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John Esposito

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The story of the owners includes a surprise visit by Harper Lee



For nearly a half-century, The Chatham Bookseller has been nestled at 8 Green Village Road in downtown Madison.



By JOHN ESPOSITO --The columnist is a published writer and freelance journalist who lives in New Providence. He can be reached through his website www.PieceWorkJournals.com

There is a vibrant downtown center nestled within the red maple tree-lined neighborhood street of affluent Madison. It embodies all the charm that residents cherish in this quintessential suburban borough. Not surprisingly, the quaint shopping district bears the name Main Street, and features an array of inviting retail shops, small businesses, a movie theater and excellent restaurants.

Walk leisurely through its colorful downtown and a special treasure steeped in tradition awaits. For almost 50 years, passers-by from near and far have turned at Main Street onto Green Village Road and discovered The Chatham Bookseller.

The Chatham Bookseller has an interesting history as both a general used and rare bookstore. Established in 1968 by Frank Deodene, it began as a mail-order used book service operated out of his Chatham home, hence the name, The Chatham Bookseller. Two years later the operation was expanded to a brick and mortar establishment at the present Madison location at 8 Green Village Road, where it has remained. Shortly after Mr. Deodene's death in 2011, the store's ownership was assumed by the very capable Jesse Mann, who had worked alongside Mr. Deodene for many years. Mann subsequently left The Chatham Bookseller in August 2014, accepting the position of Theological Librarian at Drew University in Madison.

Heritage

The current ownership of The Chatham Bookseller was undertaken on Feb. 5, 2015, by Kathy Rodgers and Richard Chalfin. They are worthy successors to carry on the shop's wonderful heritage.

Kathy Rodgers is a retired lawyer and former head of Legal Momentum, the nation's oldest women's legal rights advocacy organization. She previously worked with Mann prior to becoming a co-owner and is an avid and longtime collector of murder mysteries and books on the history of law and women's rights. Rodgers' responsibilities include handling the business aspects of the store.

Richard Chalfin is a fourth-generation bookseller and former owner of The Better Book Getter, an online antiquarian bookstore and search service. Chalfin's responsibilities include placing a selected stock inventory of their books online so they can be found on AbeBooks, Amazon, eBay, and other book sites.

The Chatham Bookseller celebrated its first anniversary reopening under the new ownership on Feb. 5. I had the pleasure of visiting this illustrious bookstore last month and speaking with the owners. The teaming of Rodgers and Chalfin has proven to be an excellent collaboration. They bring their own vision to this celebrated establishment, while continuing to provide almost five decades of unparalleled used and rare bookselling services to their customers.

There is very encouraging news for the future of brick and mortar bookstores as recently reported by The New York Times ("The Plot Twist: E-Book Sales Slip," and "Print is Far from Dead" — Sept. 22, 2015). While analysts once predicted that e-books would overtake print by 2015, digital sales have slowed sharply and there has been a marked increase in independent bookstores. This is especially good news for specialized bookshops.

Browsing

"The special quality of books is one aspect, but there is also the special thing about a bookshop," said Rodgers. "Browsing in a bookshop is not the same thing as browsing online. And when you go to a bookshop that has books that are not generally available, the serendipity of finding something that you didn't even know you were looking for is part of the fun. So we really encourage people to come in and browse. And it's a place where people come, and relax and browse and strike up conversations. And we want people to have that experience."

Chalfin wholeheartedly agreed, adding, "I've always felt at home in a used book store. I love to go out and go book hunting. I can just kind of get lost in it. There is definitely a comfort to it."

As a general used and rare bookshop, The Chatham Bookseller specializes in literature, non-fiction, including first editions, the classics, art books, and how-to books, but also "something that has some meat to it and isn't just a six-week wonder on The New York Times bestseller

list,” according to Rodgers. “And that’s what people come here for, the unusual book, the one they can’t find at Barnes & Noble.”

During the past year the bookshop has increased its inventory of sports, entertainment and fashion books, and added more in the area of law and murder mysteries, while continuing its tradition of stocking academic books on religion, philosophy, science and history from around the world. The shop now also carries ephemera, which is printed paper products like old magazines, old ads, and vintage postcards which are nostalgic for many people. And last but certainly not least, The Chatham Bookseller will launch its first website in the coming weeks.

Surprise Visit

It is generally the hope of all industrious booksellers that someday a special book will come along that translates not only into a generous financial gain, but more so, will have resulted from an amazing event to be cherished for a lifetime. Such was the experience for Richard Chalfin that began in 1997 while operating his own book dealership company in New York. He later penned his story for the New York Observer on Dec. 4, 2000: <http://observer.com/2000/12/the-day-harper-lee-came-to-see-me/>.

“This lady with a delightful Southern accent calls one day looking for a novel called ‘When Rain Clouds Gather.’ I found the book on the Internet. I noticed the name on her credit card, Nell Harper Lee. I asked, ‘Any relation to Harper Lee?’ She laughed and said, ‘That’s my best friend’.”

The coy and charming response by the famous author was followed by an offer to autograph copies of “To Kill a Mockingbird” for him, something she rarely has ever done.

Chalfin searched and found two first editions — American and British — of her prized “Mockingbird” novel, followed by the mishap of misplacing her address. He finally shipped the books in late 1999 to her home in Alabama. He heard nothing more until the spring. The long-anticipated phone call finally came, which was followed by something completely unexpected.

“‘What’s your address?’ she asked. I told her. ‘I’ll see ya!’ she said. The intercom buzzed. She was waiting in the lobby, maybe five feet two inches, in sneakers and a pantsuit, in her seventies. My assistants and I lined up at attention. ‘Here’s your books signed.’ She put them in my hands, then put her arms around me and hugged me, as I hugged them. I sold the American first edition. I made four figures on it. Had there been a (dust) jacket, God only knows. Later in the spring of 2000 she wrote me a letter. I have that. There was something about her being alive that made me feel like she was part of my family and her message was still alive.”

Chalfin has retained the British edition, which carries her 1960 photograph on the back. It’s a keeper.

Captivating

With the warmer weather approaching, this is the perfect time for newcomers to acquaint themselves with the eclectic bookshop that has captivated generations of loyal customers, and for the returning longtime patrons to discover the exciting new and subtle transitions. Stop by The Chatham Bookseller soon. Introduce yourself to Kathy and Richard. The dynamic duo would love to meet you and assist in finding that special book. Come in and browse. Enjoy the experience. That is what this wonderful bookshop is all about.

Editor’s note: The Chatham Bookseller is located at 8 Green Village Road in Madison. The shop is open six days a week, Tuesday through Sunday. The hours of operation are 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday; until 5 p.m. Saturday; until 6 p.m. Thursday; and 12 to 5 p.m. Sunday.

John Esposito is a freelance journalist. His work has been published in The Star Ledger, The (Bergen) Record, and the (Morris County) Daily Record in New Jersey; Greenwich Time, and Stamford Advocate in Connecticut; The Philadelphia Inquirer in Pennsylvania; The Italian Tribune; UNICO; The Irish Echo; and local New Jersey community newspapers. He was a special correspondent for the online newspaper, NewJerseyNewsroom.com; and has written for numerous magazines. Esposito has interviewed such acclaimed writers as John Updike, Pete Hamill, and Mary Higgins

Clark. This article and the complete Q&A with Kathy Rodgers and Richard Chalfin appear on Mr. Esposito's website: www.PieceworkJournals.com. Facebook Page: www.facebook.com/Piecework-Journals-by-John-Esposito-492572960923211/. John Esposito lives in New Providence with his wife and two children.