

The Chatham Bookseller Interview
with the owners, Kathy Rodgers and Richard Chalfin
Interviewed by John Esposito Interview - Date: February 23, 2016

Supplement to Article: “The Chatham Bookseller”
Plus: A Special Visit from Harper Lee”

JE: This is John Esposito at The Chatham Bookseller, 8 Green Village Road in Madison, New Jersey on February 23, 2016. I have the pleasure of speaking today with the shop’s co-owners, Ms. Kathy Rodgers and Mr. Richard Chalfin. We will be discussing the recent first anniversary reopening of The Chatham Bookseller under their new ownership.

My congratulations to both of you in celebration of the anniversary. Kathy, let me begin with you. When did you and Richard purchase the bookstore from the prior owner, Mr. Jesse Mann?

KR: It was February 5, 2015 when we signed all the papers and officially took ownership of the shop.

JE: Had the shop been closed for any period prior to the new ownership?

KR: Actually, no. The shop closed for a couple of weeks for vacation in August 2014 and then in September 2014, Richard and I took over operation of the shop on Jesse’s behalf. He still owned it, but we kept the shop open and the sale went through in February 2015.

JE: Kathy and Richard, I would appreciate if you would each tell me about your professional backgrounds and careers prior to becoming the new owners of The Chatham Bookseller.

KR: I am a retired attorney. I have been a collector for many, many years and that is how I discovered this shop when I moved from New York City to New Jersey. I also always had a dream of owning a bookshop. And then I discovered this bookshop and found out they needed some help, so I started working here and doing the retail side of the book shop business. And then, the whole story of Jesse needing to sell and Jesse putting Richard together with his vast experience in selling books online and knowledge of a wide array of books, and my knowledge of more of the business side and the bricks and mortar side, so as Richard says, we are an arranged marriage (laughter).

JE: I think that’s an excellent pairing for success.

Richard, please tell me about your own background and expand on your business relationship with Kathy under your co-ownership.

RC: I would like to plead the fifth (laughter).

I grew up in the book world. I used to go with my Dad to Lodi, NJ. He had a shack there. It was called Frankie’s Market. I used to go out with him on Sundays and help out. I helped him mark

comics, like ten for a quarter. He had these characters that he would drive there. It was like a carnival atmosphere. He would just do his thing, you know. I always admired that about him. He was a level-headed guy, never got crazy about stuff. And then I would work for my Dad in Passaic, NJ. I always wanted to be a performer and some form of dancer, and I hurt my knee. Then I did stand-up for many years. Meanwhile, I had a book search service in New York. My father had set me up with that. He said, "Look, you can advertise in the papers and I'll have the books." And he never had any of the books. So I found out about Book Row (a stretch of Fourth Avenue, between Eighth Street and Fourteenth Street) in Manhattan, and I would take my notes and find books for people. And then I developed a business called The Better Book Getter and got to know about books through the years and the different dealers and the whole world of books, and what to look for. I have a photographic memory, so I can remember what a book looks like, which really helps when you go into a shop and you're scanning. And as things progressed, more and more bookstores were closing and this (The Chatham Bookseller) became one of my best sources. I knew Frank (the late Frank Deodene, original owner of The Chatham Bookseller), and he knew my uncle. And he used to ask me when I came in, "Rich, are you still dancing?" Then I found out that Frank passed away and Jesse took over. I developed a nice relationship with Jesse. He was great to me. He gave me good prices on books.

JE: Richard, when we spoke earlier by phone, you referred to yourself as a "book scout." In layman's terms, is a book scout an individual who goes on book searches?

RC: Yes, like someone says, "Get me anything on hooked rugs," or "any first editions of Stephen King," and then you go out to different stores. And that's the fun. It's like treasure hunting.

JE: You also mentioned by phone that you grew up in Brooklyn. I am curious, what if any connection did your family have with New Jersey, given his businesses were in Lodi and Passaic, New Jersey?

RC: I don't know. He started in Keyport, New Jersey. I don't know why. I guess because maybe that's where the money was, that's where the buyers were.

KR: Richard you didn't tell your four generations story.

RC: I'm a fourth-generation bookseller. I always say the first three-hundred years were slow and things are picking-up (laughter). Matter-of-fact, my cousin did a genealogy search. She traced the Chalfin name back to the 1600s and learned they were printers. As far as I know my great-grandfather sold books in Russia by backpack and would go from town to town. And then he moved to Long Island. He was like a hermit in Montauk. And my grandfather would open up stores in Brooklyn and got my uncle and father into the business. So I was always around that world. And my mother had a store in Brooklyn. It was called My Friend's Bookstore.

JE: Amazing. You've had a real family history in the business.

RC: She was a riot. She was funny.

JE: As a specialty bookstore that does not sell current books, how would you classify The Chatham Bookseller? Would you refer to your shop as a used bookstore, a rare bookstore, an antiquarian bookstore?

RC: I would say it's a used and antiquarian bookstore.

KR: Yes. We sell used and rare books.

JE: Explain what a used bookstore and an antiquarian are because there is a difference.

KR: Yes, there is a difference. If you buy a book in the shop today and bring it to us tomorrow, it is a used book. Antiquarian books are considered old, rare and collectable. The man in the street would understand the word "rare" books better than the word "antiquarian" books. Rare books can also be fairly recent. First editions of the first books by popular authors had small printings and they are not all that old but they are rare and scarce and valued by collectors. We sell general used and rare books.

JE: I came across a recent article in the New York Times (*The Plot Twist: E-Book Sales Slip, and Print Is Far from Dead – September 22, 2015*) which I found very interesting and encouraging regarding the future of brick and mortar bookstores. The gist of the piece is that while analysts once predicted that e-books would overtake print by 2015, digital sales have slowed sharply and some e-book adopters are returning to print, or juggling between devices and paper. Furthermore, there has been a marked increase in independent bookstores, and publishers such as Hachette, Simon & Schuster and Penguin are investing and expanding their warehouses and speeding up distribution of books. Whether this trend is only temporary remains to be seen. While the article reports that while no one is ready to declare the death of the digital publishing revolution, the statistics reveal that the book industry is witnessing a reverse migration to print. This amounts to wonderful news for physical bookstores.

Unfortunately, this same trend cannot be said for newspapers in print where sales continue to plummet and big name newspapers are closing. The fact is that newspapers and books equate to totally separate reading experiences for readers.

RC: Ultimately, if the bookstores have survived Amazon and the mega-sellers, then the other stuff is like a fad. Part of it is a fad, and part of it is necessity that people need to have it for a school, whatever, and you are still going to have people who use the Kindle, but this is a destination. It's a place to get out, to have something in your hands that you love, that you feel it, and you can't wait to get back to it. It's not the same with a machine, it's just not the same.

KR: We have customers coming in and saying, "You know, I've had my Kindle for two or three years, but I want a real book again." And we have the people who come in and say, "I won't touch a Kindle. I have to have the real book." We get young people who want a real book. And if

you start a child out, reading to them from children's books and they can turn the pages, and they can touch the pages, it's a very special experience. They relate that special experience to real books. And I think that carries on through a lifetime. And when you read a book, there is the physical object, often it's a work of art, often it's just a familiar friend. Ah, I remember that paragraph and I can go back to page twenty-two and reread it, and I know exactly where it is. I know where I am in the book. I'm holding it. I can tell I'm half-way through. Oh my goodness, I only have ten more pages and I'm coming to the end and I don't want it to end. It's a very difference experience. With a newspaper, you're basically reading to get information. And that's what you go to a computer for, to get information. A book, you go for a bigger experience.

JE: Let's speak about the book searches that you provide for your customers at The Chatham Bookseller. Do you both perform the searches and how do you go about it?

RC: We both do them. There are still people who don't want a computer, who don't have a computer, and we're glad to offer this service. We just do the leg work.

JE: And what is the process? Is it by receiving phone calls from people who say "I have some books I would like you to look at?"

KR: There are two different things. There's the searching where we go out and buy. And then there's the search service where somebody wants a specific book and we go out and look for that specific book. So in the broader sense, how do we supply the shop? We go out and the books come in. So we have people walking in with books that they want to sell. We look through them and see what we like. We'll do a little research on them and see if any of them have some special value. And then we also go out and we go to book sales. We go to people's homes, which is a service we offer. We will make house calls. If somebody is downsizing, moving or whatever, and they need to get rid of books, we'll go and we look at them and pack them up and haul them out of there. It makes life a lot easier for people to go through us. You can buy books at auctions, so there are kinds of sources. And we're out there doing that. It's amazing what people bring in, and what they have squirreled away at home.

JE: When new ownership takes over an existing business, it's customary for the new owner or owners to want to place their own stamp on the business they've assumed, and possibly take the business in a new or slightly different direction. In what ways, subtle or otherwise, have you brought changes to The Chatham Bookseller?

RC: Well, one thing we added was ephemera, which is printed paper products like old magazines, old ads, things that are nostalgic, postcards.

KR: And used for cruise ships (laughter).

RC: Right. Everybody has a niche. So we have a lot of stuff on New Jersey, we have a lot of stuff on travel, music and people love that. They love to go through these things. And they are so

vintage and a lot it is from another era and it's so cool to see how ad people presented things back in the thirties, the fifties, the seventies. It's different. So that's what we've added. And we're also trying to be more organized here, making it more feasible for people to find stuff. A little more order.

JE: Are there any particular types of specialized used or rare books that you carry in the shop?

KR: It's easier to say what we don't specialize in.

JE: Okay.

KR: Because we are a general used bookshop, we have literature, we have non-fiction in all areas of endeavor, we have art books, we have how-to books for crafts and things. We don't take text books. We don't do the self-help books. We don't do the mass-market bestsellers that I call the drugstore books, so you can buy John Grisham in the drugstore and the supermarket. You don't need to buy him here. People come here to find the books that they can't find. When we do literature, obviously we do first editions, we do the classics, but what we're looking for, can be modern and contemporary literature, but we want it to be something that is an award winner, that has some meat to it and isn't just a six-week wonder on The New York Times bestseller list. And that's what people come here for, the unusual book, the one they can't find at Barnes & Noble or anyplace else. And just to add to what Richard said, in the book field we've added a lot in area of sports, entertainment and fashion. We've added more in the area of law and murder mysteries or what my father used to call, detectors (laughter). We are also trying very hard and want to continue the tradition of the academic books that Jesse and Frank had. So we have sections on religion and philosophy and science and history from all around the world.

JE: When you go out and perform searches, how far a geographic area will you travel? New York? Pennsylvania?

KR: If the car goes there, we'll go there.

RC: Yes. Sure, we'll go there. If it's worth it.

KR: And we have a large business online. And those books are not in the shop. These are books that are more rare, more scarce, that have some special value. We have thousands of books online that we sell. And if someone comes into the shop, we can go pull it for them.

RC: I would say that 99.9% of used bookstores have books online. That's the only way to survive. The walk-in is less than it was before the internet and it reaches out to millions of people, you know, a rare book. You have to do that. It's the competition, it's the market. That's where the market is.

KR: We sell books all over the world.

JE: My next question was going to be ...

RC: Could you drop off a book in Germany for us? (laughter)

KR: We have one going out.

JE: From what areas do you draw your walk-in customers from in New Jersey? And do you have customers at the shop from as far away as Manhattan?

KR: Yes. The entire region. Northern New Jersey is probably the basic market, but we get people from all over.

JE: What is your customer mix between young people, college students vs. older folks?

KR: We have many interesting people who come to the shop. We get a lot of people from the Shakespeare Theatre (Shakespeare Theatre Company of New Jersey, 36 Madison Avenue, Madison, NJ). They come in here looking for drama, Shakespeare, and all kinds of drama and books about the theatre, and theatre production and poetry and literature. And we do get professors and students from the universities (Drew University, Fairleigh Dickinson University, and College of St. Elizabeth). As a percentage of our clientele, younger folks are probably less than half, but they are very enthusiastic. They love it.

JE: We've now spoken about a number of changes and additions, subtle and otherwise that you have made to the shop since you have assumed ownership. Is there anything additional you would care to mention in that respect which we haven't discussed?

RC: Yes. We have a very clean bathroom. (laughter) Probably one of the cleanest in the book business.

JE: What are the store hours of The Chatham Bookseller?

KR: We are open six days a week, Tuesdays through Sundays. And we are open all day, Tuesday through Saturday, and noon to five o'clock on Sunday.

We have a Facebook page.

RC: And we sell our books online through major booksellers.

KR: We post books on Amazon, AbeBooks, Alibris, and Biblio, and then Richard puts select books on eBay. eBay is great for certain books.

RC: We pay a commission to sell our books on these major sellers' websites.

JE: Can you post your books on multiple bookseller sites at the same time?

RC: Yes.

KR: And within a period of weeks we will have our own website.

RC: Yes, the website is being built as we speak. And the beauty of that is you can order direct and not paying anyone commission when the customer orders a book through the website.

JE: Are you using any local advertising to promote The Chatham Bookseller?

RC: We are included in the Morris County - Madison Discovery Map.

KR: And that is online as well.

RC: People are not looking at the Yellow Pages like before. We are on Yelp. We do Facebook and Twitter. And that's the way the message is sent. And we want to hook into that. That's the way of communicating now. It's not the telephone. It's the smartphone, it's that computer, that thing in your hand that, "Oh, I want to find a bookstore."

KR: I look at the newspaper that comes every Thursday where I live. It's mostly trades, electricians, carpenters, real estate ads, restaurants. I don't see retail ads, which is another reason why we haven't advertised there.

JE: Richard, I intend to ask you about your amazing personal experience meeting Harper Lee, who passed away four days ago. (Harper Lee, author of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Go Set a Watchman*, died at the age of 89 on February 19, 2016) Before doing so, I would like to ask both of you for any closing thoughts about your famous bookstore which has now been in business for almost fifty years and remains an important mainstay to the residents of Madison NJ and the surrounding communities.

KR: The notion of books that we talked about earlier, the special quality of books, the material quality is one aspect, but there is also the special thing about a bookshop. 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. You know, you go to a closing store and don't usually strike up conversations with the other customers. But in a bookshop you do. And we want people to have that experience. That's part of the destination. "It's Sunday afternoon, what should we do? Let's go to the bookshop. Let's go to The Chatham Bookseller."

RC: Yes. And always being in this business, I've always felt at home in a used book store. I love to go out and go book hunting. I always feel that nobody bothers me. I can just kind of get lost in it. There is definitely a comfort to it.

JE: The Chatham Bookseller cannot really be compared with other independent books stores because your inventory is primarily used and rare books. How then do you believe your shop has been affected, if at all, by the likes of a Barnes & Noble, given that you operate a specialty store unlike the majority of independent bookstores which sell primarily current books?

RC: I think we knew what we were getting into when we began this. I think it's a challenge because you have to be unique in the sense of why would people choose to come here instead of Amazon or another store. I think we're still trying to find that, still trying to get to that. This is all new to me. Used is new, but just the sense of retail is new. But I love to help people out. I love to find stuff, that's my nature, to find for people. That's what I enjoy and I think people will like that. They'll know that we're looking out for them. I'll call someone and say, hey, I got this in. I like sales, but I like people to know that we're thinking of them.

JE: And Kathy, this feeds in to what you said earlier about the experience of browsing in a bookstore and you and Richard getting to know your customers, which is something impossible for people to get online or in a Barnes & Noble superstore.

KR: Yes, but as to the question of the Amazon effect. Amazon is impacting every retailer, including used bookstores. And Amazon now is going to open its own bricks and mortars shops.

JE: I just read that in the newspaper in the last couple of days.

KR: And I'm not sure how that is going to work. But it does have an impact on us because it has created a great deal of competition and it controls a lot of the market because it sets the rules. But algorithms don't know as much as booksellers know about books. And they get it wrong a lot. They get the descriptions wrong; they get the nature of the book wrong. And so when you come to the bookshop you get the knowledge of the booksellers and you know you're getting what's advertised. It really is in the condition; it really is the book you're looking for. So it's definitely made it tougher, but we still offer something more and I think people appreciate that.

JE: I would agree that is both an honest and accurate assessment.

We can always segue back, but I would now like to move on and ask you, Richard, to tell me about that very interesting experience a number of years ago when you met Harper Lee. I'm certain our readers will be quite interested in this for a number of reasons, especially because Ms. Lee has been in the news so much these past two years since releasing her second book, *Go Set a Watchman*, and all the controversy surrounding its release, including her health, and the change in the character depiction of Atticus Finch in the second novel, and of course, Ms. Lee's death only four days ago at age 89. I understand that although she lived in Monroeville, Alabama, she kept an apartment in New York City through the years. And so Richard, tell me how you came to know Harper Lee in 1997 and then two years later when she came to see you at your New York office.

[Richard Chalfin wrote an article about meeting Harper Lee in The New York Observer: *The Day Harper Lee Came to See Me*, which was published on December 4, 2000. The article also discusses his background in the book industry. Mr. Chalfin's entire article is viewable online at: <http://observer.com/2000/12/the-day-harper-lee-came-to-see-me/>]

RC: Argosy Bookstores used to refer customers to me when I had my book search company in New York. So Argosy referred Harper Lee to me. And 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 and had it packed and sent to her. When I called to tell her it had been shipped, 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." I said, "Are you Harper Lee?" And she said, "Yes, that's right."

JE: I understand that she offered to sign a copy of *Mockingbird* for you.

RC: Yes. I found a fine British first edition for \$400.00 and picked it up. It was another year before a Georgia dealer, for reasons known only to him, listed one (American first edition) for \$10.00. It arrived jacketless, but in good condition. I lost Ms. Lee's address and did not find it for another year. I thought I had missed my chance, even after I had found her name and P.O. Box in Alabama. I sent the books anyway. It was late 1999. Then the spring (2000) arrived and she called. "I'm in New York but the books are in Alabama with my sister. When she sends them up, I'll sign them." I said, "I'll pick them up." But she said, "I'll take care of it." Another week went by. Then the call. "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. She had taken a bus over from the East Side. She said she was about to walk up to Columbia (University).

I sold the American first edition. I made four figures on it. Had there been a 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.

JE: That certainly is a wonderful story, Richard. It is something to always treasure.

Kathy and Richard, I want to thank you for spending time with me today. I enjoyed our conversation immensely. And I wish to congratulate you both on the first year anniversary reopening under your new ownership and wish you much success in the operation of this treasured bookshop for many more years to come.

KR: We thank you.

John Esposito is a freelance journalist. His work has been published in The Star Ledger, The (Bergen) Record, and (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. Mr. Esposito has interviewed such acclaimed writers as John Updike, Pete Hamill, and Mary Higgins Clark.

“The Chatham Bookseller” article has been published in several local New Jersey newspapers including the Madison Eagle, the Chatham Courier and the Florham Park Eagle.

The article and this Q. and A. interview are included on Mr. Esposito’s website: www.PieceworkJournals.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/Piecework-Journals-by-John-Esposito-492572960923211/

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