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Her Life Is a Real Page-Turner



Deidre Schoo for The New York Times

Sarah McNally, independent bookseller and independent spirit.

By JAN HOFFMAN

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TO keep her independent bookstore not only solvent but thriving (revenue is racing ahead of last year by 16 percent), Sarah McNally has a limitless supply of small tricks up her sleeve. And a whirring, wheezing behemoth at her side.

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At the determinedly Wi-Fi-free McNally Jackson Books on Prince Street in NoLiTa, customers can lie on a chaise longue, reading potential purchases from a selection of 55,000 volumes. The store is known for its 8,300-title literature collection, organized by geography.

Italian, Spanish and Portuguese writers are huddled in one section, Germans and Austrians in another. And in a curatorial geopolitical statement, the Middle Eastern section mingles Arab, Persian and Israeli fiction writers, their boundaries defined only by alphabetized last names.

"The staff and I argue about the Libyans," said Ms. McNally, 36, a tall, ethereal Canadian with brown eyes that nearly subsume her delicate features. "They're in 'African' now, but I'm lobbying for 'Middle Eastern.' "

She will explain her reasoning, leading you with passion and charm through her mind's labyrinthine byways. Not to worry. You will get lost anyway.

The store tour, past the cafe with books dangling from mobiles (book mobiles?), through sections labeled gender, ideas, drugs, graphic novels and pets, arrives at Ms. McNally's grand gambit against the e-book pestilence: a print-right-now bookmaker called the Espresso Book Machine, the only one in New York City (worldwide, there are about 80).

From a cloud library of seven million titles, the Espresso (so named because it prints one book at a time, made to order, speedily) can download, bind and trim a paperback in minutes, for a price comparable to that of a typical paperback. Last month, HarperCollins

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minutes, for a price comparable to that of a typical paperback. Last month, HarperCollins made a 5,000-title back list available for the machine. More publishers are expected to follow shortly.

The store also uses it to print almost 700 self-published works a month, and offers “white glove” services for editing and jacket design.

Who else can go to war with Amazon but an Amazon warrior?

Ms. McNally gazed tenderly at the behemoth as it printed “Veiled Women,” by Marmaduke Pickthall (1913) for a customer. “Look,” she cooed, as mechanical thingamabobs measured and bound the new book. “It’s still warm, like cookies fresh out of the oven.”

In a phone interview, Lorin Stein, editor of *The Paris Review*, observed that Ms. McNally was uniquely poised to withstand Amazon, which, he said, served well those buyers who knew what they wanted, but not those impulse buyers who are open to ardent, articulate persuasion.

“Sarah has a combination of Canadian seriousness, rapacious, wide-ranging intelligence and curiosity, and salesmanship,” he said, “and an idiosyncrasy that clearly comes from a deep place.”

Ms. McNally sat down at a reading table across from the African-American history section, near children’s books recommended by local teachers. She sipped tea, coughing, her thin body shaking.

Bad cold? “Technically, I had tuberculosis,” she said with a shrug.

About six years ago she tested positive on a skin-scratch test. She had a latent infection, was not contagious and took antibiotics. But the antibodies will always be present.

“I look pale and weak but I’m actually strong,” she said with a sneaky smile. “Lifting heavy boxes, it’s the dark underbelly of bookselling.”

Though Ms. McNally, a daughter of Winnipeg, Manitoba, grew up in the McNally Robinson bookstores run by her parents, her current role was hardly preordained. When she graduated from McGill with a philosophy degree, she had no vision of a career, only a potent restlessness.

“I have A.D.D.,” she said, her slender arms flying, like a crane. “I hated sitting in class all day. I could only concentrate when I was reading or writing. So I bought a one-way ticket to Africa. I don’t know why. Now I’m so goal-oriented, with schedules and to-do lists. How did I do that, without even a travel guide? It was so stupid.”

For nine months, she wandered alone, almost penniless, through Tanzania, Zimbabwe and Mozambique. Finally she made her way to beautiful, remote Chizumulu Island in Lake Malawi.

“It was so other,” Ms. McNally said dreamily. “I guess I had a nervous breakdown. So people took me to a magical healer who gave me roots to drink. He said my gift for clairvoyance would be realized.”

And?

“Alas,” she said. “But maybe that was because I didn’t take the roots religiously.”

Or maybe he was right. Investing in the Espresso Book Machine, which can cost upward of \$100,000, brings the cloud down to earth, and reveals a future-oriented instinct. It helps solve inventory challenges and satisfies impulse buyers by hitching technology to the tactile pleasures of print.

Ms. McNally came to New York in 1999 and found work in publishing, eventually becoming an editor at Basic Books. But four years later, while at a Manhattan book fair, selling volumes she had edited, she realized: “There were people greedy for books, rabid for books and I thought: ‘This is what I want to be doing. I want to be with readers.’”

She fell in love with Christopher Jackson, now executive editor at Spiegel and Grau, a

she fell in love with Christopher Jackson, now executive editor at Spiegel and Grau, a Random House division. (They were both editing works by Ishmael Reed.) In December 2004, shortly after their wedding, she opened the bookstore in part with money from a grandfather who specifically designated the money for his heirs' business ventures. (The couple, now separated, have a 3-year-old son.)

The whirlwind life suits her: single parent, store owner contemplating a venture on the Upper West Side, leader of one of the store's book clubs (international fiction), member of a Proust reading group, hiker.

And fervent bookseller:

"I believe that within every great reader there are multitudes of people," she said. "And you have to open yourself to all of them. I love British chick lit and I love Proust. Don't judge yourself! There are so many kinds of writing that are great but bear no relation to each other. 'A Book of Memories' by Peter Nadas is like climbing a mountain. 'Cutting for Stone' is like going down a waterslide."

Book-buying is aspirational, she added. "They are deeply hopeful purchases."

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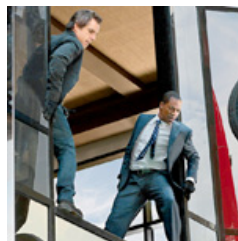
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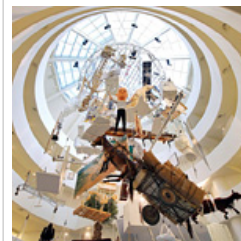
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