

*“One thing I am asking myself is whether our loyal patrons will eventually return to in-store events where they have to sit next to people who are not in their immediate families.”*

## Planning for an Uncertain Future

A bookstore owner weighs how to bring back store gatherings after Covid-19

BY LINDA KASS

Among the issues booksellers will need to address when they reopen their stores is the community-gathering role they play through author and book-related events. As the owner and event curator for Gramercy Books, located in Bexley, an urban suburb just east of Ohio’s state capital, understanding how our customers will return to bookstore gatherings is weighing heavily on my mind.

Like so many bookstores across the country, Gramercy Books is a place of connection, discovery, and inspiration, often through creative programming featuring newly published books. Like my peers, I’ve had to cancel events for many authors whose pub dates fell in the spring and summer. We’ve found new ways to showcase their books through our e-newsletter and, more recently, through livestreaming via Zoom. I’m rescheduling other authors into the early fall, at which time I’m hoping in-person gatherings will again be possible—albeit with reasonable safety protocols.

While a few of my bookselling colleagues have told me they don’t want to think about planning future in-store programs right now, I find that scheduling events down the road brings me some level of optimism, as it does for the authors and publishers we confirm. It suggests that the world, post-Covid-19, might resemble the one we had.

But I can’t help wondering how to approach this. I wonder about the event format, about how large of an audience I should allow and in what kind of space, about how to set up a seating area that allows for social distancing, and about the best ways to allay customer fears while inviting them to attend author events again.

The reality is that none of us know what our eventual regathering will look like. Several states have announced reopening of retail stores with a range of safety protocols that must be put in place. But when the moment of reopening occurs, I suspect there will exist a combination of pent-up demand and lingering fear. One thing I am asking myself is whether our loyal patrons will eventually return to in-store events where they have to sit next to people who are not in their immediate families.

For many customers, their bookstores likely seem safe. The neighborhood store has become an even more familiar friend through frequent phone conversations and ramped-up customer communications during a period of stay-at-home policies. Many booksellers have seen a tremendous outpouring of support

through online orders and GoFundMe campaigns. When done well, author appearances and book discussions via streaming and video conferencing services have proved to be excellent alternatives to in-person events.

But there remains the question as to when and if we can again come together in-store and connect with one another through book readings and discussions. Technology, as good as it is, has its limitations in the very human in-person exchange of ideas.

Teresa Kirschbraun, owner of City Lit Books in Chicago, says her store may continue to offer a Zoom alternative when it reopens, so customers can have the option to attend events in-store or online. “We have created new processes in the past few weeks just for store survival,” she told me. “I think those will help us adjust to the new normal, so that we have a hybrid of pre- and post-Covid offerings.”

Pamela Klinger-Horn, events coordinator for Excelsior Bay Books in Minnesota, anticipates that people will be eager to return to a more normal lifestyle. “Come fall, when schools resume,” she says, “there will be enthusiasm to gather again, to get away from the TV and the house. People will be excited to see their favorite authors, face-to-face.”

Mary O’Malley, a bookseller with Anderson’s Bookshop in the Chicago suburb of La Grange, says, “I see our new world as being simpler, more intimate. Our author events are going to reflect that, at least for the foreseeable future. Author events may fill a space for people who want to do things socially but are not ready for big crowds.”

Klinger-Horn has scheduled Kate DiCamillo for a ticketed, off-site family event in September, which she feels will serve as an indicator of whether people will come back in larger groups. She is considering moving this event into a more spacious room at an off-site venue—“where people can spread out if they’d like,” she adds.

As I was grappling with a decision about a large event Gramercy Books rescheduled for late summer, my store manager, Debra Boggs, offered me her pragmatic opinion: “As restrictions relax, it isn’t your decision anymore. It will be the public’s decision as to what they will attend.” ■



© LORNS SPOLTER

*Linda Kass is the founder and owner of Gramercy Books, located in Bexley, Ohio. She is the author of Tasa’s Song (2016) and A Ritchie Boy, to be released in September by She Writes Press.*