

INTERVIEW

‘BOOKS MAY SURVIVE, BUT WILL BOOKSHOPS?’

Three booksellers on their past, present and future

Loren Snel and Charlotte Boelens

The paper book's chief accomplice? Who could it be but the bookseller. TXT consulted three independents. What will the future of bookselling look like? We spoke to the new director of Athenaeum Booksellers, Caroline Reeders. We talked to comic bookstore owner Menno Barkema, of Leidse Stripshop Mevrouw Kern. Lastly, we spoke with entrepreneur Tim van den Hoed of the crowdfunded De Utrechtse Boekenbar. They may be fortes and cities apart, but these booksellers show striking commonalities. All waved digital goodbye and returned to paper. They have faith in the paper book, but do they have equal faith in the bookshop?

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Caroline Reeders

Director of Athenaeum Booksellers, Amsterdam

**YOU HAVE BEEN DIRECTOR AT ATHENAEUM FOR SOME
MONTHS NOW. WHAT HAS IT BEEN LIKE THUS FAR?**

Very fun, very special. I have worked all over the business. I imported

English books at Van Ditmar, freelanced and did consulting for various publishers, worked for Mindbus, the company that designs online stores for bookshops. But never before did I work on the bookstore side of things. I ran into an old colleague recently. We worked together at newspaper de Volkskrant twenty years ago. I told him about my job and he went, 'You already wanted that back then!' Clearly, it has been a long-cherished dream of mine. As is common with those, they can disappoint when they come true. You might have idealized things. But that romantic ideal I have dreamed of, has become reality.

YOU USED TO DO MARKETING FOR NEWSPAPERS. HAS THE PAPER BUSINESS PREPARED YOU FOR YOUR CURRENT PROFESSION?

Absolutely. Back then, the newspapers' printers were located in the same building as the editorial and marketing offices. So I basically worked in a factory. You could smell the ink, hear and feel the presses. It made for a high-paced daily dynamic. Later, at the book publishers', things went much slower. A book took six weeks, sometimes a year. I really had to get used to that. At Athenaeum, I have returned to that old, fast dynamic. I feel it, recognise it. The store is open daily, and that is a good thing. I should somewhat stay out of that dynamic though. There is a long-term plan I need to keep my eyes on. Now I am here, I am even more aware of the need to make sure bookstores like ours will still be relevant in five, ten years.

ATHENAEUM IS PERHAPS THE MOST FAMOUS BOOKSTORE IN AMSTERDAM. HOW, IN YOUR OPINION, DOES ATHENAEUM CURRENTLY DISTINGUISH ITSELF?

We offer quite some languages, like Italian, Spanish, German, French. We also offer books on subjects like classical antiquity, philosophy of science, *belles lettres*. Other bookstores offer some of that, but Athenaeum specifically pursues a policy to provide such niches. We also sell academic textbooks, an important division of our business, especially within Amsterdam, and especially for our online store. In Leiden you go to Van Stockum, I presume?

VAN STOCKUM QUIT SELLING ACADEMIC TEXTBOOKS TO STUDENTS AND STUDY ASSOCIATIONS.

Ah well, very understandable. The margin on textbooks is small. But they are part of our identity and we like to maintain our connection with the academic audience. They can come to us for whatever,

Mother's Day, Christmas. The average Athenaeum client does not read middle-of-the-road. People know they can come to us with their difficult questions, offline and online. The fact that you can approach a bookseller here with a highly specific request, and that that bookseller immediately knows what you mean, is, I think, unique. Rare recommendations, that is what you come to us for. But there is also a danger in that. We could become too exotic, go adrift. It would discourage potential new clients.

WILL A BOOKSELLER NOT KNOW SOON ENOUGH WHAT TO OFFER
THE KIND OF READER THEY HAVE IN FRONT OF THEM?

Yes, but that reader has to come to the store first. My predecessor, Maarten Ascher, has said 'Athenaeum is the elite's clubhouse, but the elite may be big'. I wonder if you will make it that way. I do not mean leaving people out in the cold. You will want to cater for the elite, and address a larger audience at the same time. Perhaps we should shed our academic and literary skin somewhat, stretch the concept of what we mean by 'quality'. But how to do that, without becoming a bookstore of ten a penny? That, I consider a quest.

HOW DO YOU SEE THE FUTURE OF BOOKSELLING
IN THE NEXT FIVE TO TEN YEARS?

I think the physical book will make it through. People do not think twice about abandoning one medium for a technically superior one. But the physical book is both sentimentally and technically the better option. People say they miss that tactility, that feeling when they read digitally. Digital reading has its perks, of course. An e-reader is easy to transport. But we peer at screens all day already. Reading a real book then offers a different experience. It will remain, but it will diminish. There are too many alternatives available nowadays. It becomes a question of trade, of money, or time. How are you going to spend the hours available in a day? Perhaps watch a movie, message friends all evening. People have not started to hate reading; their attention span is just shortening to messages of 140 characters. That shift to fragmented reading is bad news for the novel. People do not hate the things that disappear. Those things just lose their exchange value.

COULD THE PHYSICAL BOOKSHOP DISAPPEAR
TOO, JUST LIKE THE RECORD STORE?

Yes. It would be a shame and it would make me nostalgic, as you do with beautiful things beyond saving. I would resist it in the sense that I would keep on asking 'why do I want to save it? Is there reason to? Are there reasons not to?' Of course I hope and believe some bookstores will remain, and that Athenaeum will be among them. But that will only happen when we are constantly occupied with adapting, and with answering the question 'why?', instead of 'why not?'.

DUTCH PUBLISHING GROUP WPG IS DEVELOPING TEXT MINING
PRODUCTS. ONE SUCH TOOL WOULD USE DATA, MINED
FROM A NOVEL FOR EXAMPLE, TO PROVIDE BOOKSELLERS
WITH INFORMATION ON THEME, STYLE AND QUALITY.
WOULD THESE TOOLS HAVE A PLACE AT ATHENAEUM?

Naturally. Everything to help people find what they are looking for. I am not very emotional about these things. I understand other people want to resist such developments. But what I see, particularly when it comes to non-fiction, is that the better organized your metadata are the more you sell. Not just that, but it makes it easier for people to find what they are truly looking for. I do not see what the objection to that could be. By the time we are there, we will all be OK with it. When I was young, we thought a mobile phone was ridiculous. They once conducted a research in France to find out if people were prepared to take cash out of a hole in the wall. No, no one was going to do that. Preposterous idea...

DO YOU STILL HAVE TIME TO READ, DESPITE THESE BUSY TIMES?

Yes, cannot do without it. My daughter asked me this morning whether I had had a good sleep. No, I said, I was reading till late. She said: 'You say it as if that is not what you always do!'



Tim van den Hoed

Owner of De Utrechtse Boekenbar, Utrecht

**HOW DID YOU COME UP WITH THE IDEA OF SELLING
BOOKS WITH COVERS FACING FORWARD?**

There are quite some bookstores – in Berlin, Warsaw, Korea, Japan – that display books this way. They inspired me. Books are too beautiful to just be showing us their spines. The downside of this set-up is that there is less space for more titles. But that is not a big problem when you are as small a bookstore as I am.

**RECENTLY, LOUIS BOOK CAFÉ OPENED IN THE CENTRE OF UTRECHT.
DOES THEIR BOOKISH AURA POSE A THREAT TO YOUR BUSINESS?**

Louis does not sell books. They are just a café, with chesterfields and a 1930s-theme. I wanted my shop's interior to be clean, bright and inviting. And I wanted to sell books, and serve The Village Coffee, the best in town.

**SOME YEARS BACK, YOU WORKED AS A PRODUCT
SPECIALIST AT ONLINE STORE BOL.COM. IS THAT
WHERE YOUR BOOKSTORE DREAM WAS BORN?**

The idea had been playing around in my head before that. I have always loved books, but what they look like is very important to me. If I do not like the paper or the way it has been printed, I often do not want to read it. I believe everyone cares about that. You want to hold before you decide, which is why buying online is never ideal. When I was a product specialist, I had people call to claim their book was a misprint, when the frayed look of the outside of the pages was by design. Look, like this one, [the Dutch translation of Haruki Murakami's latest novel in hardcover].

HOW DID PEOPLE RESPOND WHEN YOU SHARED YOUR BOOKSHOP DREAM WITH THEM?

Some were supportive. They believed there was demand for what I wanted to offer. But there was plenty of criticism too. People asked what balance I would strike between bookselling and catering. Or told me there would be too much competition. An editor at a publishing house told me 'the last thing Utrecht needs is another bookshop'.

WHAT DID YOU TELL HIM? WHAT IS YOUR USP?

What I think makes my business unique is that you can walk in without the arresting feeling of needing to buy a book. Pop in and have a coffee. Stay awhile. Read some. Most literary bookshops are stern and quiet. I want people to step in and feel like they can ask me stuff. I can tell them about the books I enjoy. I notice those are the ones I end up selling most often.

HOW DO YOU SEE THE FUTURE, IN FIVE YEARS OR SO?

Of bookselling or of my bookshop? I am hoping to use the basement of my store in the future. I will have to see. I have four years to pay back the loan on my CrowdAboutNow sponsorship. I have only been open for a couple of months. I need to work at spreading the word, building up a clientele, and keep on showing people books. We need to keep reminding ourselves of their existence, lest we forget about them. You know, I do believe in the paper book's survival. That is not to say I believe every bookshop will survive.



Menno Barkema

Owner of Leidse Stripshop Mevrouw Kern, Leiden

HOW DID YOU FIND YOUR WAY INTO THE COMIC BOOK WORLD?

I started reading them when I was ten, and started dealing in comic books as soon as I had a car. After secondary school I got my retailer's certificate. Back then, that was compulsory if you wanted to be in retail or open a store. There was no course on cartoons. I acquired all comic book knowledge myself; it is a self-taught specialism. To go into the comic book business, you need to know what you are doing, what you are selling. You need to know which ones are popular, what sells at what price point, which books are rare, where you can acquire them. It is a complex business. That is why regular bookstores do not sell comic books, only us specialists do.

CAN YOU TELL US A BIT MORE ABOUT THE STORE. ARE YOU SPECIALISED IN CERTAIN COMIC BOOKS?

The store was established in 1981 and named after a regular customer and great comic book enthusiast. Four years ago, I joined the second owner, Hans Edink. As of January 2018, I run the store by myself. Comic books in Dutch make up 80% of my business. My bestsellers are no surprise; *Suske en Wiske* [Spike and Suzy], *Kuifje* [Tintin], *Asterix*, *Donald Duck*. Some I can get at CB [the Dutch book distributor], but for most titles I visit at least twenty different locations so as to offer my customers what they want.

MEVROUW KERN ALSO HAS A WEBSTORE. SINCE WHEN CAN CUSTOMERS FIND COMIC BOOKS THERE?

I believe the webstore has been online for fifteen or twenty years. It must have been launched as soon as the internet existed. I have personally been selling comic books online since the nineties. In those days, you managed to sell everything. Later, there was more

competition. This led to setting up an actual store. The physical store will always be the main attraction. After all, you want to hold comic books, look at them. In a webstore, you see a picture, maybe a short description, that is all. It is like reading the back of a videotape. You will not know what type of movie it is, or whether you will like it. You need to watch it to know for sure. The same goes for a comic book. You pick it up, you flip through it, you look at the images, at the drawing style, the story. That is how you will know it sparks your interest. Comic books are expensive, too, so looking at them in-store helps you decide..

IN THE MUSIC AND FILM INDUSTRY, PIRATING AND ILLEGAL
ONLINE SHARING IS A BIG ISSUE. THE BOOK BUSINESS, TOO, IS
FACED WITH OPEN ACCESS, COPYRIGHT AND ILLEGAL SHARING.
HOW DO THESE DEVELOPMENTS AFFECT YOUR BUSINESS?

Comic books are a beautiful, luxury product. There is a desire to collect them physically. You want to hold them and have them on display. Comic books are not like newspapers. I can imagine people have no need for a physical paper. News gets old quickly. Comic books are more like photos. I will always prefer a physical photo to its digital counterpart. Admittedly, some comic books like the Marvel series are expensive and hard to come by. So, if by illegally obtaining them online you can read the story, I can imagine some will do so. But I do not think pirating poses a genuine threat to the comic book industry. To successfully spread illegal scans of comic books, you need to deconstruct or damage an original. I cannot imagine anyone would want, or would take time to do that.