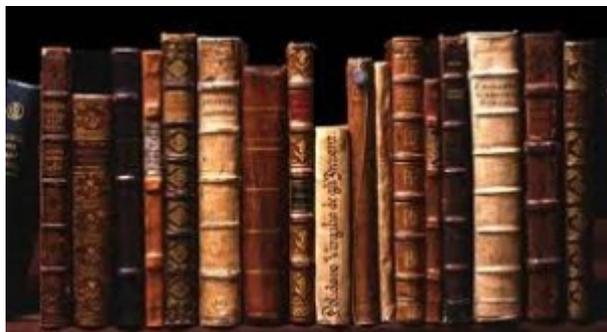


# Community Support Helps The Orca Book Cooperative Stay Afloat



11-06-2024 ~ *When COVID-19 hit, U.S. bookshops were an endangered species. Olympia, Washington's largest independent bookstore survived by embracing the co-op model.*

Bookshops have historically served as community gathering spots and hubs for social change besides being spaces where patrons can relax and feed their minds. A notable example is New York's Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop, which was the site of [organizational meetings](#) for the [first gay pride parade](#) in 1970.

"Oscar Wilde soon became Information Central. As the first gay bookshop in the country, we amassed something that proved to be invaluable for organizing a march," [wrote](#) Fred Sargeant in his 2010 first-person account for the Village Voice.

Meanwhile, Washington, D.C.'s Drum and Spear Bookstore, "was a creative hub for Black power, Black consciousness, and internationalist activism" from 1968 to 1974, [according](#) to the Library of Congress. The bookshop eventually shut down due to [debt](#).

Despite being bastions of societal advancement, community, and mental nourishment, bookshops have dwindled due to factors like [competition from Amazon](#) and the [popularity of e-books](#). In 2021, the United States Census Bureau [pointed out](#) that "the number of U.S. [b]ookstores dropped from 12,151 in 1998 to 6,045 in 2019."

The pandemic furthered this downward trend. In October 2020, Focus Finance [reported](#) that "sales turnover from brick-and-mortar bookstores declined by 31 percent from January to July 2020. Some bookstores are even seeing year-over-year sales declines as high as [80 percent](#)."

In April 2020, when COVID-19 was in full swing, the Olympia, Washington, bookstore Orca stayed afloat by [adopting](#) the co-op model. As the shop's [site](#) explains, owner Linda Berentsen "was ready to retire but wanted to ensure that the store lived on."

"Diversifying was the only option," says Kait Leamy, an Orca worker-owner since December 2021. "People didn't want Orca to go away, so turning into a member-owned co-op was a great way to fundraise at the time."

Leamy explains that the shop, which existed in various forms for nearly three decades before becoming the Orca Books Cooperative, is now owned by its employees and supportive Olympia community members.

"I think people in this area love that community-run aspect of things," they state, adding that Orca owes its survival to this communal spirit. "The community has saved our lives several times. People in town are supportive on a day-to-day basis by shopping here and also when big, crazy things happen." For example, one crowdsourcing campaign replenished funds lost to an embezzling bookkeeper. Another helped cover veterinary expenses for the shop's resident cat, Orlando.

The bookshop has two kinds of memberships: "[Basic Consumer \[and\] Low-Income Consumer](#)." Each member pays a fee that provides some benefits, discounts, and voting rights.

Olympia is a hot spot for co-ops. In 2019, the Northwest Cooperative Development Center [told](#) the social justice publication Works in Progress that the city had "more cooperatively owned businesses per capita than any other U.S. city (one co-op business for every 5,255 residents)."

Leamy, who was a member of several co-ops while in college, notes, "Now I can't have a job with the hierarchy that regular corporate jobs have, because I am so used to this co-op model where everybody has autonomy, [all] voices are equal, and no one is telling you what to do."

As Olympia's largest independent bookstore, Orca is a space where customers and staff "from all walks of life" form "a vibrant, supportive, and generous book-loving community," the store's site [states](#). "We rejoice in offering a wonderfully eccentric haven for our wonderfully diverse patrons."

The shop's amenities include a free coffee cart and a mutual aid table with medical supplies. Orca also carries cards, calendars, stickers, prints, magnets, T-shirts, and other items crafted by local creatives like noted papercut artist [Nikki McClure](#).

It also [serves](#) as a "community hub for book trade, resource sharing, and community recycling."

"You don't have to spend money to be here," Leamy notes. "These days, there are so few places in the world that you're allowed to just be in, so we try hard to make Orca a welcoming place. I think that helps us because people care and are invested."

Selling mostly used books, Orca strives to keep its prices as low as possible, "so people can have access to the information," according to Leamy. "We're told all the time that we're the cheapest bookstore in town. That feels important to us because new books are getting more and more expensive. A new hardcover these days can be \$45."

Rather than participating in a wholesale process, local authors can sell their books in small numbers at Orca. The shop takes only a small cut, leaving the author with the majority of the sale price.

Orca hosts events such as author talks, poetry readings, mending circles, and book club meetings "where [people] come together, read the same thing, talk about it, and talk about life and the world," Leamy says. "You can't do that on Amazon. Having a physical space and a physical book instead of digital feels important."

Combined with right-wing efforts to ban and burn books, the decrease in face-to-face interaction in the digital age makes the survival of shops like Orca more important than ever.

"Bookstores, particularly, are hard [to maintain] these days," Leamy observes. "There are some days where we say, 'Are we going to make it?' and some days where we're flying high. I think there are enough people out there who want bookstores to exist [bettering the odds] that we can make it."

*By Damon Orion*

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