

## Bookstore operators worry about their industry's future

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By **SHARON SMITH**, *The Patriot-News*



Urban Word Independent bookstore at 921 N. Third St. in Harrisburg. The store sells African-American books. [View full size](#)DAN GLEITER, The Patriot-News Terrena Johnson and her husband, Cornelius, of Harrisburg, own The

Crouched in front of the black history section at the **Midtown Scholar Bookstore**, Dominique Wisniewski studied the spines of the books in front of her.

Wisniewski wasn't shopping. She was on a hunt. When she stood up she held two treasures in her hand: a paperback copy of "Autobiography of a Female Slave" by Mattie Griffith and "Ain't I a Woman" by Sojourner Truth.

"Autobiography of a Female Slave" was coming home with Wisniewski to join her collection of "special books" at her home in Atlantic Highlands, N.J.

"You never know what you can find," the 25-year-old said of independent bookstores such as the Midtown Scholar. "Where can you go and get books like this? If something like this were to go away, it would be sad."

Many readers and those in the retail book business wonder what the future holds for independent bookstores such as the Midtown Scholar and mega-bookstores such as Borders and Barnes & Noble in light of **Borders' bankruptcy** and the growing popularity of e-readers.

The Ann Arbor, Mich.-based Borders filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection Feb. 16, citing the challenging economy of the last two years and a rapidly changing retail environment for books and related products.

Nationwide, Borders is closing about 200 superstores. The Borders in Lower Paxton Township, Lebanon and York will remain open.

Like most independent bookstore owners in the midstate, Eric Pappenfuse, Midtown Scholar's owner, looks at the situation with Borders and wonders what it could mean for his store.

"Borders is not going entirely out of business," he said. "I see Borders skimming off the fat and becoming smaller and more vibrant. There is a question of where we'll be in 10 and 20 years. There are real questions. I don't think there's any question as to whether people will need gathering places to engage with other readers."

Pure sale numbers underscore the reason those who champion bookstores are concerned.

In 2009, U.S. book sales were \$23.9 billion. That represents a 1.8 percent decline from the \$24.3 billion book sales in 2008, according to the [Association of American Publishers](#).

E-book sales reached \$313 million in 2009, an increase of 176.6 percent over the previous year, according to the association.

"The book industry is changing extremely rapidly," said Greg Charleston, an Atlanta-based turnaround expert and senior managing director at Conway MacKenzie. "It is very similar to what happened to music retail stores about five years ago. The bookstore market was already overbuilt. Now electronic books are coming on very strong. ... In my opinion, bookstores will continue to close over the next few years until there are very few left."

With its five floors of rare, used and out-of-print books, Midtown Scholar has the feel of a college library. The shop's stained-glass fixtures, large earth-tone mural of Pennsylvania's history and what looks like a reproduction of the Liberty Bell that hangs from the vaulted ceiling makes the venue almost like a little gallery on Third Street. Bistro tables mingle with the stacks of books, and patrons work on laptops while they sip coffee and nosh on pastries. Soft jazz plays in the background.

By design, Pappenfuse tried to create more of a community center, where people are encouraged to come together and discuss everything from good books to the city's future.

"In order for a bookstore to be successful, it has to be more than simply books," he said.

His customers agree.

Chad Smucker was hunkered down in front of his laptop on the fourth level studying for an exam. He is in the physician's assistant master's program at Lock Haven University. His classes are held in Harrisburg.

He comes to Midtown Scholar two to three times a week to study. Smucker comes for the Wi-Fi, coffee and the atmosphere.

"I feel like I get more done," Smucker said. "It's a comfortable place to read."

Amanda Frankeny drove into Harrisburg from Mechanicsburg to meet a friend for tea at the midtown bookstore.

The Midtown Scholar has hosted live music, political debates and authors. Next month, the bookstore will host Harrisburg Hope, a forum that addresses the city's astronomical debt and discusses job creation.

Lawrence Knorr, co-owner of [Sunbury Press](#) in Lemoyne, doesn't see the mega-bookstores going away. He believes their success will depend on the success of their e-book business. Amazon, which sells the Kindle, is doing better than both Barnes & Noble and Borders. Barnes & Noble, which offers the Nook, is doing better than Borders. Borders sells others' e-reader devices but does not have its own.

As the industry evolves, it should create an opportunity for small, independent bookstores, Knorr said.

“Bookstores will continue to reduce their retail footprints and focus on either a more limited set of best-sellers, or focus on a niche specialty,” Knorr said. “This is a great opportunity for independent retailers to fill a more localized need. People love the social and educational aspects of bookstores.”

Kathy Graham, owner of the **Paperback Exchange**, has her concerns, though.

In this day of online retailers, iPads, android phones, e-books and e-readers, the loss of any bookstore — even a competitor’s — is more of a reason to mourn than rejoice.

“This is the first I have been worried,” said Graham, who has been in the used paperback book business for more than 28 years.

Graham’s business has weathered computers and the Internet, but she doesn’t know what the future holds now that e-books and e-readers have become more mainstream.

This summer should tell Graham and other book retailers a lot about their future, since that’s when sales usually pick up.

Graham believes a lot of people received e-readers this year for Christmas, so she’s waiting to see if they skip a visit to her store and download a book instead.

She hopes the clientele she’s built up through discounts and strong customer service will continue to show their support.

Samuel G. Marcus, owner of the **Bookworm Bookstore at the West Shore Farmers Market** in Lemoyne, believes his knowledgeable staff and his assortment of rare and out-of-print books will help, too.

“I have people who work here who are historians,” said Marcus, a former educator. “They know their books.”

Borders and Barnes & Noble are actually some of his customers. Often the big box retailers would call the Bookworm when they needed a hard-to-find book for a customer.

“My customers aren’t interested in putting their books into Kindles,” he said. “I still think the book public is still interested in books.”

That’s what Marcus is banking on. He is moving his store into a larger space in the market and hopes to be settled in by April 1.

In Harrisburg, **Terrena Johnson, owner** of the **Urban Word** bookstore, sees safety in selling books from local and national black authors. In Johnson’s store, that is all customers will find. They will also find Johnson, who has tried to read each book that comes into her store so she can offer guidance to her customers.

“I think the fact that I know about most of the books that are on the shelf kind of helps.”