

Keynote Address Delivered by Betsy Burton at the Fall 2005 New Atlantic Independent Booksellers Association Trade Show

It's more of an honor to be here than I can begin to tell you. The amazing thing about touring with this book is that I go from independent bookstore to independent bookstore talking to other booksellers and when I'm not doing that I'm either at my own bookstore or visiting regional shows like this one full of independent booksellers -- it's my idea of heaven.

I was reading a galley of Roger Rosenblatt's new book a couple of weeks ago and the protagonist was complaining about the unholy din created by the characters in the books on his shelves -- Anna crying, Hamlet declaiming ... He didn't like the noise and chucked them all out -- or at least all but the work of Dr. Johnson, who's always right, according to Rosenblatt's character. Rosenblatt's book was funny, but a bit cynical, even for my jaded palette. I mean, anyone who throws books out.....

I liked his idea, though. If you walk into *any* good bookstore or library, and if you've got some imagination, or you're on something stronger than baby aspirin, you *might* hear the sobbing of Jane Eyre or Cordelia or Daisy Miller or Maisie Dobbs; *hear* Penelope sighing, Lady Katherine DeVere harrumphing, Scout or Huck yelling; hear Mowgli howling, along with White Fang, Old Yeller, and Heathcliff; hear the fluid Spanish of Clara Trueba, the Russian growl of Raskolnikov, the giddy French of Emma Bovary.

The image from Roger Rosenblatt's book lingered, created yet another of those moments in a reader's life when a scene in a book sears some image or idea in one's psyche in a kind of painless branding, the effects of which never really go away. I couldn't shake the *notion* of those noisy books -- neither at home in my bedroom, nor living room, or kitchen, or dining room, or *any* of the other places we booksellers shelve and then stack our books. (Which is pretty much everywhere.) I tried to talk to my husband about the idea, and even he, who loves to read, thought I had books on the brain in some newly terminal way. Have some more wine, he said. Or, on second thought, maybe you shouldn't.

The next morning, I was at work early (maybe because I didn't have my customary second glass of wine), and, I swear, when I walked in there was murmuring among the books on the shelves. My partner, Barbara, wasn't far behind me, and, when I told her what I'd been thinking -- I hesitate to say experiencing -- she offered Valium.

She's right, of course. But then so was Roger Rosenblatt. The characters in the great novels of the world -- and in thousands of lesser novels -- really do come alive to us and then stay with us, inhabit us. We can hear their voices in our minds. And preoccupied as I've been -- as we all are of late with the war, with Katrina, with the so-called Patriot Act (one of the most *un*-patriotic acts ever passed in this country) -- preoccupied as people in Utah have been by a new state law I'll talk about shortly, it occurred to me that in bookstores and libraries, in a real sense, it is our responsibility, along with that of educators, to make sure all those voices are heard, and to introduce readers to *new* voices: to Grif's and Lolita's and Garp's and George Smiley's and Rabbit's and Lucy Gault's and those of Oryx and Crake and Midnight's children.

But it is also our job to make sure that none of these voices are silenced by someone who disagrees with what they say -- that Tom Robinson still has his day in court with Atticus Finch as counsel, that Rumpole stills defends the Timpsons at the Old Bailey, that Pierre can still see peace as an alternative to war, and that Medusa, and the madwoman in the attic, can still scream their wrongs to the world. Because all of those voices inform us.

Everyone's got stories to tell, as all of us know -- know too well, I sometimes think. Story is basic to civilization, the thread that binds us together, stitching not only our collective past but also our collective present into the same unique tapestry. What's *best* about democracy is that stories *do* flow freely. In repressive societies we're allowed to hear only "approved versions" of *selected* stories, never the full gamut. Yet, how can we know enough, be tolerant and wise enough to make the important decisions necessary in a democracy if we aren't allowed to preserve and pass on the full spectrum of human experience, the whole musical lexicon that is the sum-total of our voices? And how ironic is it that in the name of democracy we're endangering that most precious freedom right here in the USA, supposedly the home of democracy, of the free as well as the brave?

More about that in a few minutes, but right now I want to say something about my own story -- the story of a bookstore, The King's English, and of the book business as I've known it for 28 years. *The King's English: Adventures of an Independent Bookseller* is a book about The King's English Bookshop, about its beloved customers, the readers; about its wonderful booksellers, also readers, of course, as in any good independent bookstore, about authors who have visited and, most of all, about books. It is also about independent bookstores everywhere, since we all have the same stories to tell -- and about independent *business* everywhere. Its format is alternating chapters, one about TKE, its history, the running of it and issues involving the book business in general, the next about a specific group of authors, whether they be novelists, children's writers, poets, nature writers, or, mystery writers. There is a long list -- sometimes several long lists, of books at the end of each chapter. And at the end of the book there are lists from 30 wonderful independent bookstores from around the country.

The chapters are anecdotal in nature, sometimes gossipy, sometimes funny. Stories abound, mostly to my discredit. Among other things, I managed to lock Sir John Mortimer's luggage in the trunk of my mother's car for a harrowing couple of hours, made one of the canniest business decisions I've ever made -- buying my own building -- to get out of a date, alienated more than one partner, and committed any number of other faux pas, literary and social, during the 28 years we've been in business.

I'm happy to say that, thanks in large part to the wonderful booksellers at TKE, we did some things right, too, the chief of which is maintain a passion for the books on our shelves, for the ones our customers tell us about, and for that fine art that we so love -- the art of matching books to people that is the chief goal of any good bookseller. Despite the anecdotes, however, the underlying theme of the book isn't funny at all. That theme is the danger that independent bookstores are in -- thanks to the pandering to chains that has gone on in publishing and in our community governments -- and the effect the loss of independent bookstores would have if we all disappeared, which, by the way, none of us are about to do.

Which brings me full circle, back to our duty to prevent any of the voices from the pages of the books we house in bookstores and in libraries from being silenced -- whether through censorship, the incursion of chains, or the so-called Patriot Act.

In terms of censorship my home state has a checkered past, from Porn Czars (don't ask) to the Movie Buffs fiasco (both of which are detailed in the book) to the new Internet law recently passed by our legislature in their infinite wisdom. This law is egregious enough that we've gone to court in a lawsuit in which TKE is chief plaintiff, and we are suing the state, along with the ACLU, the American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression, Sam Weller's Zion Bookstore, and assorted other plaintiffs.

On the other hand, in Utah our educators and our libraries and bookstores have always *fought* censorship and continue to do so. And, although this doesn't directly concern censorship, the recent decision of the Board of Education in Utah to uphold the practice of teaching evolution, rather than, or in conjunction with, creationism upholds another of our constitutional rights, separation of church and state -- not always or even usually the case in my home state, but a fact that offers further proof that there *are* blue elements in the reddest of states.

The incursion of chains into the marketplace has been a reality of life here for years, but it has taken on a new face with the plethora of so-called superstores and online retailers that have displaced independent business to the point that our communities as we've known them are threatened with extinction. I don't need to talk to any of you about the book business in particular in this respect. We're all too familiar not only with the threat posed by chains and dot-com retailers, but also with the consequences to the world of books should the Darth Vaders of the world prevail. Three buyers buying all the books stocked in stores in the country is one good way to limit choice. It's not something any of us want to see occur. Not for the sake of our businesses, of books, or of freedom.

More about freedom later, but I want to talk to you for a few minutes about Business Alliances in general and Local First in particular, because along with Book Sense, such movements and organizations offer the single best tool for fighting the onslaught of chains and dot-coms, and for maintaining a retail landscape, whether in books or drugs or hardware, where there are choices.

Seven year ago, when six Salt Lake City business owners marched into the offices of city government intent on changing zoning ordinances that were onerous and intent on challenging other obstacles to business that seemed capricious in terms of both concept and enforcement, we pointed out the unfairness of putting one roadblock after another in the way of independent, locally owned businesses while using our tax dollars to give one perk after another to developers who were bringing in chains to compete with us.

We quickly attracted other locally owned independent businesses and formed an organization, The Salt Lake Vest Pocket Business Alliance, which grew from six to 60 members in the first meeting, to 260 in the first year. We had an effect, too, hosting Mayoral and City Council debates at which candidates were forced to discuss the issues we brought up, and forced to take public positions on those issues. The results were picked up by radio stations, reported in newspapers, and, in the end, candidates we backed won city hall -- not just or even largely

because of us, of course, but we helped. Things began to change in city government. Zoning regulations were looked at from a different perspective, bureaucracy was tamed a bit, and a new business council was formed that gave us a more equal voice in city government -- more importantly, that put us in the loop at the *beginning* of decisions regarding proposed development, rather than at the end, when it was too late to take effective action.

But all of this was like pulling teeth, like slogging through finals week or reading Henry James -- slow and difficult, however rewarding. Bigger was regarded as better in most people's eyes. The public was enchanted with big, and we were viewed as marginal, as Mom and Pops -- regarded fondly, but with nostalgia, as a dying breed.

Now, the climate is radically different. Bigger is no long viewed as better by everyone, or even by most. Wal-Mart has abandoned its claims about deep discounts in its advertisements in favor of touting its connection to community. So has Home Depot. Why? Because people are beginning to recognize and to understand the depredations wrought by big box retailers, to fear that they are in danger of losing community.

People are beginning to care. Community, in fact, has become a buzzword in 2005, carrying almost as much weight as the word "environment," which is also undergoing a positive reincarnation, at last. It's been a long time coming, but people are beginning to really care about where they live -- about what the place they live in looks like. About the health and longevity of their communities. And our dream of Eden is *not* to live near, eat in, or shop in strip malls and big box retailers. Most of us want familiarity and connection.

This climate change I've referred to has occurred because the destruction caused by globalization internationally and by big box retailers on the home front -- as evidenced by the dying main streets in cities, the dying of whole towns across America -- is pretty hard for anyone to ignore. I watched the Bob Dylan special on PBS a couple of weeks ago and was struck by the seeds of the gathering antiwar movement -- how it began with anger, the anger of people who recognized something was radically wrong and were saying so, no matter what the consequences, and how it was followed by the movement of larger and larger crowds of people, who heard those raised voices and recognized there was truth in what they said.

We could be at another such place in our history, in my opinion. Angry voices are being raised in communities all over the country. People are fighting new Wal-Marts everywhere. In our city alone, there are three such battles going on right now, and one of them is already threatening to unseat a pro-development mayor. People are fighting big boxes as well, and often winning, just as BookPeople did in Austin, Texas. And on a positive note, when independent retailers do falter, the public cares -- witness Kepler's Books & Magazines in Menlo Park, California. No sooner did Clark Kepler announce that his store was closing its doors than the entire community leapt to its aid, recognizing what a vital piece of the community Kepler's is and has always been.

So, what does all this mean? It means, at least in my opinion, that the time is right. The time is ripe for us to take the idea of community and make it our own. It *is* our own. We *are* community. We, meaning not just bookstores but independent retailers, are the backbone of every community

-- its skeleton, its sinew, and musculature, the interlocking pieces that veins and arteries follow along.

In other words, we are the connector. We provide both structure and connection. People have longed for connection to one another since the dawn of time. And now they are realizing that they don't want to lose it -- that big box retailers are not connective tissue at all. On the contrary, the proliferation of big box retailers results in an anonymous, homogenized world that destroys rather than creates community.

Financial facts back up this climate change, give it economic substance. The old cant that chains are good for community in an economic sense, that they create a new tax base, is being looked at in light of fresh facts. Chains *don't* bring in new tax revenues. Rather, they simply replace old ones by putting locally owned independent businesses *out* of business, thanks in large part to the perks those chains receive from city and state governments in the form of redevelopment monies, tax increment financing, and the like. But the effects of this process are far more pernicious than the creation of a break-even tax situation. In fact, they, chains, bleed money *out* of the community -- money that locally owned businesses leave in. I hope you already know of the studies that have shown that when someone spends a dollar in one of your stores *you* re-circulate 45 to 58 percent of that dollar back into the community by using local business for everything from accounting to legal help to supplies. Chains send all but 13 percent of that same dollar out of state. The results of the studies conducted in Austin, Texas; Maine; New Mexico; and Andersonville, Illinois, all carry weight with city and state governments. Use them when you talk to officials. Engage these officials until they really listen -- not always easy. If you do, you will see the officials start to think. You will see their minds begin to change on the subject of developers and chains.

All that being said, what actually sways the public is the concept of community. There's a growing swell of yearning for community and in that yearning I believe there are the seeds for a powerful movement, seeds sometimes fed by the anger being directed toward big box retailers and developers, but, actually, primarily fueled by the yearning that lies beneath the anger. People *do* want community. They want to be able to walk into a store where they know the proprietor, the staff, the quality of the merchandise, the commitment to quality of the business. They want to see their friends and neighbors there. They've discovered that bigger isn't necessarily better, that friendliness, a smaller and higher quality selection, along with knowledgeable service, may, in fact, be infinitely preferable to big. They've also discovered they're beginning to miss not just this connection and warmth, but also the uniqueness and diversity that gave their communities fabric and texture. Many people no longer like the strip-malled environments in which they now live.

They want community back. We began Local First a year ago, creating a 501 (c) (3) so that people could donate money, and stating, as our single objective, "education on the importance of locally owned, independent business to community." People couldn't give us money fast enough. The mayor gave us \$20,000, the county funded a study like the ones I've mentioned for \$30,000 and has just put another \$15,000 in their budget for us. We've garnered \$10,000 in the last month alone since we received our tax certification and began soliciting funds from the public. It took six years to raise half that for Vest Pocket, our business alliance.

What's the difference? The difference is that people now want to hear what we have to say; *long* to hear that community doesn't have to be lost. They're eager to hear that they can vote with their pocketbooks and protect their community, take it back or even re-create it. We're launching Local First Week this November and everyone's interested -- including the media. Local First is a movement whose time has come -- and if every community had a movement like Local First, or like Independence Week, change could occur so rapidly that it would astonish everyone, even optimists like me.

We can't tell people not to shop in chains, but we can remind them of the effects of doing so -- not on us, but on them, and on the cities and towns they live in. We can't demolish the chains that are there, but we can prevent new ones from being built, or at least we can prevent government perks that make their erection *so* easy, that make it so hard for us to compete. We can tell people, in short, that it's in their hands to shape their community.

But it's in our hands, too -- in yours and mine. To create organizations like Local First in order to educate the public about the value of community, the ways it can be fostered and protected.

But it's hard, some of you will say.

It's not hard. It *was* hard seven years ago. Very hard. But now not only is the climate different, but there are organizations all over the country like Vest Pocket, and movements like Local First. There's one such alliance Arizona, Arizona Chain Reaction; one in Colorado; two in New Mexico; one in Illinois; one in Maine; one in Texas; one in Florida -- and so on, and so on. They all have resources, and they're happy to share.

You don't have to reinvent the wheel, you don't have to produce the literature, the logos, the studies, the frameworks. You have not only *their* resources to draw on, but also those of two overarching national associations, AMIBA (American Independent Business Alliance), which is responsible for Independence Week, and BALLE (Business Alliance for Local Living Economies), which is responsible for Local First Week. We're members of both and use the ideas of each. Laury Hammel from BALLE recently told me there are 20 Local First campaigns being planned right now, and I know of several Independence Days and Independence Weeks around the country. It's a movement whose time has come.

And what better PR could any of you possibly produce for you stores than to be the front of such a movement? There is a bookstore at the heart of literally every business alliance I know of. How bad can it be, being viewed not just as a leader, but also as a protector who is at the heart of your community? It's good for business, among other things. But even more important, it's good for your community. Good for the place you live. And if we all did it, we could save this business that we all so love, protect those voices calling to us and to our readers, from our shelves.

It's because of those same voices that booksellers, along with librarians, have been so unified -- and effective -- on another issue that threatens books -- the so-called Patriot Act. Section 215. So-called National Security letters. The first public application of such laws -- at least as far as we know -- was in a Connecticut library, and most of you no doubt know far more about it than I. But I read this quote from the U.S. Department of Justice, culled from the August 26 edition of

the *New York Times*. An official noted that the law prevents public disclosure concerning such demands for records, and said, "Not all the facts have come out here. . . . and to draw conclusions without knowing what the underlying facts are, people have to be careful about that."

I can hear another of our voices here, or maybe two of them: that of Joseph K in Kafka's *The Trial*, or that of The Mad Hatter. I think, although I can't be sure, that if I tried to paraphrase the Justice Department official's statement, it might come out like this: You mustn't condemn our actions because you don't know what we know, because it's against the law for you to know what we know, and, therefore, you must just assume that whatever we're doing -- and you're not allowed to know what that is -- we're doing for good reason.

One of the reasons I'm proudest of being a bookseller, aside from the fact that I love people who love books, is that all of you have taken such an absolutely patriotic stand on this issue. You believe in freedom of expression. We all do. That belief underlies American patriotism, surely. That people who believe in suppressing civil liberties call themselves patriots never ceases to amaze me.

Which brings me, one more time, back to voices. Voices and the writers who create them are the work of our lifetimes. We all dedicated ourselves to them, one way or another, and we *do* need to protect them. To do that, we need to create new voices, a new framework for the language of politics so that people can't threaten to still the voices on our shelves or the privacy of the readers who want access to them. We need to say, and to make people hear, that patriotism means protecting freedom and liberty, not removing them; that morality should be defined as caring for the halt and the lame, as the Bible would have it -- the poor, the disabled, the afflicted children and adults on our streets, all those who have nothing. True patriotism is not found in controlling others' thoughts or beliefs or punishing those with whom they don't agree.