

Bookstores fight for survival in a tech age



Paige Lugering of DeBary looks through the children's section of Half Off Books in Orange City last week. Things aren't looking good for bookstores these days. (Ricardo Ramirez Buxeda, Orlando Sentinel / July 27, 2011)

By [Sandra Pedicini](#), July 31, 2011

The Internet hasn't killed bookstores, but the bricks-and-mortar book-selling industry in Orlando and across the nation has been wounded and is trying to figure out a way to stop the bleeding.

Across America, Borders is closing down the last of its stores, and Barnes & Noble has begun rebuilding itself for a digital future.

In Central Florida, independents such as Chapters Café & Bookshop and Urban Think! have closed, and Leedy's Books on Colonial Drive plans to shut its doors.

Bookstores were once a staple of malls, but now many – from struggling centers such as Orlando Fashion Square and West Oaks to thriving ones including [Mall at Millenia](#) – have none.

Still, some have hung on, and a few are even planning to expand. As their sales have dropped, many have tried new strategies.

"People are bringing in different inventory items, often things in addition to books," said Meg Smith, membership and marketing officer for the American Booksellers Association, a trade group representing independent bookstores. "Events have become huge, whether they're author events or authorless events."

Half Off Books in Orange City has started a book club and holds game nights. It also recently started Common Grounds, a coffee and ice cream shop.

"We wanted to make our bookstore a little more of a community," said Christian Munk, an employee whose father owns the shop that specializes in overstocked and used books.

"It's definitely a challenge," Munk said, but still, his family hopes to open another Half Off Books in [Winter Park](#) in the next year or two.

Also in Winter Park, Evelyn Walters Pettit for years has sold used books from a tiny space tucked away in a courtyard just off Park Avenue. Brandywine Books attracts an eclectic group of customers, from college students to tourists. Even though she operates online, too, Pettit says sales peaked years ago.

"I'm just scraping along," she said.

Farther north in DeLand, which has another quaint downtown with a college nearby, Janet Bollum's longtime Muse Book Shop specializes in antique books. The shop also carries many offerings from Florida authors, and it sells art and holds events. Bollum also does a lot of business online.

But sales this year have been stagnant compared with last. "We seem to be on a fairly even keel but not on an upward curve," Bollum said.

Robert Leedy, who owns the now-closing Leedy's Books, said Internet sales helped independent dealers like him for many years but intense competition has made that much tougher.

Sales at independent bookstores grew throughout most of the past decade but over the past three years have dropped by almost 6 percent, according to Sageworks, a firm that specializes in analysis of smaller companies.

"We need to get back to where we were in the '90s," Bollum said.

But that could be tough. The marketplace for books has changed dramatically. Book lovers can choose from a variety of online sites to both buy books and get opinions about them from other readers.

And electronic devices such as Kindles and Nooks – which Toys R Us and Office Max began selling this past weekend – have transformed how many people read.

Technology has lured away readers such as John Baldrige, an Orlando bus driver and amateur songwriter who said he reads just a few books each year, mostly biographies.

"It decreased a little because of the computer," said Baldrige, 56. Online, he said, "I find such a wide range of what I'm looking for." And when he does buy books, it's over the Internet as well.

Faced with such trends, big book chains are branching out. Books A Million has started carrying Nooks and electronic accessories and has expanded its toy and game business. In its most recent annual report, Barnes & Noble says it "has repositioned its business from a store-based model to a multi-channel model centered in Internet and digital commerce."

Although he's closing his longtime bookstore, Leedy said he thinks there is still hope for bookstores.

"I don't think they're going to die out completely," said Leedy, who is going to work at BrightLight Books in Fern Park. "It's just a matter of adapting. It's hard to know what bookstores will look like in five or 10 years. I'm fairly certain there will be some. It's just a matter of figuring out getting that niche and presenting yourself to the public in a good way."

For the full article featuring [Sageworks](#)' private company data, please visit The Orlando Sentinel – [Bookstores fight for survival in a tech age](#).