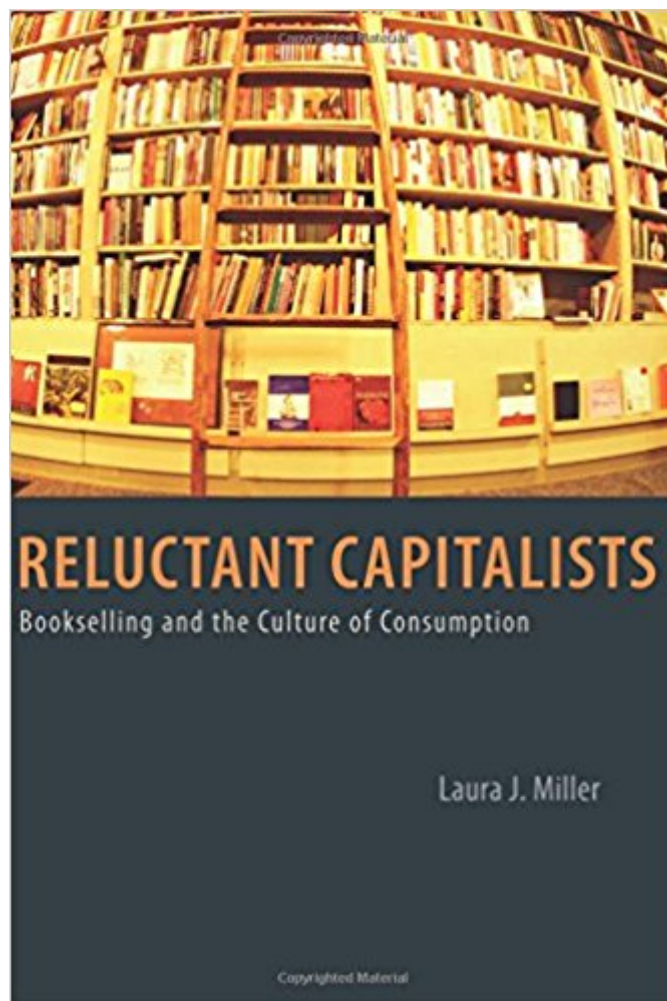


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# Reluctant Capitalists: Bookselling And The Culture Of Consumption



## Synopsis

Over the past half-century, bookselling, like many retail industries, has evolved from an arena dominated by independent bookstores to one in which chain stores have significant market share. And as in other areas of retail, this transformation has often been a less-than-smooth process. This has been especially pronounced in bookselling, argues Laura J. Miller, because more than most other consumer goods, books are the focus of passionate debate. What drives that debate? And why do so many people believe that bookselling should be immune to questions of profit? In *Reluctant Capitalists*, Miller looks at a century of book retailing, demonstrating that the independent/chain dynamic is not entirely new. It began one hundred years ago when department stores began selling books, continued through the 1960s with the emergence of national chain stores, and exploded with the formation of "superstores" in the 1990s. The advent of the Internet has further spurred tremendous changes in how booksellers approach their business. All of these changes have met resistance from book professionals and readers who believe that the book business should somehow be "above" market forces and instead embrace more noble priorities. Miller uses interviews with bookstore customers and members of the book industry to explain why books evoke such distinct and heated reactions. She reveals why customers have such fierce loyalty to certain bookstores and why they identify so strongly with different types of books. In the process, she also teases out the meanings of retailing and consumption in American culture at large, underscoring her point that any type of consumer behavior is inevitably political, with consequences for communities as well as commercial institutions.

## Book Information

Paperback: 328 pages

Publisher: University Of Chicago Press (May 15, 2007)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0226525910

ISBN-13: 978-0226525914

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.9 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars 6 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #460,009 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #119 in Books > Literature & Fiction > History & Criticism > Books & Reading > Booksellers & Bookselling #194 in Books > Business & Money > Economics > Commerce #2542 in Books > Humor & Entertainment > Pop

## Customer Reviews

Though independent booksellers may believe they already understand all that there is to know about maintaining the delicate balance between economic success and cultural integrity, those who dip into Miller's impressive examination will find their curiosity well rewarded. Miller's historical analysis reveals, for example, how independent booksellers' opposition to mass market competitors has shifted dramatically. Nearly a century ago, when department stores and five-and-dimes began selling books, the owners of established bookstores insisted that large commercial enterprises couldn't guide customers to suitably uplifting reading material. As the cultural elitism behind this argument became unpalatable, the indies changed their tune, claiming that superstores were laying down homogenized inventories that stifled intellectual diversity. Miller also discusses the internal pressures that led the American Booksellers Association to adopt a more activist stance toward the chains in recent years. One of the book's few disappointments is a closing chapter on consumption as political choice, which never quite explains how such choices operate. But that's a rare ambiguity in this otherwise carefully articulated investigation. (Apr.) Look for PW's upcoming q&a with Laura J. Miller. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

"This detailed account of the bookselling industry makes clear how difficult it is to maintain a moral boundary between local commerce and the rampant commercialism of retail websites and chains. Laura Miller shows that with books, as with every other commodity, the culture of consumption is shaped more by marketing strategies than by Americans' desire to read."--Sharon Zukin, author of "Point of Purchase: How Shopping Changed American Culture" "From beginning to end, this book is a pleasure to read." Reluctant Capitalists" is the first good history of American bookselling to appear in a very long time. Here, Laura Miller provides a fascinating analysis of conflicts within the book industry between the understanding of bookselling as a capitalist venture, and an almost diametrically opposed view of the same venture as something higher and worthier by virtue of books' content and place within our culture."--Elizabeth Long, author of "Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life" "Laura Miller's "Reluctant Capitalists" is a compelling account of the complex world of bookselling, focusing on the persistent dynamic between the book as a commodity and as a form of expression antithetical to market principles. Miller discovers that today's conflicts between independents, chains and Big Box stores have historical precedents, and how

despite repeated episodes of consolidation and price-cutting, readers and sellers remain passionate about the book's extra-commercial status. In addition to producing a top-rate study of bookselling, Miller has provided a fascinating framework for thinking about consumer culture more generally, by highlighting the ever-present tensions between commodification and singularity, sentiment and consumer rationality, emotion and economics."--Juliet B. Schor, author of "Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture" -- Juliet Schor (12/19/2005)"Though independent booksellers may believe they already understand all that there is to know about maintaining the delicate balance between economic success and cultural integrity, those who dip into Miller's impressive examination will find their curiosity well rewarded. Miller's historical analysis reveals, for example, how independent booksellers' opposition to mass market competitors has shifted dramatically. Nearly a century ago, when department stores and five-and-dimes began selling books, the owners of established bookstores insisted that large commercial enterprises couldn't guide customers to suitably uplifting reading material. As the cultural elitism behind this argument became unpalatable, the indies changed their tune, claiming that superstores were laying down homogenized inventories that stifled intellectual diversity. Miller also discusses the internal pressures that led the American Booksellers Association to adopt a more activist stance toward the chains in recent years. This . . . [is a] carefully articulated investigation."--Publishers Weekly"Books are different. Commodities, to be sure. Bought and sold, no doubt. Yet in the world of commerce, books retain a certain mystique. That regard has held true, traditionally, for booksellers as well, notes Laura J. Miller, a Brandeis University sociologist. In *Reluctant Capitalists: Bookselling and the Culture of Consumption*, she uses the bookstore wars between independents and big chains to explore the ambivalence toward business values in the world of books and wider concerns about consumption and highly 'rationalized' systems of retailing. Traditional booksellers felt stressed long before the first of the 'superstores.' From the end of the 19th century to the 1960s, Ms. Miller writes, department stores took a heavy chunk of bookstore sales. Five-and-dimes and similar outlets also joined in, putting pressure on bookshops and making one commentator in 1954 fume that booksellers 'must now compete with everything from delicatessens to whore houses.' A major jolt would come with the expansion of chain stores in the 1970s and 80s. Early on, writes Ms. Miller, chain bookstores tended to be small sites in mall locations with a focus on popular titles. Their discounts, previously rare in bookshops, threatened independents, but they had little in the way of selection. With superstores, things changed. The first superstores, opened by Crown Books in 1990, seem modest by later standards: 6,000 to 8,000 square feet, with 30,000 to 40,000 titles. By 2002 Borders stores carried 62,000 to 209,000 titles. Tracing the chains' growth, Ms. Miller shows

how they centralized and standardized selection, ordering, and other procedures while attracting a new public previously intimidated by bookstores. Among her topics are the standardized design of superstores, with their mix of gentility and flash and their tactics of display. Just as in supermarkets, prime positions are for sale. Publishers with big marketing budgets, she says, can purchase good real estate for their titles, such as on the end of a row of shelves facing the aisle. While some books are promoted, others, especially those more esoteric or from smaller presses, may end up as 'wallpaper,' there to create ambience but not pushed to sell. Ms. Miller describes how independent booksellers, still feeling a mission along with the pinch, have fought back by transforming the American Booksellers Association into a champion for independents, pursuing lawsuits against trade practices they claim favor the big chains, and seeking support from an often fickle reading public."--Nina C. Ayoub, Chronicle of Higher Education -- Nina C. Ayoub "Chronicle of Higher Education" (05/12/2006)"Chain superstores, notes Laura J. Miller's fascinating new study "Reluctant Capitalists: Bookselling and the Culture of Consumption," are the latest manifestation of a centuries-old struggle between bookselling Davids and Goliaths-a battle over where Americans actually shop versus stores with, Miller tartly notes, 'a style of retailing that Americans at least profess to miss.'" -- Paul Collins "Voice Literary Supplement" (05/23/2006)

An outstanding book for those that appreciate bookstores and the selling of books. Loads of history on booksellers--B. Dalton, Crown, Waldenbooks, etc. Of course, the information stops just before the time of the most dramatic changes in bookselling history: the e-book. Should Laura J. Miller decide to update this book, add to it, it would be a terrific textbook for college English classes on publishing.

I have worked in bookstores for the last 30 years, and it's so interesting to find out that what I have experienced fits in perfectly with the themes of this book. It looks at the history of bookstore culture and its intersection with capitalism. It isn't brand new, but it does feel dated in the least. Important themes and ideas.....Everyone who works at a bookstore (or library), or owns a bookstore or is even thinking about owning a bookstore will learn something from this book. If bookstores are to survive, this is the kind of information that will help in decision-making along the way.

The author looks at bookselling and especially book buying from a very sophisticated standpoint taking many economic, social, and cultural factors into account. The idea that the book both is and isn't a commodity like any other is examined up down and sideways. One interesting point: the rise

of giants Borders and Barnes and Noble has made buying a book an entertainment experience (e.g., people go on dates at Borders!).

Booklovers who wouldn't usually be inclined to read something about the bookselling industry will appreciate this detailed account of the business, particularly in light of the ongoing -- and often ruinous -- competition between independent bookstores, the mega-chains, the "big box" retailers and the online giants.

A very well-done study of the book selling industry. So clever to use books as a focal point for a discussion of the complexities of buying and selling. Refreshingly free of jargon, though there are occasional traces of academic production (I intend to show in the next chapter ...). But this is minor given the generally clear-headed writing and thinking the author displays. Along with all the fascinating information about the development of book selling, as a vocation and as mere commodity pushing, she has included excellent reflections on the nature of the consumer and the consumer's choices to exhibit pure marketplace rationality vs. politically informed cultural activity. Personally, I remain caught in the complexities of these choices: I bought this book on but feel it's critical to support independent bookstores (I do that too). I've just returned from a cross country trip and it's dreary out there in places that have no independents. Coincidentally they seem to be places that have no city centers, no architecture, no newspapers, few cultural events ..., nothing but cars and roads and big box stores.

Reluctant Capitalists: Bookselling And The Culture Of Consumption holds the ability to appeal beyond the usual business reader, moving into the realm of book enthusiasts and booksellers alike. Book buyers often reject chain stores and consider any association between books and mass marketing unacceptable: so why is it that other chains have gained wide popularity while the chain bookstore's image struggles? Reluctant Capitalists examines this phenomenon, providing a history of the contested practice of selling books and surveying the rise of chains, mega-chains, and standing conflicts between chains and the small bookseller. Ideals and politics as well as book-buying habits and choices are analyzed in chapters which interview both book reader and major industry players.

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