

The Chatham Bookseller - Keeper of the Flame



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The enjoyment derived from reading books is a personal experience. Those small objects we hold in our hands represent more than just things. Books stir emotions and become part of who we are. Book browsing offers a distinct adventure from reading. The practice of perusing bookshelves affords the bibliophile with both the pleasurable and social means of acquiring knowledge and satisfying the quest for discovery. Such is the passion that accompanies the feel and scent of the tightly bound printed pages, and accounts for why bookstores have been an irreplaceable part of our lives.

It is, therefore, an unfortunate fact of life that many local community bookstores have closed their doors in recent years. The first undoing of independent shops came with the wave of superstores such as Borders and Barnes & Noble. What these giants reaped upon the locals has come home to roost in a big way. Borders is now gone and Barnes & Noble is struggling to survive. This has occurred possibly because of mismanagement, but in large measure due to other competitive online websites, particularly Amazon, which offers its customers significant price reductions, two-day deliveries and free shipping. The perks provided by online services, however, will never equate to the friendly, knowledgeable service and ambiance provided by a local bookstore.

Among the few independents bookshops that have weathered the storm, there is one such gem still to be found in the affluent borough of Madison, NJ, whose enchanting downtown center continues to boast an array of wonderful shops, businesses and restaurants.



The quaint establishment is known as The Chatham Bookseller, a classic old world bookstore in the truest sense. It is a well-respected mainstay in this upscale Madison community, and known far and wide by shoppers in neighboring counties since its relocation from next door Chatham in 1970. The Chatham Bookseller is centrally located at 8 Green Village Road, directly off Main Street (Route 124). It is housed at the former site of the Madison Children's Library, and across the street from the former home of the Madison (adult) Library, which is now the Museum of Early Trades and Crafts. (The children and adult libraries have since merged and are located behind the Madison YMCA at 39 Keep Street.)

This book haven's staying power in the community is attributable to its uniqueness, knowledgeable staff, attention to detail and courteous customer service. The vintage bookshop has known but two owners since its inception. The current proprietor is Jesse Mann (age 50), a Morris Township resident, who assumed the reins in 2012 from the late Frank Deodene, who originated the business in 1968.

Mr. Mann had known Frank Deodene since his childhood days, as the Mann and Deodene families were neighbors living in Chatham. As a youngster, he was a friend and schoolmate of Mr. Deodene's son. During his teenage years, Mr. Mann would frequent The Chatham Bookseller because of his interest in reading and book collecting. As fate would have it, his lifelong friendship with Frank Deodene eventually developed into a solid business relationship during the summer months of the early 1990s. The two men remained close friends and colleagues until Mr. Deodene's passing in January 2011 at the age of 76.

The store's name has always been a source of amusement for people not familiar with its origin according to Mr. Mann. He relates that Frank Deodene was a former Director of the Chatham Library in the 1960s. There was an approximate two year period during that time that Mr. Deodene began selling rare books out of his Chatham home. He referred to his business enterprise as The Chatham Bookseller. Upon leaving his directorship position, bookselling became his primary occupation. Mr. Deodene then moved his mail order operation to its current Madison address, primarily for space considerations. Since the business was strictly mail order, there was no real necessity to change the name, and it has thus remained The Chatham Bookseller over the ensuing years, after the business's conversion completely over to a retail operation.

On a personal note, this writer first became acquainted with The Chatham Bookseller in 1987. I purchased a coveted,

out-of-print, first edition tome that year from the late store owner, Mr. Frank Deodene. The book was "Edgar Allan Poe, A Critical Biography," (1941) by renowned Poe scholar, Arthur Hobson Quinn. His work is considered by many to be the foremost complete and authoritative biography on the life of Poe through the present day.

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Earlier this spring I had the opportunity to sit down with Mr. Mann at his eclectic bookstore, located in the heart of downtown Madison. He shared his thoughts on why The Chatham Bookseller has remained the keeper of the flame for almost a half century and retains its enduring appeal as a local treasure for the residents of Madison and many loyal customers in the neighboring communities. Mr. Mann also provided his opinions on various aspects of the bookselling business, and view as to the future of bookstores in general. Below are the highlights from that April 9, 2014 interview:

JE: Growing up in Chatham NJ your family was neighbors with the Deodones. How did your friendship with the former owner, Frank Deodene grow into a working relationship?

JM: I was living in Spain working on a doctoral dissertation at the time and just about finished. Frank knew I was returning to the United States and would probably return to this area because my mother lives here. He called me and asked if I would spend the summer with him. I think it may have been the summer of 1990 or 1991. I said yes and we both assumed it would be a short-lived connection or relationship. I worked in the store full time during the day, while continuing to work on my doctoral dissertation in the mornings and evenings. It went very well during those months and for a bunch of other reasons, some professional and some personal, I decided to stay in this area and we continued to work together.

It is kind of comical to describe our business relationship because it was never a business relationship in any sort of formal or technical sense. Ours was a friendship that also involved working together. We always talked in sort of vague terms about the actual ownership issue, but we almost never did anything concrete about that until I was essentially forced to do it when Frank died. It is complicated to explain the corporation status. His wife had a role in that. We had to make some alterations, of course, to the corporation status. But our relationship was one, I would say, of partners long before there was any formal transfer of ownership.

JE: When did you officially become the new owner of The Chatham Bookseller?

JM: I think it was 2012. During the intervening months between Frank's death and the actual transfer of ownership, I think his wife was the President of the corporation by default and also was the owner. But I don't believe we actually signed the actual transfer documents until the end of that year.

JE: How would you classify The Chatham Bookseller? Is it an antiquarian bookstore, a used bookstore, or a rare bookshop?

JM: There is a listing in the ABAA (Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America) directory, which is probably the most important book trade organization. Our listing in that directory states that we are a general used book store. My late colleague used that designation to distinguish himself from the other booksellers he considered pretentious, who called themselves rare booksellers. But in fact, The Chatham Bookseller is both a general used book store and an antiquarian store. We do both, and that, I would say, is the strength and beauty of the place.

JE: Let's discuss the physical make-up of The Chatham Bookseller. You have described your shop as both a general used book store and an antiquarian store. What selection of older books will greet your customers when they enter the store?

JM: We carry a lot of different subjects. I would say that the emphasis of The Chatham Bookseller is on literary fiction and non-fiction subjects like history, art, philosophy and other scholarly books in similar subjects. The rare books are still some part of the business. The store, once upon a time, focused on the history of science, medicine and technology. We still have a fair number of books in those fields that one might consider rare. I think the best way to describe the store's contents, so to speak, is to recall an incident about fifteen years ago where I was on the phone selling a book by the Kelmscott Press, which was one of the important late nineteenth and early twentieth century private presses. I think the book cost \$5,000 and we were selling it by telephone. At the same time I was selling a paperback book in the store for \$1.50. That sort of juxtaposition gives you some idea of the range of the store.

JE: How has The Chatham Bookseller gone about acquiring its large inventory of used and rare books from the period you began working at the store in the early 1990s through the present? Do you purchase books from customers as well as performing independent searches?

JM: In those early days we needed two people in the store all the time. One was usually out on the road buying books and the other was manning the store. Initially it was Frank who was out making those house calls and I was in the store. Later on, either one of us would usually do that during the day, in what you might think of as regular business hours.

There are two principal sources for us. One is private house calls, which I now do myself. Now that I am essentially alone in the store, I tend to do those calls at different times: early in the morning, after I close the store, and sometimes on the weekends. The other principal source is from book sales, such as library and other institutional book sales, but we probably do more private buying. And, of course, people bring books to the store all the time. That is one of the advantages of having a physical bookshop over an online business. It is not just a place to sell, but it's also a place to buy and, therefore, the store functions as a very good point of attraction for buying books.

JE: What are the store hours?

JM: The store is open Monday through Saturday, 9:00 a.m. through 5:30 p.m., and on Sundays, 12:00 p.m. through 5:00 p.m.

JE: How many employees comprise your staff?

JM: We have had two part-time employees in recent years. One employee, David Rode, just retired last month (March). He had been with the store off and on for a very long period when it was a catalog mail order business. I believe David was involved in writing some of the catalog descriptions when the business was mail order and more geared towards rare books than it is now. I currently have one regular part-time employee, Kathy Rodgers, who has been with the store approximately two years. She is a very capable and helpful person.

JE: The Chatham Bookseller is centrally located in the suburban borough of Madison. This community is considered by many to have the look and feel of a quaint New England town or village. The townscape offers a certain appeal conducive to specialty shops, such as your bookstore, in this downtown neighborhood. With that said, it is clearly evident that a large number of local boutiques and book stores, once abundant throughout small and large communities in New Jersey have fallen on hard times. The resulting outcome has been many store closures in recent years. Certain towns, boroughs and villages, however, are exceptions to this undercurrent that has been evolving in downtowns for more than a quarter of a century. One such community that is an exception to this downward spiral is Madison. Despite having to deal with occasional residents' complaints concerning a shortage of parking spaces in the Main Street area and the local merchants' loss of business due to the nearby Short Hills Mall and Livingston Mall, the borough of Madison continues to thrive and prosper. Do you agree, and if so, why is the Madison downtown area an exception to the many other neighborhood town centers across this state which are suffering?

JM: I believe there are a couple of things to say. It is important to point out that Madison, in particular, is an affluent town and Morris County, in general, is an affluent area. And that is helpful because there is certainly some connection between let's say, literacy, interest in reading, and money. This is both from the point of view of people who buy books, but also people who sell them. It is also worth saying that Madison is a university town. Depending on where you draw the border, you could say there are three institutions of higher learning in Madison, or at least very close. One certainly is in Madison, which is Drew University. Then there is Fairleigh Dickinson University, which is sort of on the border, but technically it is also in Madison. And the College of Saint Elizabeth, which is located in Convent Station, is not too far from Madison. So that is a relevant thing to bear in mind as well. Madison does have a thriving downtown, even in comparison to other local downtowns like Morristown and Chatham. There is a very active Chamber of Commerce in Madison that does a lot of work to keep the downtown vibrant, so you do not see too many empty storefronts here. I do think that this kind of community supports a business like this better than others. We do have some business with the universities and a lot of business with local people as well. I don't think of Madison as a tourist destination exactly, though some people interested in local history come here maybe to go to the Museum of Early Trades and Crafts across the street, or for other reasons such as visiting Drew University, which is architecturally interesting. So there is a very close connection between the type of community we're in, and this kind of business, that's true. At the same time, Madison is also a commuter town. My guess is that the majority of people who live here work in Manhattan.

JE: Madison has been often referred to as a "bedroom community."

JM: And that is probably true, so in that sense maybe it's not the ideal location, especially for a place that doesn't have late hours during the week, but we are here on the weekends. I don't think that commuter status has been detrimental to us. It's probably the opposite. And at the same time, even though Madison has all of those universities, it doesn't have the character of the university town as others places might, like Madison, Wisconsin or even New Brunswick, New Jersey, though New Brunswick may be a more complicated case. Madison is a bit of an anomaly. It is not exactly commuter only and not exactly university only. It's a mixture.

JE: Does The Chatham Bookseller draw customers who are students at the neighboring universities?

JM: Regularly.

JE: What geographic range of towns and cities do your customers come from?

JM: They come from some distance. In some instances there are certainly customers who come from other counties

outside of Morris County who come regularly. The book business has changed dramatically, as you were suggesting. It used to be that we had a lot of business, 50% maybe of the store business annually, from other booksellers who came from great distances, sometimes other countries to buy here, and then return to their locations, and sell there.

JE: A great many local bookstores that sold primarily new and current books have closed in recent years. This is not the case in all towns, boroughs, and villages, but certainly a number of them. A strong argument can be made that the initial reason for the decline and closings of those specific types of bookshops originated with the advent of superstores such as Borders and Barnes & Noble, more than twenty years ago. This has only accelerated with the continual growth of the online books sales through websites like Amazon and AbeBooks. And especially in the case of Amazon, we see them offering significant price reductions on new books, and free shipping to its customers as a means to under-cut their competition. Faced with the current state of affairs in the bookselling business, are you at all optimistic about the survival of bookstores for those that sell new and current books, as well as specialty stores like your own that stock used and rare books? And what is your opinion about the future of books in print as opposed to electronic books?

JM: Well, I would say from the point of view of the store itself, times are difficult. There is no doubt that anyone associated with print media, in one form or another, sees a dramatic change going on. And that affects everyone and it affects them adversely, including The Chatham Bookseller. I would say two things in response to the questions. One is that books have, from my point of view, two aspects. One is the content delivery aspect, and the other is the book, as object. As content delivery systems, they are probably doomed because there are more efficient and even better ways of transmitting information or communicating.

JE: By more efficient or better ways, do you mean electronically?

JM: Electronically, that's right. A good example would be the encyclopedia. Print encyclopedias are already on the way out, if they are not completely dead because it is so much easier to store all of the information and update the information electronically. So as an information delivery system or content delivery system, the electronic or digital form is obviously better. As objects though, the other aspect of the book industry, books do have a future in the same way that furniture or antiques or paintings have a future because they have some physical quality and you might even say, some cultural or historical link that is valuable to people. What that means is that as a bookseller, you have more interest these days in copies of books that are unique in some ways: signed, limited editions, or special in some way so that the object component of the book stands out over the content. The position we're in now with print media is, from my point of view, very closely analogous to a transition that took place in the fifteenth century from handwriting or manuscript production, to printing with movable type. And there are many ways in which the transition that occurred in that time period into the sixteenth century is similar to what is going on now. If you just look at the way Amazon pitches its Kindle, for example, what they are trying to replicate, is the experience the reader has when reading a physical book. They don't want to shock their clients or their customers with a technology that's so different from what they are used to. And that is exactly what the printed book did in the fifteenth century.

JE: And you just led into what was going to be my very next question. Are you the owner of a Kindle?

JM: No, but it's not because of any sort of ideological opposition. It's more an aesthetic matter and a matter of habit.

JE: I recall an article in the *New York Times* from some time ago, possibly as long as five to eight years ago. The author interviewed a number of journalism students who were nineteen or twenty years old. The question asked of these young men and women was to approximate when they last bought a newspaper. Bearing in mind how many years ago this informal survey was taken and the article published, I was quite surprised to learn that the majority of the students responded they last bought a newspaper when they were thirteen or fourteen years old. Now so many years later, I would like to pose this question to you as an educator. As a professor at two universities, and by nature of the curriculum that you teach, I will make an assumption that your students, in particular, are avid book and newspaper readers by the course studies they have undertaken.

JM: Not always willingly.

JE: Given your students grew up in this digital age, what is your perception of how these young people go about handling their course studies? Have you had any direct discussions with them on their approach to immersing themselves in the subject matter?

JM: That comes up all the time, particularly at Montclair State University where much of the communication between instructor and student takes place electronically. That's personal communications, but also assignments are transmitted in that way. So often the students are reading texts in some digital form. Maybe they print it out, but most of them, I suspect, read it on either a mobile device, or on a laptop, or some other similar machine. So much of the reading that they do for class takes place in the digital format and that is in many ways a relief for both instructor and student. Much of their experience of life is mediated by a screen of some sort. If you want to be an effective teacher, you have to recognize that is where it is these days.

JE: Referring to what you suggested earlier, the digital format for certain types of text books is possibly superior to the printed text.

JM: That could be, and that is more and more the trend, particularly in the sciences, but to some extent in the humanities too. But the students I have worked with do have to read, at least, excerpts of novels. Cervantes comes to mind, or recently my students had to read Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal*. Some of them might have done that in print form, but the way I communicated it to them, at least in the case of Swift, was electronically. So they probably read it in digital form.

JE: Would it then be accurate to say that the majority of your students read, whether it is novels or text books, in the digital form?

JM: I think so. In general, I would say they do not read as much as they should. Some of that is because of the format. That's the most interesting question. Is there a difference in the way people read because of the format? I think the answer to that is clearly yes. So some people are afraid that the nature of digital reading lends itself to a sort of superficial reading, but it is not based on any evidence.

JE: Do you believe people are reading more or less today?

JM: That is somewhat hard to answer, and my own view is not based on any kind of hard evidence. People are certainly able to read more, that is, the access is greater. It is not maybe the quantity that's the issue, but the nature of the reading that their doing. If I were to look at the young people that I know, both those that are related to me, and those I work with in those various institutions, I think they are constantly confronted with text, but also with image. And they may be more adept at reading images than people in our generation. That is unclear yet. Let's put it this way, the amount of time that they spend confronted with text and images probably is more than the time we spend confronted with those things.

JE: I would like to conclude our discussion by posing the following question. If you were to make your biggest pitch for the relevancy of bookstores and books in print today, what would you say to your audience?

JM: I think there are several parts to an answer to that question. One pitch is an aesthetic, I suppose. My own experience or my own predilection is that the book form still has something very functional and very beautiful about it. But I think increasingly you can replicate those experiences electronically, so maybe that's not such a strong hold or draw for other people, but it is still for some. The object nature of the book that I was talking about earlier is still an important draw. I would say that the connection between format and reading experience is an important one to many people. What I mean by that is the object of the book and the format of the book communicate something about the reading experience that is different and in some ways preferable, at least for some, to an electronic format. And I think that will always be the case on some level. But I would also say that the beauty of a place like this is not only the stuff we sell, it is the atmosphere that such a store offers. It is an atmosphere, at least ideally, of an unhurried experience. Many people come here, I think, to find a sort of refuge from the bombardment that they're subject to: text, image, noise and other distractions. So the appeal of a place like The Chatham Bookseller is as much its atmosphere, as the actual books we sell.

JE: Jesse, thank you for taking time out from your busy schedule for this interview today. I appreciate it very much.

JM: Thank you, John.

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Note: *Jesse Mann, the current owner of The Chatham Bookseller, holds teaching positions at two universities. He has been an adjunct professor in the Classics Department of Montclair State University, off and on, for approximately twenty years. Additionally, Mr. Mann occasionally teaches at the Madison campus of Drew University. Over the years he has taught Latin, German, Canon Law and an ongoing summer course on the history of reading for four consecutive years. For professional reasons, his reading habits comprise mostly non-fiction, history, mainly Medieval Renaissance and European history. He is a collector of the Oxford Books of Verse.*

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