographically exclusive of all countries outside the US and the UK.

As the introduction mentions, the vocabulary of sexuality and gender is vast and tricky. The focus of this paper is on men who are primarily attracted to men, sexually and romantically. Most gay bookshops expand their purview beyond this group, with all examples studied at least containing content for homosexual women, but historically and culturally, the experience of a gay man is distinct from that of a gay woman. To expand study to all gender and sexual minorities would require a much larger platform than this paper. However, with the understanding that humans experience sexuality on a continuum and that gender and sexual minority communities are often closely related in terms of legal rights and social acceptance, the focus on gay men is not exclusive of other gender and sexual minority groups.

3.1. Interviews and Correspondence

At the proposal stage, the following interviewees were considered.

- Fred Sargeant, first manager of the Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop and Craig Rodwell's partner;
- Larry Lingle, owner of the Oscar Wilde Bookshop from 1996 to 2003;
- Deacon Maccubbin, owner of the Oscar Wilde Bookshop from 2003 to 2006 and Lambda Rising;
- Kim Brinster, manager and last owner of the Oscar Wilde Bookshop;
- Don Weise, a publisher for Alyson Books and founder of Magnus Books;
- Sasha Alyson, founder of Alyson Books; and

- Jim MacSweeney and Uli Lenart manager and assistant manager of Gay's the Word.

Fred Sargeant, Larry Lingle, Kim Brinster, and Sasha Alyson were not successfully contacted. Deacon Maccubbin was found and contacted via Twitter but did not respond. Don Weise was reached via email and agreed to answer questions by email but did not follow up. Jim MacSweeney and Uli Lenart were both contacted in person at Gay's the Word. Additional contacts included:

- Jim Baker, director of Querverlag;
- Nicolas Rupp, representative for Michael Jensen and David Powers King, authors of *Woven*;
- Philip Rafshoon, who opened *Outwrite*; and
- Catherine Baker, owner of The Melton Bookshop.

Jim Baker was contacted at Frankfurt Book Fair, Nicolas Rupp by phone, and Philip Rafshoon and The Melton Bookshop on Twitter, by tweet and direct message, respectively. The latter two did not respond.

MacSweeney agreed to sit down for a full, recorded interview (transcribed in appendix A). In retrospect, the interview's tone could have been more neutral. At times, it showed personal bias. For example, the statement "I think it's awesome," while perhaps beneficial to forming a rapport with the subject, was not that of an academic observer. At other times, such as when asking about Deacon Maccubbin's statement that gay culture is now mainstream enough to make gay bookshops obsolete,⁴³ the tone may have been too adversarial. Although the tone may have benefited from increased neutrality, both the positive bias revealed and requests for justification of the shop's existence probably contributed to a more colorful picture being painted by MacSweeney.

3.2. Selecting Authors, Publishers, and Bookshops

The gay authors discussed in this paper and researched on Nielsen BookScan were those interviewed in Canning's *Gay Fiction Speaks*, those mentioned during the interview with Jim MacSweeney,⁴⁴ and those featured under "gay fiction" on the Gay's the Word website:⁴⁵ Andre Aciman, Naomi Alderman, Eric Karl Anderson, Michael Arditti, Neil Bartlett, David Bergman, Dennis Cooper, Alasdair Duncan, Drew Ferguson, Patrick Gale, Allan Gurganus, Catherine Hall, Aaron Hamburger, Nick Huddle, Andrew Holleran, Alan Hollinghurst, Tennessee Jones, Amjeed Kabil, Denis Kehoe, Jonathan Kemp, Randall Kenan, Kevin Killian, Mikhail Kuzmin, David Leavitt, Jose Luis de Juan, Douglas A. Martin, Armistead Maupin, Anthony McDonald, Mark Merlis, Ethan Mordden, Felice Picano, James Purdy, John Rechy, Max Schaefer, Rupert Smith, Colm Toibin, Sarah Waters, Edmund White, and Jeanette Winterson.

Neil McKenna, interviewed for a documentary on *Gay's the Word*,⁴⁶ and Michael Jensen, whose story is discussed in chapter 2 of this volume, were also researched, for a total of forty-one authors. Not all books sold in gay bookshops are novels, but focusing on novelists meshes well with reader surveys, which are further described in section 3.3.

Alyson Books, as the first gay publisher, was an obvious choice, but it is difficult to get a definitive list of all gay publishing companies. At the proposal stage, the two companies of focus were Alyson Books and Magnus Books. Any gay publishers that appeared on Nielsen BookScan results for the above authors were also investigated, totaling eight publishers. Other than Alyson and Magnus, I looked at BIGfib Books, Bold Strokes Books, Chelsea Station Editions, Gay Men's Press, Hard Candy, and Soft Skull Press.

The two main bookshops researched were the Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop in New York City, because it was the first in the US, and *Gay's the Word* in London, because it is the last standing in the UK. There were also several famous gay bookshops—all in North America—that came up in the research. Glad Day Bookshop opened in Ontario, Canada but expanded to an additional site in Boston, Massachusetts. Others include Lambda Rising (Washington, D.C. and Baltimore, Maryland), A Different Light (Los Angeles, California, Greenwich Village, New York, and San Francisco, California), and Outwrite (Atlanta, Georgia).

3.3. Surveys and Social Media

For gathering some data on the needs of readers, a survey was used on the topic of book buying in general (appendix B.1). Ideally, it would have had enough responses from people identifying as gay to isolate and analyze those responses. The first survey launched (appendix B.1.1) was on the website FreeOnlineSurveys.com and was distributed via social media. It was posted on Facebook, where friends and family, including others on the MA publishing course, were the audience. It was also posted on Twitter, where the majority of my followers are publishing-related people and companies. The third and fourth platforms were my two blogs, my publishing blog and my personal blog, whose audiences are similar to the Facebook audience. Finally, in hopes of garnering more responses from people identifying as gay, the survey was posted on forums in online support group website DailyStrength. In a few instances, a link to the survey was shared with people directly via email or other one-on-one online communication. The distribution of responses by source was:

- fourteen from Facebook, including Facebook mobile;
- four from DailyStrength;
- three from direct referral; and
- two from my personal blog.

Obviously, Facebook was the most successful platform, while Twitter and my publishing blog yielded no responses. Tumblr proved immensely useful for a fellow researcher, but StumbleUpon, which was used in my first survey (including paid discovery), proved to be an ineffectual option. Paid discovery brought hundreds to my publishing blog, specifically to my request for survey respondents, but the increased traffic did not lead to any completed surveys. A stronger social media presence, including on Tumblr, would have likely improved my results, while the use of StumbleUpon was a waste of resources.

The next survey (appendix B.1.2) was similar to the first but launched on Instant.ly by uSamp. FreeOnlineSurveys does not have their own list of respondents, so the researcher is responsible for providing her own. Instant.ly, on the other hand, provides guaranteed responses for payment. They collected twenty-one responses from a sample without restrictions. That is, it was not possible on Instant.ly to limit responses to gay participants, and I opted not to exclude female participants. Although the focus of this dissertation is on gay men, both samples included males and females regardless of sexual identity. Unlike the first survey, the Instant.ly survey had fewer questions (to decrease costs) and no open-ended responses at the end.

The twenty-three respondents on FreeOnlineSurveys were offered the option of providing an email address for a follow-up survey. It was anticipated that data gleaned from the first could lead to additional questions. The third survey (appendix B.2.1) launched was on FreeOnlineSurveys and asked respondents about their similarities to fictional characters in their reading. The audience for this survey included those who gave email addresses in response to the first survey, my Twitter followers, and anyone referred by those two groups. As anticipated, the response rate was lower, with only six completed responses. All were directly referred.

The fourth and final survey (appendix B.2.2) was similar to the third but launched on Instant.ly. While the fictional characters survey on FreeOnlineSurveys was only one question, the Instant.ly fictional characters survey was longer. I had limited the number of questions in the former to encourage more responses, but Instant.ly respondents were paid for their answers, and the cost is the same for three questions as it is for one. Therefore, it made more sense to gather additional details from individuals reimbursed for their time. There were forty completed responses.

One important element of the surveys was the self-identification of the sexuality of the respondents. The delicacy of language in the context of human sexuality is discussed throughout this paper. The surveys were intended to gather data on all readers while also allowing focus on gay men, as per the focus of this research, and gender and sexual minority people in general. The ideal survey question would:

- include each respondent's preferred term for self-identification;⁴⁷

- keep the list relatively short to encourage participants to read and answer each question;⁴⁸
- encompass a broad range of people; and
- include a free-response option for those uncomfortable with common labels.⁴⁹

The resulting list, which drew upon these criteria, the totality of secondary research, and university resources such as UC Berkeley Gender Equity Resource Center, was asexual, bisexual, gay, lesbian, pansexual, questioning, queer, and straight. There were also options to refrain from answering or enter one's own preferred term.

For the types of bookshops listed in the book buying surveys, the goal was to list as many common types of bookshops as made sense to include. Here, I was somewhat less concerned with conciseness, since I was asking the participants to look back over a period of a year, and I expected that seeing the type of bookshop they had visited on a list would help spark their memories. To create the list, I looked at online recommendation lists of bookshops in London, New York, and Oxford and compiled a list of the types of bookshops included in those lists of recommendations.⁵⁰ The resulting list was: academic, antiquarian, chain, charity, children's geography, history, LGBTQ, music, online-only, ebooks, other independent, religious, remainder, science, secondhand, travel, and university.⁵¹ There was also an option for none of those listed and a free-response option.

With additional funds, the two survey topics could have been explored further and may have produced strong evidence of trends. With the time and money constraints of this research, responses were valuable, but more so as individual questionnaires than representative samples of the total population.

3.4. Nielsen BookScan Limitations

As mentioned in section 3.2, Nielsen BookScan was used to research authors and publishers. The time period considered was 2001 through the second quarter of 2013. Nielsen BookScan is a good source of quantitative data from a third party, but there are noteworthy limitations. First, only UK data is available. This can be seen as a major drawback for analyzing the industry across the UK and the US, as this paper does, but many of the authors and publishers singled out are American, and it is common for a single literary fiction title to sell in both countries (through rights sales or different territorial contracts).

In cases where a book is published by multiple publishers, for instance a US and a UK publisher, it is counted as two "titles," not one. Because this paper differentiates based on the publisher, and because Nielsen differentiates based on ISBN (International Standard Book Number), each unique ISBN is considered a separate title for the purposes of chapter 2 analysis. An author may have separate contracts for the editions, but to a bookshop, the difference between versions is likely irrelevant.

Unlike the limitations present in the surveys described earlier, Nielsen is much more authoritative as a representation of the consumer market in general. Their database is extensive, and the opportunity for bias is low. Even so, it is true that some titles are more likely to sell on Amazon or through another sales channel that is not included in Nielsen data. It is also a very significant possibility that the titles searched would have sold many more or fewer books in the US than in the UK. Still, Nielsen data is sufficiently expansive and unbiased to be used for trends and comparisons.

4. Public Space

For the purposes of this study, a public space is a physical location where people can gather and discuss their ideas and opinions, similar to Goodsell's place-bound public space, defined as a "space-time continuum for connected and interactive political discourse consisting of face-to-face interaction in a single physical location."⁵² Cattell et al. used a similar but more socially than politically targeted definition. Public spaces are sites of "sociability and face-to-face interaction," and their quality is "commonly perceived to be a measure of the quality of urban life."⁵³

4.1. Types of Public Space

Public spaces include, but are not limited to, restaurants, theaters, and bookshops. Urbanization spawns a myriad of new public spaces and allows for groups to connect that previously would have had limited socialization.⁵⁴ Cities, where belonging to a heteronormative family unit is no longer a necessity, allow for single people to operate independently of their parents and support themselves financially and socially.⁵⁵ Single gay people living on their own in urban settings have more opportunities to explore their sexual identity and meet other gay people.

State-sponsored spaces may or may not allow for or encourage public discourse. It often depends on the architecture, atmosphere, and décor.⁵⁶ Goodsell's examples of state-sponsored public spaces are city halls and US state government cabinet rooms, but a library or school could just as easily qualify as a state-sponsored space. Sites of political speech are not inherently different from sites of nonpolitical speech. In the context of gay public spaces, speech that would not qualify as political for any other group, such as discussions of sex and family, can be seen as political in nature. Laws in the US and UK have discriminated, and continue to discriminate, against homosexuality,⁵⁷ so social speech among gay people often contains political themes. In a state-sponsored public space, there is an increased possibility that limits will be placed on openness and free discourse.⁵⁸ Privately owned public spaces are also susceptible to limited openness, however, since trespassing laws often allow for indiscriminate exclusion of individuals from private buildings or real property.⁵⁹ (Note that for the purposes of this research, openness is discussed in its intangible atmospheric context, rather than its alternate definition of literal, architectural openness.)

Shopping venues are an important source of public interaction, especially in areas where larger, state-sponsored venues are sparse or nonexistent. They are often used "to stroll or to sit down on benches to eat lunch"⁶⁰ and to build a sense of community. In London, "commercial space was integral to the formation of queer social networks"⁶¹ in the 1930s, and various commercial venues such as bars and clubs are still important meeting places for gay social interaction.⁶² Similarly, other minorities use shopping

venues to communicate with each other in a relaxed environment. For example, Green Street in London attracted “Asian older people who were not confident speaking English.”⁶³ On that shopping street, they had the ability to converse with each other and could therefore be more relaxed and comfortable expressing themselves and socializing. Shopping venues allow for casual socialization, sometimes leading to long-term casual relationships, as well as the option for isolation.⁶⁴ One can be anonymous and away from everyday settings and obligations without actually cutting oneself off from public life and other people.

A public space need not necessarily be place-based. Many communities, especially those spread out geographically, have migrated to the internet for socialization. Goodsell defined electronic public space as a “space-time continuum for connected and interactive political discourse achieved at dispersed geographic locations through information technology.” When that information is “broadcast by television, radio, internet, or other means,” it falls under extended public space.⁶⁵ In an age where extended public space is so readily accessible, the importance of place-bound public space may be questioned. It is much less expensive and time-consuming for like-minded individuals to congregate over the internet than to meet face-to-face. Online social networks catering specifically to gay audiences include Only Lads, I’m Gay So!, and GayVibes.⁶⁶ These sites range from dating (Only Lads) to professional (I’m Gay So!) to general social interaction (GayVibes), but according to Alexa data, do not attract large amounts of traffic. The most popular of the three, Only Lads, for example, is ranked 23,000 (approx.) in the UK.⁶⁷ Of course, gay groups on more popular general social networking sites can attract more visitors.

4.2. Discrimination and Public Spaces

The discrimination faced by gays has often been compared to that experienced by racial minorities and the gay liberation movement in the US linked to the civil rights movement of the 1960s.⁶⁸ Public spaces can actually heighten racial discrimination. Cattell et al. gave an example of a neighborhood where ethnic minority groups experienced “problems which they believed had a major impact upon their physical and mental health.”⁶⁹ In early London, men in public spaces “entered into an ongoing conflict with the Met [Metropolitan Police] and LCC [London County Council].”⁷⁰ Groups that meet with discrimination in mainstream public spaces suffer emotionally—even physically—and benefit from alternative spaces. Maximum health benefits can be obtained when a place allows people to feel comfortable and is perceived as being pleasant.⁷¹

Homophobia remains an issue today. MacSweeney reflected on some instances when it affected Gay’s the Word:

I’m thinking of, in the London riots two years ago ... we were the only bookshop in London to have our windows smashed, a homophobic thing. You know, when

I'm cleaning spit off the windows, when I get stuff on the windows or comments outside, you're aware there is an irritant, visibility, you know, so you're aware of the homophobia that's outside. People uncomfortable walking around. So, while we've won ... huge levels of acceptance in some ways, in others ... many people are hugely disturbed, and the struggle still goes on.

Despite continuing homophobia and even direct attacks to the shop, MacSweeney remains confident in Gay's the Word as a safe meeting space (further discussed in section 7.1), clarifying his statements about hate incidents with, "Most of the time it's fine. I don't even think about it."⁷²

5. Gay Publishers and Authors and Their Audiences

MacSweeney makes a point about his own reading habits rhetorically. “It’s not about someone who’s an Irish gay man. Why would I want to read it?”⁷³ He posits that good writing will attract readers, and that is why some gay literature crosses over to mainstream audiences.

5.1. Gay Publishers Versus Other Independent Publishers Versus Industry Titans

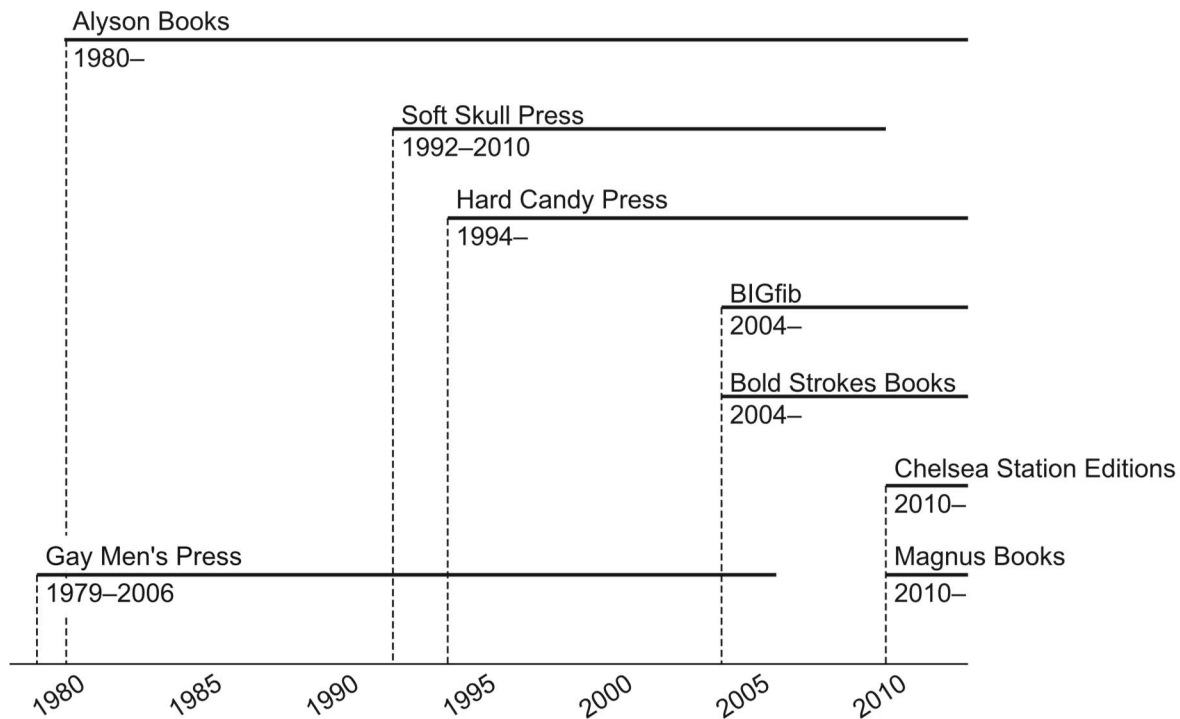


Figure 5.1. Timeline of gay publishers examined through 2013. Selection criteria for publishers to focus on are described in section 3.2.

Eight gay publishers were selected for further research (see section 3.2) and are shown on a timeline (figure 5.1) of their operation. Figure 5.2 shows a proxy of their financial situation from 2001 to 2012 using Nielsen sales data. Although six of the eight publishing companies remain in operation to date, their combined retail physical book sales are clearly on the decline. It is important to note that most trade publishers have taken hits to printed book sales since the recession of 2008.⁷⁴ Gay publishers began declining prior to that time. Sales figures for Alyson Books, for example, the oldest and most successful gay publishing house to date, began a steep downward trend in 2007. Gay Men’s Press saw an earlier downturn, beginning in 2004 (figure 5.2). Gay Men’s

Press folded in 2006 and, although still in operation, Alyson Books ended print book production in 2010.⁷⁵

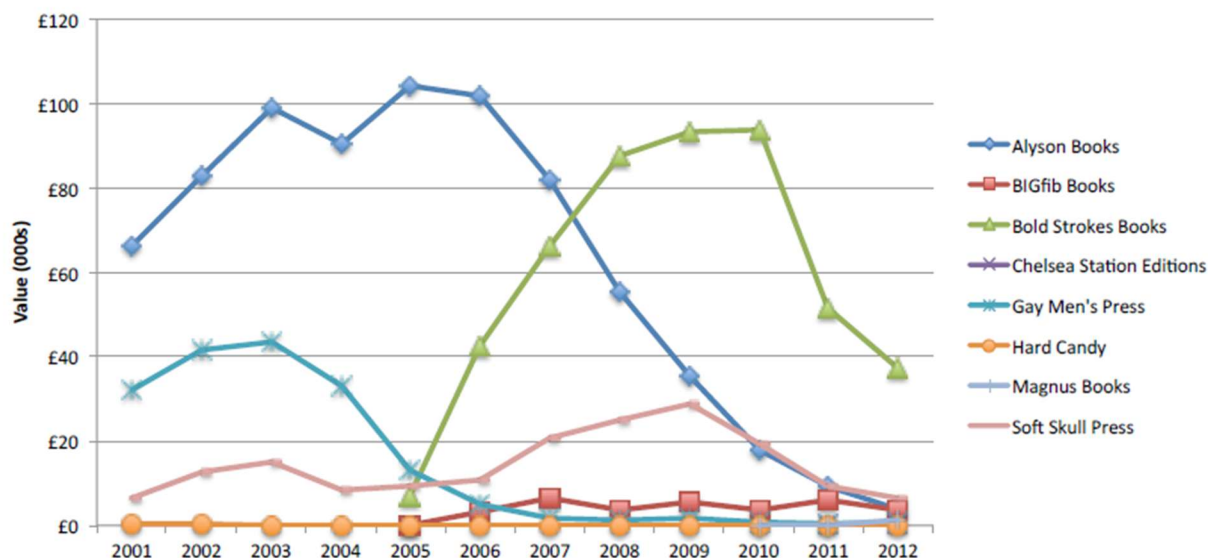


Figure 5.2. Book retail sales by year for eight gay publishers according to Nielsen BookScan (TCM). This chart includes all titles for the publishers named, as opposed to tables 5.1 and 5.2, which show limited data based on author and genre. See section 3.4 for more information on Nielsen BookScan data gathered and its limitations.

Out of 730 titles researched (see section 3.2 for selection criteria), only thirty were published by a gay publisher. This means that an average gay author—at least of the forty-one researched—only releases 4 percent of his titles with a gay publisher. “Genre fiction” was the most likely to be published by a gay publisher (17 percent), followed by “the world / ideas / culture: general interest,” “literature, poetry & criticism,” and “biographies & autobiographies,” each published with a gay publisher for 6 percent of titles. The most common product class, “fiction general,” was only 3 percent likely to be published by a gay publisher.

See tables 5.1 and 5.2 for more detail. Not surprisingly, the most common class of genre fiction published with a gay publisher was “erotic fiction.” There is an expectation that gay erotic fiction written by a gay writer “will only be read by lesbians and gays,”⁷⁶ so it makes sense that these titles would be predominantly published by companies catering to a gay audience. However, even erotic fiction titles were only published by a gay publisher 40 percent of the time.

Of the forty-one gay authors researched, the two most successful in terms of UK sales are Sarah Waters and Patrick Gale (Nielsen BookScan). Waters is a gay woman whose protagonists are consistently gay women. On the other hand, Gale is a gay man whose protagonists span a range of genders and sexualities. Gay’s the Word, according to MacSweeney’s guidelines, would stock only some of Gale’s work. The bulk of both authors’ titles are classed under General & Literary Fiction by Nielsen and would be sold

in bookshops as such, not on a designated gay literature shelf. Neither author achieved their sales volume through a gay publisher. (Waters’s primary publisher is Little, Brown, and Gale’s is HarperCollins.)

Nielsen Product Class 2	Gay Publishers	All Others	Total
Fiction General	15	423	438
Biographies & Autobiographies	3	49	52
Genre Fiction	9	43	52
Literature, Poetry & Criticism	2	32	34
The Arts	0	33	33
The World / Ideas / Culture: General Interest	1	16	17
Other / Unclassifiable	0	104	104
Total	30	700	730

Table 5.1. Nielsen BookScan 2001–2Q2013 TCM: counts of titles by gay authors. See section 3.2 for a complete list of authors included in this data. The first column uses Nielsen BookScan classification terminology. See section 3.4 for more information on Nielsen BookScan data gathered and its limitations.

Nielsen Product Class 3	Gay Publishers	All Others	Total
Erotic Fiction	4	6	10
Crime, Thriller & Adventure	2	4	6
Science Fiction & Fantasy	1	3	4
Historical & Mythological Fiction	1	21	22
Romance & Sagas	1	7	8
Horror & Ghost Stories	0	2	2
Total	9	43	52

Table 5.2. Nielsen BookScan 2001–2Q2013 TCM Genre Fiction: counts of titles by gay authors. See section 3.2 for a complete list of authors included in this data. The first column uses Nielsen BookScan classification terminology. Table 5.2 is a subset of the data in table 5.1, and Nielsen Product Class 3 is a drilldown of Nielsen Product Class 2. See section 3.4 for more information on Nielsen BookScan data gathered and its limitations.

5.2. “Casual Homophobia”

Gay authors, even those who write niche gay erotic fiction, have had success being published by mainstream and other publishers in addition to specialist gay publishers. Arguably, then, gay publishers may not serve a more vital function than any other publisher. Perhaps mainstream companies can easily satisfy the need for gay literature. However, mainstream publishers like Portobello and Penguin often camouflage gay books with covers that imply characters adhering to gender norms and heterosexual relationships, like Catherine Hall’s *The Proof of Love* and Naomi Alderman’s *The Lessons* (figure 5.3). These titles were published in 2011 and 2012. MacSweeney characterized the way that mainstream publishers “de-gay” the covers and blurbs of books with gay content as “casual homophobia.”⁷⁷ Some of the authors he communicates with have trouble finding a publisher to sign them at all. Therefore, gay publishers continue to

provide an avenue for authors to reach an audience uncensored, without the whitewash that large publishers might use.

Other instances of homophobia in the publishing industry are currently not being helped by gay publishers, who focus on gay content. Gay authors, even those who write books without any gay content whatsoever, continue to face difficulties. A topical example is Michael Jensen's experience with his new fantasy novel *Woven*, which he co-wrote with David Powers King. King, in his author bio, included that he lived with his wife and children. Jensen, similarly, included that he lived with his boyfriend and dogs. Sweetwater Books removed the mention of Jensen's boyfriend. Although Jensen offered to change the word "boyfriend" to "partner," Sweetwater would not budge and opted to drop the book.⁷⁸ Because *Woven* has no gay content, Jensen's options may be limited. However, many publishers approached Jensen and King afterward. In fact, they found it unnecessary to actively seek a publisher due to the volume of offers.⁷⁹ Jensen's story illustrates both lingering homophobia in some publishing houses and the range of options for gay authors.



Figure 5.3. "De-gayed" book covers. Although both of these novels center on gay characters, their covers and blurbs give no indication of gay content. Images reproduced under fair use for educational purposes.

5.3. Publisher-Author Relations

An independent publisher, whether specializing in gay literature or not, has more freedom to champion individual authors but less capital to do so. Larger public companies are responsible to their shareholders, and continuous growth is seen as the ideal business model. Publishing houses owned privately by larger corporations have similar pressures to increase profits year over year.⁸⁰ Some authors are savvy to the mechanisms in place at a typical publisher, but many “know very little about the world of publishing and the structures of the field upon which their careers ... depend.”⁸¹ Writers are often more concerned with their art, the quality of their product,⁸² and the opinion of other writers than they are with how it is produced and sold.⁸³ An author primarily in search of renown and profits is also unlikely to linger on the publishing process and will depend on an agent to handle that aspect of his career. However, the relationship between author and his agent or editor is one of “mutual dependency rather than a seamless convergence of interests.”⁸⁴ Writers have a more lasting relationship with each other and their readers than with their publishers or even their agents.

Felice Picano, the author most likely in the sample to publish with a gay publisher (thirteen of twenty-eight titles), actually published with multiple gay publishers. Going in to this research, it was expected that an author publishing often with a gay publisher would have a relationship with that publisher, but Picano’s books have been published by Bold Strokes Books, Hard Candy Press, Alyson Books, and Chelsea Station Editions, as well as several mainstream publishers.

5.4. Reader Expectations

Gay books crossing over in to mainstream audiences does not seem to be as important to publishers and authors as it is to readers. Jim Baker, director of German gay publisher Querverlag (Although Querverlag is German, Baker is English.), indicated his priority was to serve his current audience with quality literature and to disregard crossover when considering market strategy.⁸⁵ If other gay publishers have similar goals to Baker, it makes sense that they would not seek to publish primarily erotic fiction, which is seen as catering to the lowest common denominator.

Meanwhile, about 52 percent of readers surveyed indicated they prefer for the characters they read about to be similar to them in terms of sexual orientation. The rest of the respondents—nearly half—either preferred characters different to themselves or a mix of sexualities among protagonists in books they read. Ninety percent of those surveyed identified as straight. Although those identifying as straight were more likely to indicate that they prefer straight protagonists (61 percent), there were still many who preferred variety. In fact, 8 percent of straight survey respondents preferred to read about characters whose sexual orientation differed from their own. Obviously, there is a

significant demand for gay content among straight readers. See appendix B.2 and section 3.3 for survey questions and other information.

When it comes to sources of literature, readers have several options (More recent changes in those options will be further addressed in chapter 6.), including other leisure activities. Seven percent of survey respondents reported they did not visit any booksellers in the past year, including online-only retailers like Amazon.⁸⁶ When people do make purchases, they are doing so online or in large chain stores. Sixty-six percent of respondents were most likely to shop at either a chain bookshop or online, and 59 percent of respondents made the bulk of their purchases that way. After those, the most popular outlets were secondhand shops and university/academic shops, the former of which has an edge on price competition and the latter of which arguably tends to have a captive audience in students and a desirable location on a university campus. The number of visits to independent bookshops were dwarfed by the visits to other, larger retailers (figure 5.4).

One teen respondent identifying as bigender queer noted, “I love to read books and visit the library frequently to amass knowledge and understanding especially involving the LGBT community and the learning thereof.”⁸⁷ Although this paper does not explore libraries in depth, they can be considered a state-sponsored public space, as discussed in section 4.1, and are facing many of the same difficulties as independent bookshops. Although the causes and nature of these difficulties are outside of the scope of this research, the trouble facing libraries does affect readers’ options for obtaining gay literature. This is especially true for younger readers and those with limited financial resources.

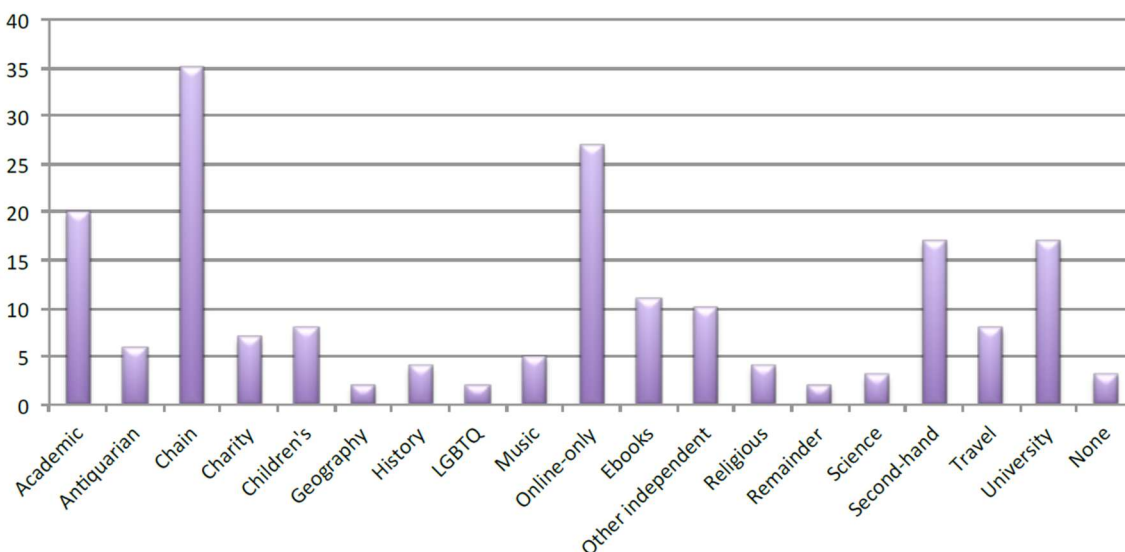


Figure 5.4. Visits to bookshops. Survey participants were asked, “What type of bookshop have you visited in the past year?” See appendix B.1 and section 3.3.

5.5. Digital Developments

Many of the publishers researched have had an increased focus on ebooks in recent years. Alyson Books went completely digital in 2010. That is, they stopped publishing print books altogether.⁸⁸ A steep drop in retail sales of Alyson print books (figure 5.2) began in 2007. In 2009, they printed their last paper book, and in 2010, publisher Don Weise left the company to start Magnus Books.⁸⁹

Pep called the change “a sad sign of the times” and attributes it to bookshop closures.⁹⁰ This assessment is problematic. While it is true that seven of the ten bookshops studied were closed by the end of 2010, Alyson’s sales figures clearly began dropping in 2007, when eight of the ten bookshops were still in operation (see chapter 7 and figure 7.1 for more detail). It seems in this case less likely that bookshop closures were the main impetus of Alyson switching to all-digital than that the bookshop closures and publishing changes were spurred by something else that began before 2010.

The rise of ebooks has been detrimental to many publishers, who were forced to speculate on the trajectory of various digital products and often made decisions that negatively impacted them.⁹¹ The move from print to digital does not seem to be predicated by consumers’ preference for digital products; rather, it is related to “the collapse of the print distribution network.”⁹² One survey respondent (identifying as a straight female) who relies primarily on electronic media noted, “buying physical books and browsing bookshops has become more of an indulgence.”⁹³

6. Independent Bookshops into the Twenty-First Century

The publishing industry is in a state of rapid change, and a casualty of some of this change is the independent bookshop. In 1958, a decade prior to Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop's entry into the arena, most trade books in the US (72 percent) were sold by independent bookshops. In 1980, that percentage was just 40 percent.⁹⁴

Amazon and other online retailers made price competition by independents impossible. Even chain bookshops that went online following the emergence of Amazon (in 1995) "were running losses year on year because they regarded [offering deep discounts online] as crucial to their ability to compete with the superstores."⁹⁵ When Amazon first began selling books online at significantly lower prices than brick-and-mortar shops could afford to do, physical shops still maintained the benefit of immediate availability of stock. Once ebooks became a viable option (section 5.5), the immediate availability aspect shifted in favor of online retailers like Amazon.⁹⁶ With very little in the way of social or governmental systems in place to protect small booksellers, a handful of loyal core customers and lofty ideas of preserving culture fall to the roadside in the wake of chain conglomerates and the (as yet) untouchable Amazon.

6.1. Legal Constraints on Big Chain Retailers

One aspect of the decrease in independent bookshops is the collapse of the Net Book Agreement in the UK, which began in 1900.⁹⁷ The Net Book Agreement prevented retailers from selling discounted books to consumers, so publishers had the power to set book prices.⁹⁸ Proponents argued that booksellers should be encouraged to sell a wide range of books and provide customer service with the confidence that short-termism and large corporate retailers would not cut in to their ability to do so. As a result, consumers had equal access to all books, frontlist or backlist, mass market or niche. Opponents of the Net Book Agreement argued that the rights of consumers were actually being compromised, because consumers had a right to the lowest prices, and that retailers' rights were being compromised, because 'price was an important lever for generating sales.'⁹⁹

Ultimately, large retailers prevailed, and the Net Book Agreement was officially no longer in place in 1997.¹⁰⁰ As a result, consumers had strong price incentives to shop at large retailers that could afford to offer deep discounts; independents could no longer compete with them on the basis of price in the UK.

In the US, there was no Net Book Agreement. Instead, price competition in bookselling was more likely to be regulated by the Robinson–Patman Act of 1936 against "discrimination in price, services, or facilities."¹⁰¹ The Robinson–Patman Act was

introduced to prevent monopolies and continues to be the law in the US. The American Booksellers Association successfully challenged publishers and large retailers for discriminatory practices under the Robinson–Patman Act. However, success was tenuous. The costs of litigation and terms of favorable settlements were such that smaller companies, even when allied through the American Booksellers Association, lacked the resources necessary to compete in court with large companies.

6.2. Social Consequences of Dwindling Bookshops

Thompson dubs publishers “merchants of culture,”¹⁰² and limitations on the number and variety of book outlets can easily translate to culture limitations. “A bookstore is a place where readers learn about books, where they buy things simply because they have been handsomely packaged and well-displayed.”¹⁰³ When bookshops start to disappear, book marketing becomes less effective. The print book industry and traditional publishers require a strong network of booksellers to support production and innovation. People buy fewer books, because there are currently no better ‘modes of discovery’ than bookshops.¹⁰⁴ While true that readers have access to more books online, with greater variety and affordability, sales are partly limited to those motivated to buy certain books. The motivated customer will find and buy the book they want, but the casual customer will simply buy fewer books. Those books purchased will also be limited, because no longer is a casual reader introduced through marketing to an interesting topic they had not considered before. Instead, he is likely to gravitate to the familiar. Meryl Halls of the Booksellers Association puts it this way: “It can create a bit of a cultural desert in a town if a bookshop closes.”¹⁰⁵

6.3. Adaptations of Independent Booksellers

Community involvement and event hosting were key in the survival of independents; those that engrained themselves in their neighborhoods were much more likely to remain open.¹⁰⁶ With rents rising and profit margins falling,¹⁰⁷ it became necessary for bookshops to become more than just retailers. The first independent bookshops to fold were those “that did little to make book buying a pleasurable and rewarding experience for the customer.”¹⁰⁸ Price competition is essentially impossible, and the instant delivery of ebooks, supermarkets and large chains, and quicker delivery times for paper books ordered cheaply online removes the convenience advantage many independents had.

One example of an independent bookshop successfully adapting to the changing retail climate is The Melton Bookshop in Leicester. First opened in 1975, financial difficulties pushed the owner Julian Duxbury to close the shop in March 2013.¹⁰⁹ However, before Duxbury retired and closed up, Oxford International Centre for Publishing Studies graduate Catherine Baker stepped in to take the reins with plans to revive and sustain the

beloved community fixture. Baker launched a Facebook page and Twitter account for the shop in April 2013 and announced plans to turn the shop into a meeting space “providing a social experience for customers as well as somewhere to buy books.”¹¹⁰ There were already groups meeting at the bookshops, such as the creative writing group and the Bookworms Book Club, and Duxbury offered customers discounts through loyalty schemes.¹¹¹ Baker introduced a publicity-based discount in May; enough likes on Facebook, and she would take 10 percent off. In July 2013, Baker started the Bookshop Sewing Club, and in August announced that orders could be paid over the phone and shipped. The Melton Bookshop remains open based on innovations to address social needs, lessen price differentials, and expand convenience as well as social media presence.

Another successful independent, Barefoot Books, is actually both a publisher and a retailer of children’s books. A 2013 visit revealed a ground floor bookshops and café and first floor publishers office and space for activities such as mother and baby yoga. In May 2013, their CEO, Nancy Traversy, announced that the company would no longer work with Amazon,¹¹² a bold and risky move for a publisher but perhaps an advantage for their retail segment. Gay’s the Word’s adaptation strategies will be discussed in chapter 7.

7. Gay Booksellers

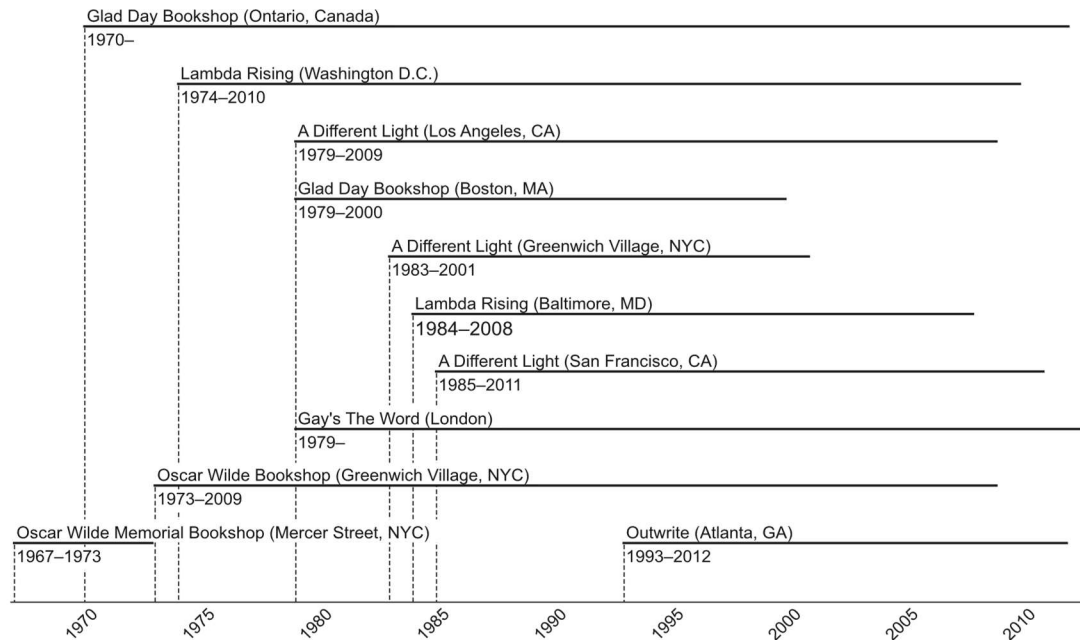


Figure 7.1 Timeline of gay bookshops examined. Selection criteria for bookshops to focus on are described in section 3.2.

As more mainstream booksellers and retail chains open gay sections in their shops, a specialist gay bookshop arguably becomes obsolete. Neil McKenna, author of *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde*, referred to *Gay's the Word* as “a sad casualty of better times.”¹¹³ Despite financial difficulties in recent years,¹¹⁴ however, *Gay's the Word* remains open and, to all appearances, vibrant. On two visits to the shop, it was full of customers steadily for hours. Arriving on the morning of 8 August to interview MacSweeney, one customer was actually waiting outside for the shop to open. She entered with a specific book in mind but found the popular new title had been sold out. MacSweeney and the customer had a long conversation about what she would like to read. “This is the kind of book that makes you happy to be alive,” he told her about his recommendation, which she readily purchased. This occurred within ten minutes of the shop’s opening on a Thursday morning. Although MacSweeney indicated that “often ... there is nobody in between ten and midday,”¹¹⁵ several more customers browsed the shop that morning, and a handful of sales were completed.

Largely a case study of Gay's the Word, this chapter puts into context a gay bookshop in terms of gay people's needs for public space, gay authors and publishers, and the business of selling books. Figure 4.1 lays out the bookshops researched, but as discussed in section 3.2, increased focus was on the first gay bookshop, Oscar Wilde (Memorial) Bookshop, and the only remaining gay bookshop in the UK, Gay's the Word. Firsthand accounts are limited to Gay's the Word. To MacSweeney, his bookshop is "a repository of the whole, the richness of lesbian and gay life."¹¹⁶

7.1. Pride and Acceptance

The belief by some that gay bookshops would be primarily filled with pornography translated into barriers for entry onto the market. Landlords were hesitant to lease to a shop they assumed would be obscene.¹¹⁷ In 1984, HM Customs & Excise even raided Gay's the Word on the grounds of indecency, expecting to find a sex shop.¹¹⁸ Ironically, gay bookshops were born out of a desire for more access to literature,¹¹⁹ not pornography, and therefore stock very little, if any.

Pride and openness are important aspects of gay bookshops.¹²⁰ Figure 7.2 shows storefronts of several gay bookshops (only one of which is still in operation). Note that the three US shops prominently display rainbow flags and other rainbow iconography. The fourth, Gay's the Word in London, instead broadcasts its gayness in the form of a large, prominent sign. (This pattern suggests that rainbow iconography may be more prominent in American gay communities than it is in British communities.) MacSweeney pointed out that the shop's proprietor, Ernest Hole, was "claiming a space" in naming the shop so conspicuously. "We're Gay's the Word," said MacSweeney, "it's not about hiding away."¹²¹

Lenart described Gay's the Word as "a tangible place...that is our own, that is not diluted."¹²² He also recounted a poignant and defining incident from his own experience at the shop that influenced his dedication to keeping it open:

One day a young Greek kid walked in who had just been kicked out of home for being gay. I think he was around fifteen or so. He'd been to a well-known chain looking for a book to help him deal with his sexuality, and everything that was going on, and had been ushered to a shelf behind a stairwell somewhere containing some gay erotic fiction then had a copy of the Gay Kama Sutra thrust into his hands. At this he'd taken a step backward, knocked over a huge pile of books, and then ran out of the place in sheer embarrassment. Then he'd found out about Gay's the Word. We talked to him about what was going on, his family's response, how he was feeling, then showed him the books from our coming-out section and referred him to some agencies that might be able to help. As this beautiful and brave young man was leaving the shop he turned round to shake my hand and thank me for my help. He looked straight into my eyes and— I'll never forget the words—said "thank you so much for existing."¹²³

As a persecuted minority, gay people are in need of dedicated public space (see section 4.2) for instances such as these. I asked MacSweeney if such conversations might happen more at Gay's the Word than another independent bookshop.



Figure 7.2 Storefronts of gay bookshops. (a) Lambda Rising in Washington, D.C. photographed March 29, 2009, by George Kelly; (b) Outwrite in Atlanta, GA photographed November 11, 2006, by Atlantacitizen; (c) Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop photographed February 20, 2007, by GK tramrunner229; (d) Gay's the Word bookshop photographed July 7, 2013, by Ross Burgess. (All images obtained through Wikimedia Commons and reproduced with cropping under a Creative Commons license.)

Yes, yeah it does. Maybe we initiate it, I don't know. The staff are quite friendly. You're not just selling a book. But, as I say, you can just buy a book. You don't have to engage in any conversation if you don't want to, but no, people talk about

all sorts of stuff, definitely ... London can be anonymous. We talk about lots of things, about culture and film and all of that. You get lots of people been coming in for many, many years. Everybody from ... fourteen to ninety-five, which is great.¹²⁴

He compared bookshop employees to hairdressers, saying, “people tell you a lot ... about their own lives, not just about the books they’re buying.” He also speaks directly to the shop’s function as a safe and open public space. “When people come in here, they’re in a safe space where they can ask about books or talk about stuff. Or if they’re there with their girlfriend at the back [lesbian fiction section], you know, hold hands, whatever.”¹²⁵ A common mantra of the shop seems to be “come in, come out,”¹²⁶ a call to gay people to embrace who they are in a safe space.

7.2. Unique Characteristics and Offerings of Gay Bookshops

Gay’s the Word is owned by a limited company formed for the sole purpose of funding the shop. Shareholders do not receive dividends; rather, their pay-out is having the bookshop standing in their community. “It’s quite a benevolent thing really, sort of idealistic thinking from the seventies.”¹²⁷ However, although owned by a ‘benevolent’ group, the shop has to keep itself afloat, and the limited company arrangement also provides a barrier to change or expansion, since raising capital is more difficult. To obtain a loan, an individual staff member would have to guarantee it.

The shop carries a wide range of literature including “queer history, biography, coming out, trans, psychology, parenting, books on Native Americans ..., gays in Africa” gathered from international sources. Looking in a large bookshop with a gay section, one can find such topics as “fiction, lots of gay erotic fiction, and books on sex and photo books,” but the contents of that sort of gay section in a mainstream shop is wholly dependent on what is selling at a given time, and the placement of the section might become less and less conspicuous or disappear if there is a lack of interested staff.¹²⁸ The short-termism of modern publishing also means that chain bookshops are stocking only the latest titles,¹²⁹ and a gay section in a shop like that cannot come close to the variety offered at Gay’s the Word or another dedicated gay bookshop.

Starting with the Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop in 1967, gay bookshops were often used as meeting spaces around political activism. The first gay pride march in the US was planned in large part in the shop, which “became the intersection for the newly formed Gay Liberation Front, Gay Activists Alliance, the Lavender Menace, and ... ‘student homophile leagues.’”¹³⁰ Craig Rodwell, owner of the Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop, was first an activist, and bookseller was only a piece of that identity. Gay’s the Word provided meeting space similarly for London groups like lesbians and gays supporting the miners’ strike in the mid-1980s, Gay Icebreakers, Black Lesbian and Gay group, a gay disabled group, and Club TransLondon. MacSweeney is still open to hosting

activist groups, and nonpolitical groups meet often in the shop, but there is less upheaval currently in the UK over gay rights than there was in the 1970s and 1980s. Still, as pointed out in section 4.1, continuing political and legal discrimination of gay people causes many typically apolitical discussions between gay people to hold political undertones.

Not only did gay groups meet at Gay's the Word, the shop was founded by a gay socialist group (Gay Icebreakers) and its founders spoke at meetings of other gay groups such as The Marypad Group, one of the CHE (Campaign for Homosexual Equality) groups in London.¹³¹ The shop was interwoven with the gay community in London, just as Oscar Wilde Bookshop was in New York.

7.3. Author Relations

Gay bookshops can host authors that are less likely to hold events at mainstream bookshops, such as Felice Picano.¹³² They are more likely to champion authors whether or not they are big sellers. The short-termism that pushes authors quickly from a publisher's focus does not apply nearly as much to an independent bookseller like Gay's the Word, who stocks a strong backlist.¹³³ When customers and employees converse at a bookshop, they are not discussing publishers they both like or should be introduced to; they discuss authors. The customer introduced at the beginning of this chapter, when she found the book she wanted out of stock, began asking about other works by that author. MacSweeney described the options he had, but she was looking for content more similar to the book she was originally after. He introduced her to a few new authors, and they discussed authors they both liked. Customer service, in that way, can be just as beneficial to gay authors as book launch events.

7.4. Publisher Relations

In theory, gay bookshops benefit from gay publishers, because they make gay literature more accessible. Section 5.2 describes instances of lingering homophobia in the publishing industry, so there is a gap in the market where mainstream publishers might reject a high-quality book with gay content on the grounds that it will not cross over or due to religious objections. MacSweeney sometimes has difficulty finding new stock because of limitation on gay literature and the reticence of some publishers to sign gay authors.¹³⁴ Some, but not all, of those books marginalized by mainstream publishers can be picked up by a specialized gay publisher. However, as shown in section 5.1, gay publishers are not the main source of gay literature, and with widespread crashes in retail sales (see figure 5.2), it does not appear they will be in the near future.

Gay's the Word does not deal directly with gay publishers.¹³⁵ It is rare for any publishers and small bookshops to have direct relationships, since much of that falls to distributors. The selection at Gay's the Word is eclectic, and gay authors tend to publish more often with mainstream independent or corporate publishers than with gay

publishers, as shown in section 5.1. When a desired book is one by a gay publisher, there tend to be several mainstream and other options to obtain it other than a relationship with the publisher. Magnus Books, for instance, distributes with Perseus Distribution, Baker & Taylor, Ingram, Bella Distribution, Bulldog Books, and Publishers Group UK.¹³⁶ Out of seven distributors, two are specialist gay book distribution companies; Bella Distribution (lesbian) and Bulldog Books (LGBT) are US and Australian companies, respectively.

7.5. Embracing Digital Dominance

While gay publishers are going digital, gay bookshops may be missing out on digital opportunities. Chapter 4 introduced the ideas of place-based and extended public spaces. Gay's the Word and other shops are increasingly using social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook to broaden their audience. However, in the case of Gay's the Word, their website is under construction, and their social networking is largely limited to advertising new books and publicizing events. The barrier to increased digital capabilities lies in limited financial resources. On the website, there is an option to purchase books online, but that option centers around email, not an automated sales website. While some large booksellers have gone so far as launching their own ebook platforms, such as Barnes and Noble's Nook or WH Smith's Kobo, Gay's the Word—and most independents—offer nothing at all in the way of ebooks. The unprepared publisher suffered when digital books started to become commonplace (section 5.5), and the unprepared bookseller does as well.

8. Conclusions

Gay bookshops, while continuing to serve an important role in society, are no longer financially viable. This is true of independent bookshops in general. Those that fail to adapt, to carve out a culture- and business-savvy niche, are doomed to fail. However, those that do adapt and stay relevant are still not guaranteed to succeed.

Shops like these provide a public meeting space for an underserved minority, access to often-marginalized literature, and modes of discovery of new authors and books to consumers. Historically, they have even been a source of political action and social change. The Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop was used to plan the first gay pride parade in New York,¹³⁷ and Gay's the Word supported the miners' strike in 1985.¹³⁸

However, independent bookshops have been hit with hard times for the past few decades,¹³⁹ and gay bookshops were not spared. Since 2000, eight renowned gay bookshops have closed of ten examined (figure 7.1), and one of the remaining two is neither in the US nor the UK (but in Canada). The UK's last gay bookshop, Gay's the Word, while operational still faces frequent challenges to solvency.¹⁴⁰ US and UK markets cannot seem to accommodate these valuable resources.

8.1. Solutions for Gay Bookshops

When there is need in a society that the free market fails to meet, government intervention is an obvious solution. However, particularly in the US, where gay rights are hotly contested by religious and right-wing groups, government subsidies to a gay retailer would be an especially hard sell. In addition, any measure of state sponsorship in a public space can be limiting to the openness of that space, as discussed in chapter 4. Even if the financial support was indirect, in the form of tax exemptions or reductions, the same discrimination that makes a space like a gay bookshop so necessary also leaves it open to controversy and added scrutiny.

A government-subsidized bookshop would have to be not-for-profit. Giving a certain type of retailer a competitive advantage is against the principles meant to save the independent bookshop discussed in section 6.1. The Net Book Agreement and the Robinson–Patman Act, as well as booksellers associations in the US and the UK, are ideologically counter to state intervention. Even though US and UK governments regularly provide subsidies, tax incentives, and grants to private businesses, the social imperative of sustaining gay bookshops is unlikely to garner political attention.

When governments cannot help supply a need, there are private charities in place. In the UK, a charity like PACE might be an option. PACE is “committed to responding to the changing needs of LGBT people, and offering appropriate, sensitive, LGBT-delivered support services to help people move through their difficult times.”¹⁴¹ Although funded by

the National Lottery, this kind of charity would hardly qualify as state-sponsored. A not-for-profit bookshop or library funded by a specialist gay charity organization could fulfill many of the socially beneficial functions of a gay bookshop. Still, charities are accountable to their donors, and keeping costs down, if applied to staffing such a library or shop, could easily result in less competent or less motivated staff.

Gay's the Word is owned by a limited company where the shareholders do not receive dividends from the shop. MacSweeney describes the setup as "quite a benevolent thing really, sort of idealistic thinking from the seventies."¹⁴² As the last open gay bookshop in the UK, Gay's the Word obviously found an edge that other shops lacked, and it stands to reason that community ownership is a large driver of their success. This kind of limited company or a cooperative could be the way forward for preserving and extending the community benefits offered by a gay bookshop.

The community aspect of any retailer is rarely as 'benevolent' as that of the ownership of Gay's the Word, but bookshops like The Melton Bookshop discussed in section 6.3 can expand their services to appeal to the community in a larger sense. An independent bookshop lends itself to social interaction, especially a gay bookshop (section 7.1). Utilizing the inherent social properties of a gay bookshop, product or function expansion could, in effect, subsidize the sale of books. Selling more than books or renting out space at times might detract from a bookshop's focus, but such tactics also have the potential for larger profit margins than the book trade.

Whatever path an independent bookseller chooses to take, previous chapters show that digital advancement is essential. Section 5.5 shows how unprepared publishers suffered from the emergence of ebooks and online retailers. Sections 6.3 and 7.5 introduce tactics and options for independent bookshops to exploit rather than shy away from technology. Findings of this research exposed that market changes affecting all bookshops were more important to the collapse of gay bookshops than any gay-specific drivers.

Returning to the survey respondent in section 5.5, her description of shopping for books as 'an indulgence' is telling. Not only must booksellers expand digitally, they must compete with digital media through taking advantage of their 'indulgent' properties; creating an experience for the customer is tantamount. Section 6.3 points out that excellent customer service and business acumen were essential to independent bookshops surviving the entrance of large competitors in to the market. The same could be said to apply to advances in digital technology. Buying a book from a supermarket, through an e-reader, or from a specialist bookshop are very different experiences, and booksellers would do well to embrace and exaggerate those differences.

8.2. Opportunities for Further Study

This research paves the way for a potential major project for a digitally savvy MA publishing student with an interest in marketing. Gay's the Word has an out-of-date website. Overhauling their website and introducing new functionalities could be a concrete step in reviving and sustaining the shop. Sections 5.5 and 7.5 describe the need for those in the book industry to stay current in terms of digital technologies.

Chapter 3 points out several avenues for expanded research. The book trade in the US and the UK has been studied extensively and was the backdrop for this study. On one hand, book publishing is dominated by these English-speaking countries. However, bookselling differs greatly from country to country. In Germany, for example, fixed pricing of books continues to be a reality. Simultaneously, Germany has several gay bookshops, such as Bruno's, Galerie Janssen, Prinz Eisenherz, and Löwenherz. Would the reintroduction of the Net Book Agreement in the UK bolster the independents? Is it even a possibility? International expansion of this research could both illuminate the situations in other countries and provide further examples of possible solutions for US and UK bookshops.

The definition of "gay" in this research was very narrow. Although intersecting other gender and sexual minority groups at times, the focus has been on homosexual men. Most of the customers observed in Gay's the Word and both employees are male, but there are statistically just as many lesbians. Where are they getting their literature? Do they read less or different material? Expansion into other gender and sexual minority groups is an option for extending this research. Perhaps there would be similar findings for other minority bookshops. Racial, religious, and language minorities all require safe public space too, and their literary needs may be very similar.

Data collecting was also limited for this research by time and financial constraints. Amazon sales are coveted and elusive statistics that might bear out explicit patterns not seen by Nielsen BookScan in the UK alone. Those figures are all but impossible to obtain, but firsthand observation of additional shops, larger survey groups, and more expansive sources of book sales data would improve knowledge and understanding of the topic.

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Appendix A: Transcript of Interview with Jim MacSweeney

Laura Tsitlidze interviewed Jim MacSweeney at Gay's the Word, on Marchmont Street in London, August 8, 2013, 10:15 a.m.

LT I started looking at Oscar Wilde in New York.

JM Mhm.

LT And I heard that you were there?

JM In New York?

LT Yes.

JM Oh, the Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop.

LT Yes.

JM Ah okay, oh yeah, yeah, yeah I've been there.

LT Okay, so I started with that and, you know, it closed down, Lambda Rising closed down, just trying to see where people are getting what they need instead, you know?

JM Okay.

LT But also just, what's so great about this place? And I think it's awesome, so...

JM I mean with Lambda Rising and Oscar Wilde, there are different reasons. As far as I'm aware with Lambda Rising, the owners were retiring and didn't want to sell, so they, you know, running a perfectly viable bookshop, doing very well, very famous, and just decided to say, "Okay, we are retiring and that's it," so they closed down. With Oscar Wilde, you've got areas changing, so what would have been a gay village, and then that moving to Chelsea, and a different life moved up to Chelsea, of course, but um, just diminishing returns in the sense of big, when I was in the states, big bookshops like Barnes and Noble having an enormous gay section. People going in there rather than traveling down to Oscar Wilde, which was a gorgeous little bookshop, you know, what a nice space, and it reminded me of here. As you know, the person who started this bookshop did some work in Oscar Wilde in the seventies and then came back and wanted to set up his own space, so he ran book stalls ... Oscar Wilde was the first of the modern gay bookshops.

LT Right.

JM Before that, gay bookshop tended to mean erotic – erotic or down back alleys – and this was about politics and ideas and biography and novels, but ideas, you know. And that would have inspired Giovanni's Room and certainly us and lots of other bookshops in the states.

LT So when did you start here?

JM The shop started in '79, and that was founded by one person, and then other people joined in, and then had a little, like a mini-financial crisis, and Gay Icebreakers, who were a gay socialist group, came together and they put money in and sort of saved it, you know. At the very start, you know, when you're on rocky ground, you get your lease and all of that, and then try and fill it with books. And there wasn't that many books available. In a sense, I mean only a third of the bookshop at the start was books that went books up to that first part [pointing], and the rest was a meeting space. Over the years, books have gone all the way to the back. We had a meeting sp– I think we changed the meeting space at the back into an office in '97, and that was just to make it books all the way down, give us space, but we still have lots of meetings here. TransLondon meets here. There's a lesbian discussion group every week. We do lots of events, which are fun, fun to do, get people in. It's good to get our word out that the shop is here and doing lots of things.

LT Do people meet in the office, then?

JM No, no, we put, we move these [pointing] out of the way and they put folding seats around here.

LT Oh, okay.

JM Or, when there are events, we've also folding– either folding seats in a circle or just folding seats in lines, with a speaker.

LT And what kind of speakers do you have?

JM Well with TransLondon, the lesbian and gay book group, and lesbian discussion group, they run their own things. They're separate in a sense. You know, we give them keys, they come and use the space, pull people in. With us, when we're doing events, it'll be—we sell books, so, you know, poetry, history, biography, novels, etc. From book launches to, yeah, a brand new poet, whatever.

LT And you yourself, when did you start here?

JM Oh, about '89.

LT Okay.

JM I was aware of the shop when I came to London in eighty... When did I come to London, to England? '82. Like, I remember coming to the shop in about '83, just coming out, you know, I was like, 'oh my gosh.' We had a bookshop in— at home, so...

LT Where was that?

JM In Cork, Ireland. You know, but coming to a shop that was just lesbian and gay was like, extraordinary, just seeing the range of books. And that's before, we would be one of the few places in London you could get books. That's before shops had gay sections, which happened in the early 90s, before Amazon. In about the early 90s, shops looking for new markets created ... They looked around at what independents were doing—it's what happened in the states as well – and created lesbian and gay sections. Before that, you know, they weren't interested. And that's only happened with Barnes and Noble and Borders in the states. What were feminist, women's, gay bookshops doing? And they took that and recreated it, and did it in a bigger way. Of course, it's great that your books are then available to a wider audience. It's not so good when it really impacts on your business and clients, and then if the books aren't selling fast enough, those sections close, because for them it's about units, and for us it's about community, so we're coming from different places, you know. I'm stocking books 'cause it's interesting. I mean, we have to turn over books and, and, and sell, but you know, I will stock books that came out years ago and I'll still be ordering it in, having it there. And the other thing is, of course, is that we know the stock, and we've read a lot of it, so when people come in, like just now, and I'm talking, we're talking about books and laughing about stuff and sharing, and sharing a passion for, for people we've read or not read, and that's always a pleasure. That's the nice thing about working here. You never know who's gonna come in. That doesn't mean ... Some people just come in and buy a book. That's fine too. And others, there's more of a connection. People do come in from all over the world, come in, come out, and find themselves. Obviously with the increasing visibility of lesbians and gays, it's less of an issue for people in, in the west, I suppose, you know, because it's ... people are more visible, and the laws have changed.

LT And so, this place is still owned by a group?

JM Not owned by a group as such, not by anyone, really, I mean, it's a limited company. How it would have been set up, the easiest way I can think about it, you and your friends wanting a bookshop, setting up a limited company and having shares. You go off and do your own ... get on with your life, work wherever you're working, and there is a staff, two or three staff to work it, and then a board of directors. Nobody who set it up has ever had anything from the shop, so there

aren't dividends paid out to them. The shop is there to ... to be, and that's how it goes, so basically—hi there [to a customer]—so we cover our costs and pay our bills and get on with it but it isn't, no one's going to retire on lots of money or make huge amounts. They just set up the community bookshop, so it's quite a benevolent thing really, sort of idealistic thinking from the seventies. That is its good and its bad points. Of course if you wanna ... If you want to raise capital or to make a loan, there isn't anyone to guarantee it. Or, I would have to guarantee it, and I'm a member of staff. I'm also director, manager. But, so that's ... it's an odd ... yeah, it's an odd arrangement. Nobody actually owns the shop, yeah, it's just a limited company.

LT So it's definitely seen as having an important place in the community.

JM I think so.

LT And what do you think the role is in the community, of the shop?

JM It's a visible space for just lesbian and gay literature. We have a huge range of books and it's not just a shelf, it's, you know, a whole bookshop. And we cover everything from queer history, biography, coming out, trans, psychology, parenting, books on Native Americans to like, gays in Africa. I'm searching out books and pulling them in from all different places. Importing from the states, books [inaudible], and there's nothing quite like it in the UK. We're the only one. When you go in gay sections of general shops, you know, you'll see some fiction, lots of gay erotic fiction, and books on sex and photo books. We provide much more variety.

LT In the early days, obviously, there was a lot of activism based in the shop. Does that still happen at all?

JM Politics have changed. I mean, certainly in the early days, it could be just, someone coming around about the film about the Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners. Miners' strike thirty years ago ... or was it twenty ... um, 1985, we had meetings here for that, and then collections outside. Gay Icebreakers, which is the gay socials meetings used to meet here. Black lesbian gay group, gay disabled group, so there were lots of gays, groups, used to meet here. There are still groups like Club TransLondon, you know, that started here. They get about forty, fifty people coming every ... every month. The discussion group, it's not political in a sense, but you know, it's important that it's there and people come in and come out, and they have a safe space to talk around all sorts of stuff, but also to make friends. But we're open to whatever groups that, I suppose just ... [serving a customer] Often, at this hour of the day, there is nobody in between ten and midday. I'm like, "oh, obviously you're pulling them in."

- LT Haha, everyone heard I was coming.
- JM Well done you. Thank you. You must come more often.
- LT So, when Lambda Rising was closing ...
- JM Yeah.
- LT Deacon Maccubbin said that the work was done, basically. Do you think that the work ... that, that, the work of that shop was done? That, because gay culture was so mainstream now and, you know, like the regular bookshops are carrying it ...
- JM Well, the thing is when you run your own space, and, you're not ... Cheers now, thank you [to a customer]. When you running your own space and you're having control of what you're stocking, um, in a mainstream bookshop, you used to notice that the sections we're like "Oh, they made a section here, okay." Let's say in Waterstones, particular branch, and then it would be moved around, and then it's under the stairs, and then at the back of the shop, and then it disappears, or it becomes the lowest common denominator. Like, there's real pressure for books, so, you know, with a proper bookshop, like here, you know, there is—a gay bookshop—there is space for a really strong backlist to show a wide range of books. In other shops, in straight bookshops, or mainstream bookshops which have gay sections, unless they've got staff who are interested, you know, it's often the basic stuff. Foyles has a great gay, gay, lesbian and gay section, and I think Waterstones, the Waterstones just around the corner doesn't, and it's a huge Waterstones, very few gay books, and why is that, you know? So, I am still not there where I want to entrust it to the general retail—book retail—trade. It's certainly true that lots of rights have been won, and things have changed for us, thank god, but I like reading books where we happen to be the main protagonists in books. That's not the only books I read, but I want to hear about our history, our biographies, and I'm aware, talking to writers, how difficult it is to get published. That's sometimes our problem, just finding stock. I'm finding books coming in where it's subtly de-gayed on the back of covers, 'cause they don't want it to be too niche. You know, they want to open up to a more general market, and, if I'm thinking back to the early days, um, in the seventies, when people like Edmund White and Andrew Holleran and The Violet Quill Group were writing, they wanted to write about our lives, and how they were, and if straight people got it, fine, and if they didn't, that's not who they were writing for. They were writing and celebrating [inaudible]. Um, so Dean Maccubbin, I think I would just disagree.
- LT Okay.
- JM I would disagree. I'm certainly aware that you can get your books [inaudible], you can certainly get your books on Amazon and online. You can buy, but that's

different from walking into a queer space. And I wonder does he feel the same about gay bars, you don't [need] gay bars, or gay clubs, because we're so mainstream we can meet anywhere. You know, as you go down to a club full of sweaty men dancing. "Is there a need for that anymore if we're now so mainstream?" you're thinking. Actually, there is. There's sometimes spaces you want to meet, ask questions.

LT So as a meeting space, you would also say that it'll never be done, that there's no ...

JM When people come in here, you know, um, we're not in a place yet ... When people come in here, they're in a safe space where they can ask about books or talk about stuff. Or if they're there with their girlfriend at the back [lesbian fiction section], you know, hold hands, whatever. Hi there [to a customer] ... I'm thinking of, in the London riots two years ago, you know, we were the only bookshop in London to have our windows smashed, a homophobic thing. You know, when I'm cleaning spit off the windows, when I get stuff on the windows or comments outside, you're aware there is an irritant, visibility, you know, so you're aware of the homophobia that's outside. People uncomfortable walking around. So, while we've won, you know, huge levels of acceptance in some ways, in others, you know, many people are hugely disturbed, and the struggle still goes on. You know, I'm getting Russians coming in buying books. We've got Russian books in the window at the moment. We're just aware of what's going on in Russia, so the struggle—that there isn't a need for it anymore, a need for gay books, gay history, gay books, I think it's very important.

LT And so, I follow you on Twitter, and I was—I saw, maybe a few months ago, that there was an incident outside with people, with young boys being ridiculous. So that does happen?

JM Yeah. It happens less and less, but it does happen. You're always aware of it. You have—sometimes you just go into a heightened mode of awareness in case you're feeling under threat. Most of the time. Most of the time it's fine. I don't even think about it.

LT Oh, okay.

JM I don't think about it particularly, you know. Unlike, if you're on the street as a gay man, and you see trouble coming against you, you can cross the street. You know, we're here. We can't change. We're Gay's the Word, you know. That title, the name of the shop, is chosen. It's not about hiding away. It's about being visible, and claiming a space. In 1979, it was a much more homophobic society. Things have improved immeasurably in thirty-five years, but it's still there. You know, we get

photographs of the shop taken every day by people going by, some of those find it amusing, some feel threatened, some are delighted with it. But I think I see the bookshop as a repository of the whole, the richness of lesbian and gay life. Our stories. As I say, we search them out, put them out on display. People come in, and look, and buy.

LT One thing that I wanted to touch on, you mentioned. About how some books that people, that the publisher wants to get into more mainstream audiences, they'll "de-gay" it on the back?

JM We have ... I'll just show you books that are.

LT Sure.

JM *The Lessons*, very good book, Naomi Alderman. Man and woman on the cover, when one reads the back. The main relationship is this between two men. There is nothing on the front or the back that would give any indication of that whatsoever. This won Green Carnation Prize, *Proof of Love*, Catherine Hall, very good book. The main protagonist is a gay man, and he has a relationship with another man, with another farmer, in the Lake District. And he has a great friendship with a girl who's a tomboy, not this little girl in the white with long hair. It says nothing at any point on the back about any queerness. Now, for us to sell it here, we have to hand-sell, because people don't know what the content is. In a straight—in a general bookshop, it would just sell generally, so they're not bothered, but I'm aware of 'Why have we got this? Ah, okay, ah, there's a queer—gay content here. Now, I'm not talking about someone's gay turns up on page 45. I'm talking about, well, the main protagonist is, or this is a really central part of the role, but marketing, they de-gay a lot. That's just it. And it's irritating. If we've become, if we're that accepted and mainstream, why not just say, you know, 'blah, blah is gay' type of thing? You know, it's not hidden. It's not a big surprise when it happens on page 5. It's not as if this is the climax of the book that someone is revealed to be gay, so I think it's just casual, it's homophobia.

LT Well, as far as that's concerned, do you think it's always a bad thing to have books that maybe would have been marginalized and are less marginalized?

JM I think the better—some books will only be read by lesbians and gays. So, you'll have lesbian romances and gay romances, and they're niche, and they'll be read by ... The better stuff, more literary stuff, crosses over if it's good, so people like Alan Hollinghurst and Armistead Maupin and Colm Toibin, Patrick Gale. They all happen to be gay men—Neil Bartlett—and they'll be read by people who like good writing in the same way that, if I'm reading a book and it's by a woman with a main woman protagonist, I'm reading 'cause it's good writing, not because ... It's not

about someone who's an Irish gay man. Why would I want to read it? It's writing. The better stuff crosses over, so here you've got artists, writers like Sarah Waters and Jeanette Winterson. They're just read by everybody. Full stop. For me, it's important that writers write whatever they want to write. Just because someone happens to be gay, they don't need to write about ... Gay writers don't need to have gay people in their books if they don't want to. They're free to write what they want.

LT Might you stock something like that here?

JM Generally, we need that they have, they're about, that they have gay content. Unless it's coded, it's more historical, where they weren't able to, but for current-day books, no. People come in here, that's what they're looking for. They're looking about gay content. In that, lesbians and gays that are at the center of the story or part of it. That make sense? So that, if they're love stories, or if there's relationships, that's, we're there, and we're in it. We're not sexless, or the friend who's there occasionally. We're a central part of it.

LT And so, I've touched on everything.

JM Okay.

LT Do you have anything to say about, you know ... Has this place made changes to your life?

JM I'm here a long time. It's certainly enriched my life. It's been a real privilege to work here. It can be very stressful sometimes if you're worried about keeping it going, but I think the range of people who come in ... and I like books and talking about books with people, and also seeing the range of our community, different ages and types—so different to a bar or a club, so it's full of surprises. Yes, my life has definitely been enriched to have been a part of the shop. Yeah, it's been fantastic. It's been a real pleasure. When I get stressed about other things, I can look back at the good things. And it's a pleasure talking to people coming out from other cultures. They're in from China, India, different parts of the states, part of Europe, and talk about the gay scene there or how things are or parents' response, just parents' response about their kids, their own kids, relationships. People tell you a lot, you know, they talk to you a lot, about their own lives, not just about the books they're buying. We're like their hairdressers.

LT Do you think that happens more here than at a different type of independent bookshop?

JM Yes, yeah it does. Maybe we initiate it, I don't know. The staff are quite friendly. You're not just selling a book. But, as I say, you can just buy a book. [laughing] You

don't have to engage in any conversation if you don't want to, but no, people talk about all sorts of stuff, definitely. The staff are friendly, I think. Yeah, they are. Well, any ones I employ are. I think it's important. London can be anonymous. We talk about lots of things, about culture and film and all of that. You get lots of people been coming in for many, many years. Everybody from ... people from fourteen to ninety-five, which is great.

LT That's really good to hear.

Appendix B: Surveys

B.1. Book Buying Survey

B.1.1. Free Online Surveys

Book Buying

A brief survey about your shopping habits. All questions are optional and feedback is greatly appreciated. Individual responses are confidential, and compiled results are for academic use only.

1) Are you ...?	
Male	
Female	
Other (Please Specify):	

2) How would you describe yourself?	
Asexual	
Bisexual	
Gay	
Lesbian	
Pansexual	
Questioning	
Queer	
Straight	
Prefer not to say	
Other (Please Specify):	

3) Please enter your age.	
---------------------------	--

4) When was the last time you visited a bookshop (brick-and-mortar)?	
In the past week	
In the past month	
In the past 3 months	
In the past 6 months	
In the past year	
Longer than 1 year ago/Don't know	

5) About how many times have you visited a bookshop in the past year (excluding Amazon or other online-only retailer)? Please enter a whole number.	
---	--

6) What type of bookshop have you visited in the past year? Select all that apply.	
Academic	
Antiquarian	
Chain (Barnes & Noble, Blackwell's, etc.)	
Charity (Oxfam, etc.)	
Children's	
Geography/maps	
History	
LGBTQ	
Music	
Online--only (Amazon, etc.)	
Ebooks (iTunes, etc.)	
Other independent	
Religious/spiritual	
Remainder	
Science	
Second--hand	
Travel	
University	
None	
Other (Please Specify):	

7) What type of bookshop do you visit most frequently?	
Academic	
Antiquarian	
Chain (Barnes & Noble, Blackwell's, etc.)	
Charity (Oxfam, etc.)	
Children's	
Geography/maps	
History	
LGBTQ	
Music	
Online--only (Amazon, etc.)	
Ebooks (iTunes, etc.)	
Other independent	
Religious/spiritual	
Remainder	
Science	
Second--hand	
Travel	
University	
None	
Other (Please Specify):	

8) From what type of bookshop do you make the most purchases?	
Academic	
Antiquarian	
Chain (Barnes & Noble, Blackwell's, etc.)	
Charity (Oxfam, etc.)	
Children's	
Geography/maps	
History	
LGBTQ	
Music	
Online--only (Amazon, etc.)	
Ebooks (iTunes, etc.)	
Other independent	
Religious/spiritual	
Remainder	
Science	
Secondhand	
Travel	
University	
None	
Other (Please Specify):	

9) Is there a type of bookshop you would like to visit that does not have a location convenient to you? Select all that apply.	
Academic	
Antiquarian	
Chain (Barnes & Noble, Blackwell's, etc.)	
Charity (Oxfam, etc.)	
Children's	
Geography/maps	
History	
LGBTQ	
Music	
Other independent	
Religious/spiritual	
Remainder	
Science	
Secondhand	
Travel	
University	
None	
Other (Please Specify):	

10) Anything you would like to add?

11) Are you willing to participate in a follow-up survey? If so, please list your email address below, to be used ONLY for that purpose. If not, leave blank.

B.1.2. Instant.ly

Book Buying

Q1: SINGLE-SELECT LIST

Are you ...?

- 1 Male
- 2 Female
- 3 Other, please specify: [OPEN--ENDED ANSWER]

Q2: SINGLE-SELECT LIST

How would you describe yourself?

- 1 Asexual
- 2 Bisexual
- 3 Gay
- 4 Lesbian
- 5 Pansexual
- 6 Questioning
- 7 Queer
- 8 Straight
- 9 Prefer not to say
- 10 Other, please specify: [OPEN--ENDED ANSWER]

Q3: MULTI--SELECT LIST

What type of bookshop have you visited in the past year? Select all that apply.

- 1 Academic
- 2 Antiquarian
- 3 Chain (Barnes & Noble, Blackwell's, etc.)
- 4 Charity (Oxfam, etc.)
- 5 Children's
- 6 Geography/maps
- 7 History
- 8 LGBTQ
- 9 Music

- 10 Online--only (Amazon, etc.)
- 11 Ebooks (iTunes, etc.)
- 12 Other independent
- 13 Religious/spiritual
- 14 Remainder
- 15 Science
- 16 Second--hand
- 17 Travel
- 18 University
- 19 None
- 20 Other, please specify: [OPEN--ENDED ANSWER]

Q4: SINGLE-SELECT LIST

What type of bookshop do you visit most frequently?

- 1 Academic
- 2 Antiquarian
- 3 Chain (Barnes & Noble, Blackwell's, etc.)
- 4 Charity (Oxfam, etc.)
- 5 Children's
- 6 Geography/maps
- 7 History
- 8 LGBTQ
- 9 Music
- 10 Online--only (Amazon, etc.)
- 11 Ebooks (iTunes, etc.)
- 12 Other independent
- 13 Religious/spiritual
- 14 Remainder
- 15 Science
- 16 Second--hand
- 17 Travel
- 18 University
- 19 None
- 20 Other, please specify: [OPEN-ENDED ANSWER]

Q5: SINGLE-SELECT LIST

From what type of bookshop do you make the most purchases?

- 1 Academic
- 2 Antiquarian

- 3 Chain (Barnes & Noble, Blackwell's, etc.)
- 4 Charity (Oxfam, etc.)
- 5 Children's
- 6 Geography/maps
- 7 History
- 8 LGBTQ
- 9 Music
- 10 Online--only (Amazon, etc.)
- 11 Ebooks (iTunes, etc.)
- 12 Other independent
- 13 Religious/spiritual
- 14 Remainder
- 15 Science
- 16 Second--hand
- 17 Travel
- 18 University
- 19 None
- 20 Other, please specify: [OPEN-ENDED ANSWER]

Q6: MULTI-SELECT LIST

Is there a type of bookshop you would like to visit that does not have a location convenient to you? Select all that apply.

- 1 Academic
- 2 Antiquarian
- 3 Chain (Barnes & Noble, Blackwell's, etc.)
- 4 Charity (Oxfam, etc.)
- 5 Children's
- 6 Geography/maps
- 7 History
- 8 LGBTQ
- 9 Music
- 10 Other independent
- 11 Religious/spiritual
- 12 Remainder
- 13 Science
- 14 Second--hand
- 15 Travel
- 16 University
- 17 None

18 Other, please specify: [OPEN--ENDED ANSWER]

B.2. Fictional Characters Survey

B.2.1. Free Online Surveys

Fictional Characters

Who do you like to read about?

Do you tend to read novels where the main character is like you? For each of the following characteristics, indicate whether or not you usually have them in common with the characters you read about?			
For example, if you are a woman and read mostly fiction where the main character is a man, choose “different” for gender. If you are in your twenties and read fiction about characters in their twenties, choose “similar” for age.			
	Similar	Different	A Mix of Same and Different
Gender			
Age			
Geographic Location			
Religion			
Cultural Background			
Sexual Orientation			

Are there any other characteristics that you prefer to have in common with the fictional characters you read about?

B.2.2. Instant.ly

Fictional Characters

Q1: SINGLE--SELECT MATRIX

Do you tend to read novels where the main character is like you? For each of the following characteristics, indicate whether or not you usually have them in common with the characters you read about?

For example, if you are a woman and read mostly fiction where the main character is a man, choose “different” for gender. If you are in your twenties and read fiction about characters in their twenties, choose “similar” for age.

	Similar	Different	An equal mix of same and different
Gender	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Age	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Geographic Location	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Religion	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Cultural Background	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Sexual Orientation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Political Views	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Family Structure	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Personality Traits	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q2: SINGLE--SELECT LIST

How would you describe yourself?

- 1 Asexual
- 2 Bisexual
- 3 Gay
- 4 Lesbian
- 5 Pansexual
- 6 Questioning
- 7 Queer
- 8 Straight
- 9 Prefer not to say
- 10 Other, please specify: [OPEN-ENDED ANSWER]

Q3: COMMENT BOX

Are there any other characteristics that you prefer to have in common with the fictional characters you read about?