



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

The Bore of the Book Biz

Bakker, A.

Citation

Bakker, A. (2012). The Bore of the Book Biz. *Re_*, 1(1), 12-13. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/30005>

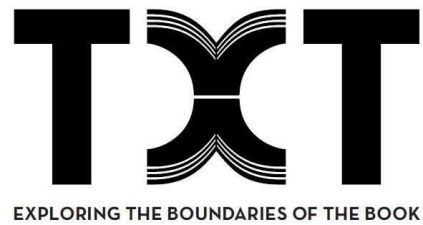
Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/30005>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page

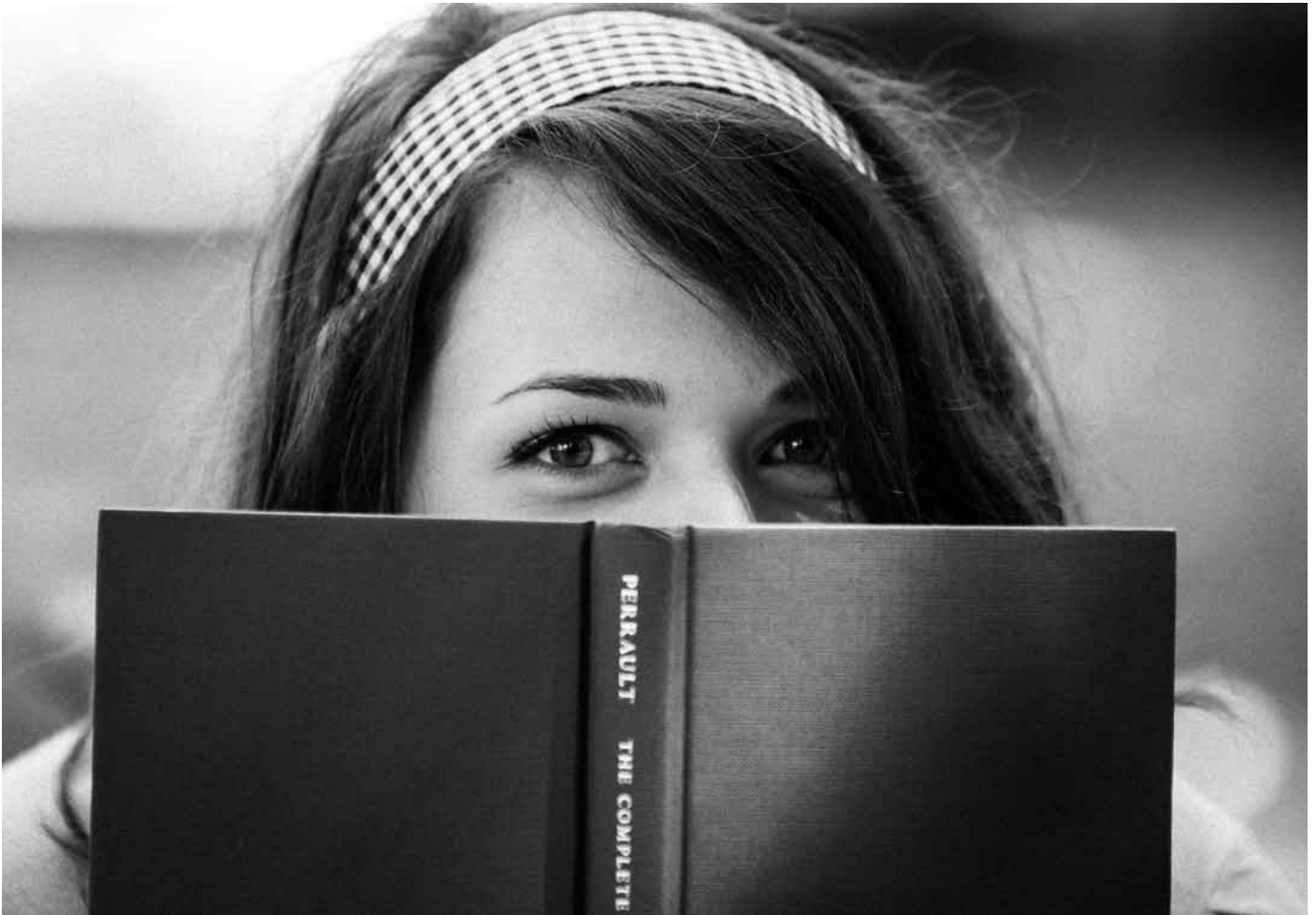


The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/28849> holds the collection of TXT in the Leiden University Repository.

This document has been released under the following Creative Commons license



The Bore of the Book Biz



ANNE BAKKER

Why there is little interest in physical shops and what booksellers can do to change the course of their stores

Over the last few decades, contemporary societies are being digitized at an accelerating pace. In 2011, correspondence is mainly by email, online newspapers are read by a bigger number of people every day as opposed to print newspapers. And web shops have come to do good business since they opened their virtual doors. As a consequence, physical shops have experienced a decreasing turnover, with bookshops as a good candidate for suffering the greatest losses. This is due to the two-pronged attack of on the one

hand web shops providing customers with the easy alternative of not having to leave the house and on the other hand the arrival of the e-book, which until recently was solely sold and bought online. As bookshops are starting to get uncomfortably anxious about dropping sales, a Dutch chain of bookstores (Libris) has just started offering e-books over the counter. This in fact is the first step bookstores need to take if they want to stay in business. One could wonder if it would be a big problem if bookshops were to disappear. Apart from people

losing their jobs, what else would be lost? At first sight perhaps not that much, since books will still be available online. But this merely covers the most apparent line of approach. With the bookshop out of the picture, reading becomes a less obvious leisure activity. Again one could ask whether or not this would be a problem. Many scholars underscore the benefits of reading and following linear narratives. A few examples of those benefits would be the stimulation of concentration and creativity and of the ability to understand, remember, and

“For bookshops and especially the independent ones having little to no financial backing compared to stores that are affiliated to chains, it would be wise to play the culture card more than they do now.”



learn more from linear texts than one could learn from hyperlinked texts on the Internet.

If a decreasing number or total disappearance of physical bookstores means that people will read lesser linear texts, this would compromise cultural identities. Books can be considered the bearers of traditional knowledge; they foster a collective memory. A crack in the process of creating a collective memory would be detrimental to a nation's cultural identity since that is, for the better part, based on what that nation's people know to be their shared history.

But if it is so important for physical bookshops to stay in the picture, then why is it so hard for them to do so? For one, I believe that Dutch shopkeepers are still “reluctant capitalists.” Their American counterparts seem to understand their position better, which allows them more adequately to deal with the threats posed to them by supermarkets and major bookselling chains. American independent bookstores have been seeking to be “a savior of community life” ever since they understood that capitalist competition was going to shove them off of the stage. According to Myers, Harris, and Mandelbrote only innovative ideas allow companies to set themselves apart from the other players in the field. So obviously, even after cautiously starting to sell e-books in physical shops, the reluctant capitalists really need to open up their minds to innovative ideas for more rigorous change. For bookshops and especially the independent ones

having little to no financial backing compared to stores that are affiliated to chains, it would be wise to play the culture card more than they do now. Though not every consumer might want to admit it, bookshops have symbolic, cultural value. By organizing cultural events, for example by inviting authors to talk and or sign books or by organizing writing competitions, the notion of bookshops as cultural transmitters will be more widely accepted, which will result in better appreciation of and higher profits for the shops. Also, if space allows it, the reservation of some of this space for a literary café might boost a bookstore's attractiveness. Consumers like to ponder a bit on possible purchases. And where better to do this than in the store's own characteristic café?

This might also be a place to meet people and discuss the bestsellers list or alternatively niche publications. In *The Bookseller* of October 21st, 2011 ten independent booksellers were asked to give one tip each about how to stay in business. Of course this was done with regards to the British market, but the Dutch market will not be different to the extent that the tips will be of no use to Dutch independent booksellers. I will not name all ten of them, but just give the general gist of the energising total of tips. One of the things mentioned is that it is wise to try to think ahead of what customers want and provide them with knowledgeable and friendly service. This may mean specialising in certain niches in order to provide books that no other store sells. Besides that it is deemed important to join local life via

‘author events, school visits, storytelling sessions – things that really add up in people's minds.’ These happen to be the same activities that people tend to come back for. Finally, attention is given to the promotion of the own bookstore and of hard work.

It cannot be easy to be in business in times of economic distress, especially if it is in the sector most people probably first start economising on. It is a real challenge to hold out, so it is time for booksellers to face the facts and stop being reluctant capitalists. If they want to stay in business, they have to convince people to come to their stores in person. And for this, things need to change. Bookstores need to become more visible than they are now and becoming more culturally active can be a means to this end. For generations bookstores have been regarded as having cultural and symbolic value. There is no need and actually no reason for this to change now. Of course, it is so much easier to take a seat behind your pc with a cup of tea at home than to go out and commute all the way to the physical bookstore. But is it not valuable to flick through a book before you buy it, feel the texture, smell the smell? Most customers will agree, but in the digital present they just want to be sure they get a little extra for the effort of leaving the comfort of their homes.

ambakker85@live.com

Photo © 2012 Giulio Menna