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Bookstores offer a personal touch the Net can't match

By Brad Spurgeon International Herald Tribune
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PARIS One is a medium-sized, two-floor, trendy place on an idyllic street on Paris's Left Bank. Another is a cubbyhole in the storybook principality of Monaco, while a third is a sprawling three-floor palace on the majestic Bahnhofstrasse in Zurich.

Despite the different packages, they all have the same purpose: selling English-language books abroad.

And although the Internet is making it more difficult to keep alive a tradition that goes back to at least 1802 - the year that Galignani in Paris boasts it became "the first English bookshop established on the Continent" - most such stores thrive thanks to their role as hubs of English-language cultural activity for the expatriate community.

Odile Hellier, who owns the Village Voice bookstore in Paris, said that it is thanks to the web of relationships among her clients and writers that she has remained in business for nearly 25 years.

"What makes the Village Voice go on the way it does is we have that core of the writers, intellectuals, who are part of the fabric," Hellier said. "They have woven together the Village Voice."

Even so, while all the stores say that it is thanks to the expatriate community and not the tourists or locals that they are kept in business, many expatriate book buyers, like their counterparts at home, have abandoned bookstores for the seemingly cheaper and more convenient method of buying online.

Indeed, the figures are numbing: Amazon.com celebrated last July its 10th anniversary, with 49 million active users and \$6.9 billion of revenue in 2004. Used book sales on the Internet are also booming, with sales in the United States increasing by 33 percent in 2004 to \$609 million, according to a study commissioned by the Book Industry Study Group.

Recent news reports indicate that purchases online will become easier and cheaper, as Amazon and Google devise methods to search and download books and pages.

But David Sedaris, an American writer who has lived in Paris for seven years, pointed out a major flaw with this reasoning.

"One thing about English-language bookstores in the age of Amazon is that it assumes that everybody has the Internet," said Sedaris, 48. "I don't. I've never seen the Internet. I've never ordered a book on it, and I wouldn't really want to."

Sedaris, whose most recent book is a collection of short stories called "Children Playing Before a Statue of Hercules," lives on rue Dupuytren in the 6th Arrondissement of Paris, at the same address where Sylvia Beach opened her original Shakespeare and Company bookstore in 1919 before moving to the rue de l'Odéon in 1921.

Beach's store became the archetype of the English-language bookstore abroad, famous as a meeting place for English language expatriates in the 1920s and 1930s, and for publishing James Joyce's "Ulysses" in 1922. A store of the same name has existed across the Seine from the Notre Dame Cathedral since taking the name after Beach died in 1962.

Sedaris is a regular client at the Village Voice and in addition to having done readings there himself, he attends readings by others, to meet his fellow writers, and said that is the essence of what the stores offer that Amazon cannot.

"If you moved to Paris and you didn't know anybody and you wanted to make friends," Sedaris said, "then you could go to these readings at English-language bookstores and you would meet people. Even if you weren't that interested in writing."

Sedaris, who has read in English-language shops across Europe, said certain shops had more skill at developing a sense of community among their clients than others.

The Abbey Bookshop, also in Paris, but specializing in Canadian books, runs a "Canadian Club," providing book lovers with activities that often have nothing to do with books. The club organizes excursions including going to films, hiking or having a picnic - in addition to book discussion groups. Members are kept informed by a monthly e-mail newsletter.

Not all English language bookstores abroad find it profitable to play host to authors' readings. For Jane France, owner of the Scruples bookstore in Monaco, which was also founded nearly 25 years ago, readings simply don't attract enough people to make them worthwhile.

In Zurich, Monica Vischer Richter, manager of the Orell Füssli English-language store called "The Bookshop," founded in 1999, pointed out that adults are not the only ones to profit by English language bookstores abroad.

There are few better places for expatriates to keep their children in touch with their origins, and both the Zurich store and Scruples have strong children's sections. The Zurich store has readings for children on the first Saturday of every month.

"The parents enjoy it as much as the children," said Richter, "because the parents meet all their friends or their colleagues or other people from their own country."

But another human aspect of any bookstore that wins over the Internet is, according to Richter, the simple pleasure of shopping.

"Most people really like to go into shops to see, to touch things and then to spend money," Richter said, "and then for spending the money you are rewarded with a good, with the thing that you can touch and that you can take home with you."

Hellier said that she thinks the act of buying books in a store rather than online is essential to the health of our culture.

"My fear is that while the machine society that we live in is very functional, very practical, and allows for a certain communication, it is a linear communication that closes the mind," she said.

She said that although Internet sites perform many of the functions of a bookstore - recommending similar books or passing on personal impressions of a book - nothing equals the kind of discovery possible when visiting a store and scanning tables covered with a professional staff's latest hand-picked selection.

"People want to read less and less fiction," she said, because they are not exposed to it enough.

"I understand people don't have much time - in spite of the leisure society that we are trying to develop. People are solicited everywhere except by books, and when they do read it is in relation to their work, or to learn about something that they want to know - facts.

"But in reading fiction, you enter someone else's world, you open yourself to someone else, to his imagination, and this is extremely precious for the mind."