

The Little Bookshops That Could

Ten years ago, New Zealand's independent bookstores were tipped to perish in the face of competition from the big chains and online giants like Amazon. But they are continuing to thrive.

When Wellington's foremost literary salon, Unity Books, turned 40 last year the Willis St shop was packed cheek by vibrating jowl with a who's who of New Zealand's cultural achievers.

Talk about talk. Writers, publishers, film makers and artists mingled unceremoniously with politicians, economists, historians and members of Unity's extended family – the loyal customers and staff past and present – who've made the award-winning shop something of a Wellington institution.

Now as a bevy of international literary stars prepares to descend on the city for the 2008 New Zealand Post Writers and Readers Week (March 11-16), Unity Books – the event's official bookseller – is gearing up for another round of fabulously brainy events across four venues each day.

This time anyone with a love of ideas and books – their lovely old-fashioned vessels – can listen and maybe chat with the likes

of novelist Ian McEwan, Nobel laureate economist Joseph Stiglitz, cartoonist Garry Trudeau of *Doonesbury* fame, distinguished New Zealand historian Dame Anne Salmond and *Gourmet* magazine editor-in-chief and memoirist Ruth Reichl.

"We're the only shop in New Zealand that people can rely on to have every book by every author who's performing over the week," says manager, co-owner and independent bookshop maven Tilly Lloyd.

There are 119 independent bookshops around the country, a muscular and mutually supportive network, according to Lloyd. They stick together in the face of competition from the big chains like Whitcoulls and Borders, and international

online dealer Amazon. Their European and American counterparts also face stiff competition from supermarkets but so far, says Lloyd, New Zealand supermarkets have been "less than vigorous in their attention to books".

"And the e-book phenomenon has yet to reach its iPod moment. No one is entirely certain how the future digital landscape for books will shape up, but there will always be people who love books – not just to read but because they are objects of beauty."

And it's the independent stores, argues Lloyd, that book lovers can rely on for informed book knowledge and intelligent service.

"They're watering holes for ideas within their communities. When you buy books and make inquiries with a local independent bookseller, the person serving you can easily be the person who owns the store. They know their customers and have a good working knowledge of authors so they make canny commercial as well as cultural decisions in their buying.

"This level of commitment combined with a deep regard for books gives each store a certain ambience that reflects the owners'

PAMELA FLEMING IS A NORTH & SOUTH CONTRIBUTING WRITER. PHOTOGRAPHY BY VICTORIA BIRKINSHAW

the attention of the media I was chaperoning. They came out looking like one of the stars, with a creative collection which was a leap ahead for them, and which jettisoned them off into a new territory altogether. Now their outerwear is arguably more famous.”

And so the evolution continued. Knitwear production in Dunedin has since ceased, but Margi is proud that 60 per cent of the company's woven garments are manufactured in Dunedin and every NOM*d garment is still New Zealand-made. Local knitwear manufacturing is becoming increasingly difficult, however, and the company has this year for the first time commissioned samples from China. Construction skills in New Zealand's apparel sector are being lost, Margi believes, because businesses are not being given sufficient support to enable them to train young people, and she's ambivalent about a “buy New Zealand-made” campaign that doesn't help safeguard production capacity.

Asked to describe Margi's standing in the industry, Blomfield — who recalls her in New Zealand House's London kitchen, “cool as a cucumber” busily staining garments with teabags — hints at some of the personal characteristics which contribute to her and Chris's success.

“They're less prone to histrionics than some. They have a nice quiet gravity about them, and are liked and respected by their peers. They don't rub people up the wrong way and they don't shout their opinions loudly. You'd think they might have to shout louder to be heard in the Auckland market, but it's a credit to their skill and quiet talent that they don't.”

Elisabeth Findlay says she's donning her professional — rather than private — persona when she reports that her sister is “enormously admired” by her colleagues in the industry. “Margi has unique style, is very focused and very creative. She's hard working, passionate about what she does and single minded: she's quite steady about where she's going and how she's doing it.”

Because NOM*d garments are often asymmetrical, construction-heavy or intentionally exaggerated, it's surprising how easy they are to wear. Margi credits this “wearability factor” in part to her retail experience and she has always insisted her design team members work one day a week in-store at Plume. “I think that changes the fashion design thing from being idealistic into something that is going to earn you a living. People have referred to NOM*d as being quite real clothes — you can actually wear them — whereas there are some labels that are amazing and revered, but quite unwearable.”

It's easy to hypothesise that Margi's working-class background contributed to this pragmatism. “Nothing's been handed to us on a plate,” she says, “so that appreciation of the fact you have to earn a living is really important. I'd like to think those values are instilled in people who work for us as well.

“Although we appreciate art, that's not what pays their wages. In fact, we endeavour to have designs which have artistic quality but which are also extremely wearable and saleable. That's what keeps us fed.”

A typical working day for Margi will see her getting into the office mid-morning and working until 7pm or 8pm. She might place and check orders for offshore labels, source fabrics or oversee promotional material for the upcoming season, working up to 12 months ahead.

She leads a team of three design assistants with whom she's quick to share credit — and pronounces email and her Blackberry her “greatest tools”.

And although Chris, with typical self-deprecation, describes himself as “not the fashion person in this relationship but the painter, light-bulb changer, maintenance man, storeman packer,



driver, fetcher and carrier”, his background in retail fit-outs and merchandising has proved invaluable, especially for their retail enterprises that now include a second Plume store in Christchurch and flagship NOM*d store in Fitzroy, Melbourne.

Having grown up without extended family makes immediate family even more important. Margi's father died in 1987 but her mother Zinovia still lives in Dunedin, as does her sister Vera. For Sam's daughter Frankie, Margi is probably one of the coolest grandmothers a kid could ask for, and the clothes-crazy mother of two boys clearly enjoys having a little girl to indulge.

“She's got a mind of her own and her own style,” says Margi. “She hasn't come over to the dark side yet though: she's still in a very ‘pink’ stage.” Which might explain the palest salmon georgette which appeared between the black, charcoal and shadowy blue garments on NOM*d racks last season.

It's hard to picture the creator of NOM*d swapping her beautiful black, studded and buckled Italian boots for woolly slippers and relinquishing the day job any time soon. It sounds like we can expect more evolution yet from Margi Robertson: “We've never had any plans or strategy. Whether we need to start forming any now I don't know. I'd quite like to let it develop as it wants to.

“My only point of reference is Vivienne Westwood or Karl Lagerfeld. If those characters are still going then there's no reason to think we can't do the same. That's how I'd like to see it.” +

Manager and co-owner of Wellington's Unity Bookshop Tilly Lloyd (left) with assistant manager Marion Castree.



“Every time someone makes a choice to buy a book online from an overseas supplier it takes money away from New Zealand booksellers. We cannot always compete with price but we can compete in other ways.”

values and personality.”

She speaks collegially of her Wellington peers: “Victoria Books have university texts. Parsons on Lambton Quay does music. The Children’s Bookshop caters for children, teens and the educational market. Millwood has paintings as well as books. Capital Books also specialises in technical titles. Pinnacle represents spirituality, health and New Age.”

And Unity? “Well,” says the mistress of understatement, “we’re quirky.”

Independent booksellers are a dedicated and lively lot. The word “passion” was used so promiscuously by all I spoke to I wondered if some obscure ecstatic religious cult had infiltrated the trade. They talked unbidden of their passion for books and authors, for ideas and community, their intimate connection to customers and how they make it their business to second-guess and pre-empt in order to get the right book for the right person.

Lloyd and her fellow independents, four of which have been trading for over a century, are remarkably resilient. Booksellers NZ says only 19 bookshops, independent or chains, have closed in the past five years and others are popping up all the time. It’s a tough but seductive marketplace.

New Zealanders love reading and they love buying books. The 2002 Department of Statistics Cultural Experiences Survey shows purchasing books is our most popular cultural activity, closely followed by visiting the library. More than 1.2 million people, or 44 per cent of the adult population, reportedly bought at least one book in the four weeks before the survey. Book buying was a popular activity for people of most ages, but particularly for women and those in the 25 to 34 and 35 to 44 age groups.

The future, it seems, is literate. Given the book trade’s standard operating margin is 40 per cent compared to that of the fashion industry, for instance, which operates on around 100 per cent, it’s just as well.

Early last year, when the US-based bookshop chain Borders announced it was selling its four New Zealand shops after eight years in the country, Lloyd was neither surprised nor relieved. (A & R Whitcoulls has since acquired 100 per cent of Borders’ shares.)

“When gigantic international chains like Borders enter a tiny market like New Zealand they’re not expecting to make money, but they are expecting to take our market share and on-sell their brand.

“Factor in competition from existing chains and online booksellers like Amazon – not to mention the astronomical overheads all downtown independent retailers face in New Zealand – and independent booksellers have a fight on their hands,” she says.

When the Consumers Institute urged people to buy imported goods online, specifically recommending books from Amazon.com, Booksellers New Zealand, which represents 90 per cent of the country’s publishers and bookshops, struck back. “Every time someone makes a choice to buy a book online from an overseas supplier it takes money away from New Zealand booksellers,” says chief executive Linda Henderson. “We cannot always compete with price but we can compete in other ways.”

True to its feisty reputation, Unity Books went a step further. Determined to prove that locals could beat foreign online retailers hands-down, Unity began ordering the same book from both their American supplier and Amazon simultaneously. Usually there was no more than a couple of bucks between them and a day’s difference in supply. One time, a requested book arrived from the US supplier 16 days ahead of Amazon’s parcel and was only 33 cents more expensive.

Unity Books faces specific retail problems, however. Operating in the heart of Wellington’s CBD, the shop has had to absorb a 59 per cent rent hike over the past three years. It’s also losing foot traffic due to



Wellington’s Unity Books has customers who have been shopping there since it opened in 1967.

a massive construction site vibrating dustily on the other side of its fiction wall while a complex of offices, apartments and shops are built.

“You can’t pass those costs onto customers and there’s no compensation,” says Lloyd. “It’s called progress. But these issues are survivable. Clearly the shop still matters since we’re still trading very strongly. Thank



God for our smart, discerning and loyal customers.”

Unity Books regularly welcomes customers who have been shopping there since it opened in 1967. “Others accidentally come across us for the first time, which is always wondrous. Then there’s the hardcore from all Wellington’s constituent communities: people active in education, spirituality, politics, journalism, the arts, design, architecture, gay and lesbian liberation and a whole range of more local issues.”

Several vigorous book clubs use Unity as

their home base for selecting and buying titles. A book club member herself, Lloyd is a great fan of the movement. “They socialise and formalise our analysis of what we’ve read – replacing the ‘Oh yes, wasn’t it good?’ comment that suffices as party chit-chat.”

She says her customers are attracted to a shop they can see is serious about books. “The place is only about books and anything to do with books.

“It’s a philosophy we’ve inherited from founder Alan Preston, and one we maintain by what we choose to stock and promote.”

Already basking in award-winning glow as the *Listener’s* Bookshop of the Year 2007 and the *Capital Times* Bookshop of the Year 2005 through 2007, Unity also picked up the Best Shop accolade in the online, punter-driven Wellingtonista Awards. Announcing the award in December, the Wellingtonista website said: “Once you get past the big chain bookstores of varying quality there are many proud independent booksellers scattered about Wellington. And the foremost of these is Unity Books. We ask the question seriously: if you can’t get it at Unity, is it really worth reading?”

A 22-year veteran of the book trade, Lloyd ran Wellington’s Women’s Bookshop in the heady days of feminist activism. She co-edited, with Marian Evans and Bridie Lonie of the Spiral Collective, *A Woman’s Picture Book* before hitting the road as a publisher’s rep for a string of influential publishing houses like Century Hutchinson and Penguin. She briefly edited the trade mag *Booksellers News*, then in 1990 was headhunted by Unity Books to be the shop’s buyer. Four years later she took over as manager, a role vacated by poet and book exporter Louise Wrightson.

When Preston died in 2004 Lloyd and Jo and Lawrie McColl, owners of Unity’s sister shop in Auckland, bought the Wellington business from his estate. The McColls had bought their shop from Preston a couple of years earlier.

Preston remains a hero to Lloyd. When he opened his first shop, just up the road from their current base, daily sales were only \$20 or \$30. His vision was to provide access to books “in tune with the times”, she says.

An avid customer since the 1970s, Lloyd says Unity’s fiction and nonfiction holdings were always astonishingly radical and hip.

Smart, witty and warm, Lloyd wears her bibliophile’s idealism on her sleeve, something she shares with her handpicked and much-loved staff – all of whom are

“The range of books in the English language is massive – which means independent bookshops can stock what they believe their market wants.”

experienced booksellers and mightily opinionated bookworms in their own right. “They’ve all got ink surging through their veins...”

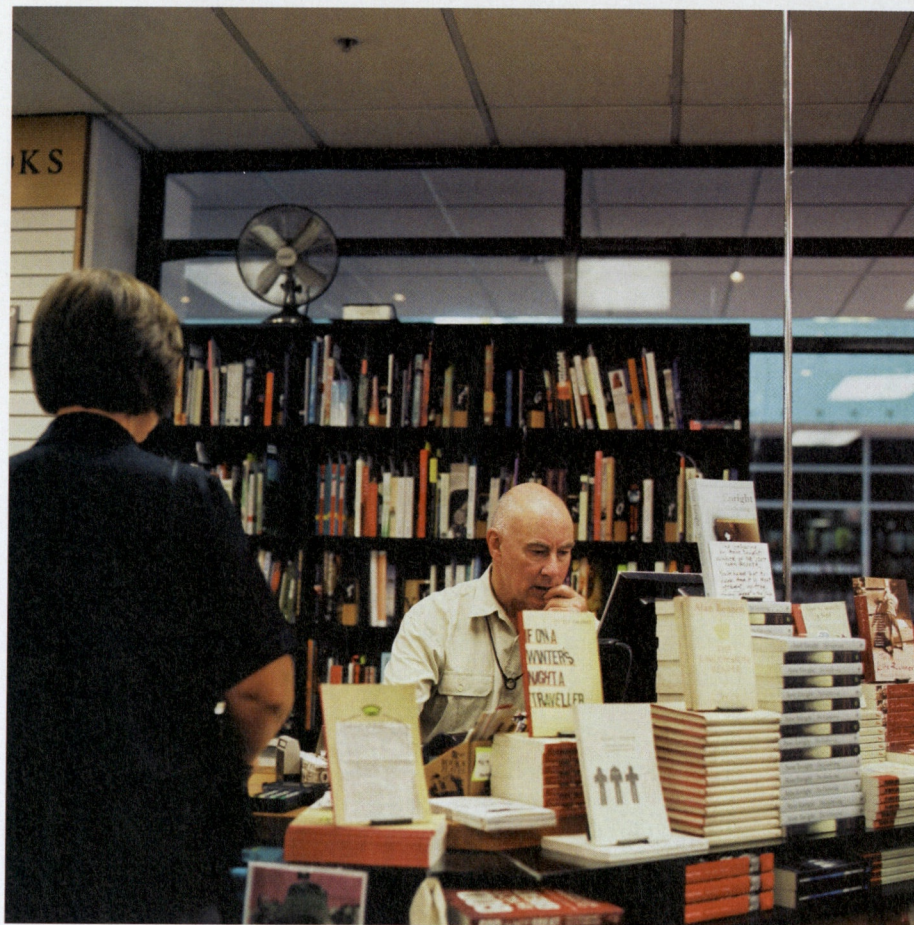
When Minister of Labour Lianne Dalziel kick-started a campaign encouraging commitment to work-life balance principles among employers, she chose Unity Books for the media launch. “Everyone who works in this seven-day-a-week business has a life so we operate with maximum flexibility,” says Lloyd.

Not as simple as it sounds, of course. Lloyd, a tiny shock-haired dynamo, not only oozes erudite charm but energy. She needs it. “Running a literary bookshop can be a bit of a whirl. People come first – well, first-equal with books. Apart from the trade and the many authors we delight in seeing, the astonishing range of customers is our sustaining force.

“Any independent bookseller knows what it’s like to be revising the newsletter or the website at the same time as meeting the customer from Queenstown on her annual in-person book binge while simultaneously stepping over someone’s skateboard and directing another customer to the biography section. Millions of those moments make up our normal lives.”

Lloyd speaks with respect and affection of long-time staffer and novelist Nigel Cox, who died last year from cancer. She says every one of the hundreds who have worked in the store, 17 of whom are published authors in their own right, has made a mark in the place.

Lloyd says it is impossible for chain stores to replicate a culture like Unity’s. “With



the chains, head office buys for all of their stores, whereas independent booksellers shape their own inventory, selecting books to sell by an instinct and knowledge of what’s hot and what’s about to be hot.”

Forty years in the trade makes Unity Books a mere babe compared to four other independent bookshops, all over 100 years old and operating – rather joyfully actually – in the provinces.

The oldest is Buddens Bookshop in Motueka, established in 1904 by George Budden, whose initial interest in the printed word was the purchase of a printing press to print bulb catalogues for his father, a local nurseryman.

The shop’s fortunes have followed those of its community. It flourished during Motueka’s tobacco-growing heyday, but these days it’s a “lifestyle business” for owners Pat Shortley and Nic Brown, who describe books as their life. Pat, the ex-social worker, and Nic, the ex-cow cockie, have carved out a niche “toward the literary end of the market” – serving their loyal, largely rural clientele by bringing in new and second-hand books from around the world.

Unity regularly picks up “best bookshop” awards, including Best Shop in the Wellingtonista Awards.

Charles Muir opened Muirs Bookshop in Gisborne in July 1905. The Muirs, the country’s oldest newspaper family, also established the *Gisborne Herald*.

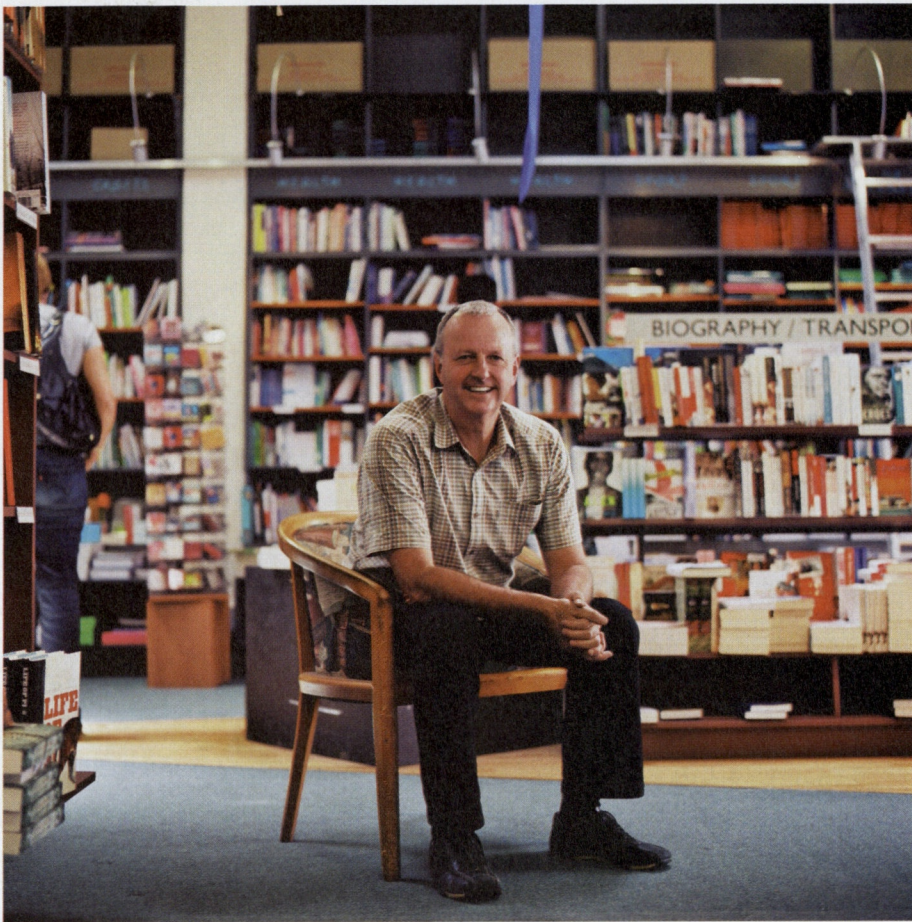
The bookshop went out of family ownership briefly but 25 years ago they bought it back and these days it thrives with Anne Muir at the helm.

She’s the wife of Charles’ grandson and current *Gisborne Herald* publisher Michael Muir.

It was named Independent New Zealand Bookseller of the Year in 2001 and last year was runner-up. The business has also won several local customer service awards.

The bookshop and cafe is open seven days a week in summer and six days the rest of the year with a staff of six on the floor. They’re involved in most local literary launches and host visiting authors from New Zealand and overseas.

“We see people come into the bookshop who are as passionate as us about books, if not more. Visitors from out of town rave about us and we make a big effort to encourage young readers – building, we



Hedley's Bookshop in Masterton is run by David Hedley, the grandson of founder William Hedley.

hope, our customer base for another 100 years," says Anne.

Further north, Carson's Bookshop has been providing the old mining town of Thames with mind fodder since 1906, when William Carson first opened its doors.

Pat and Vince Mravicich have owned the business for 20 years, shifting two doors down the road from its original site in 1993.

They trade seven days a week and attract customers from around the country, many of whom come to browse their vast range of titles. They have a particular reputation for history books.

Carson's has had only three owners. Vince, an engineering moulder by trade, and Pat, who has an accounting background, missed out on buying the business when it first came up for sale. They waited and 13 years later they were successful.

Pat's a third-generation Thames resident who recalls visiting the shop when it was also a lending library and she was a little girl. She says Carson's nurtured her literary habit.

It's with enduring satisfaction she and Vince live the bookshop's motto: "If there's a book you want it's Carson's you need."

The most recent centenarian, Masterton's Hedley's Bookshop, celebrated its birthday last year. Like Muirs, it's still in the family. Situated on the busy provincial town's main street, it's run by David and Jenny Hedley. David is the grandson of founder William Hedley.

David's father Alex took over when he was only 21 and developed the business over 50 years.

"He was a great bookseller of the old school, very outgoing, a huge reader and talented marketer who loved talking about books almost as much as he loved reading them.

"When radio was a new medium he pioneered voicing his own adverts but his main interest was selling books.

"His customers were very individual. He got to know them and what they were interested in. That was the secret of his success and it's pivotal to our success too," says David.

Like all independents, David faces competition from the chains but he says their effect has waned in recent years.

"The range of books in the English lan-



guage is massive – which means independent bookshops can stock what they believe their market wants."

He says access to the internet has helped rather than hindered his business because people are more aware of what's available. "But they still want to see the books, hold them in their hands and then make their decision – and we're only too happy to help them."

Hedley's Bookshop maintains six full-time equivalent positions for six days a week and an extensive mail-order business servicing customers throughout the country.

"We're very strong on New Zealand books but we carry a broad range. In the old days, men wanted adventure stories and women wanted history or romance, but now there are so many different genres and styles.

"We cater for a very sophisticated audience."

He recalls the euphoria that enveloped their centenary celebrations. "The locals rallied around. There were grandparents bringing grandchildren into the shop that gave them so much reading pleasure over the years.

"When you have that kind of relationship with your customers why wouldn't you be optimistic about the future?" +