

Bookstores anchor communities

LGBTQ-oriented shops don't just sell volumes; they provide safe spaces

Matt Alderton
Special to USA TODAY

Even in the age of e-commerce and COVID-19, independent bookstores are thriving, according to the American Booksellers Association, whose membership currently includes 1,700 stores with 2,100 locations. Although that number is less than a third of its pre-internet peak, it's still an increase of more than 20% from 2009.

The growth of indie bookstores is especially good news for the LGBTQ community, said Will Clark, a manager at Giovanni's Room in Philadelphia, which claims to be the oldest and longest-running gay bookstore in the United States.

"For the LGBTQ community in particular, bookstores are more than just a place to buy a novel. ... Especially in the 1980s and 1990s during the AIDS epidemic, bookstores were huge community spaces for activism and organization," Clark said. Bookstores in gay neighborhoods were safe spaces where LGBTQ patrons could learn about their health, explore their sexuality and be their authentic selves. "Because of the internet, we're fortunate that LGBTQ people today have access to a lot more information than they did back then. But structurally, bookstores continue to serve that purpose. There's just something about a physical space that still feels really essential to our sense of community."

Struggling with competition from online booksellers and the economic fallout of the pandemic, many LGBTQ bookstores have closed in recent years. Yet many others remain. Here are five survivors that deserve your support.

Giovanni's Room (Philadelphia)

Named after the 1956 novel by gay author James Baldwin, Giovanni's Room (queerbooks.com) traces its history to 1973, when four LGBTQ activists established a store on the 200 block of South Street. At that time, there were so few books on LGBTQ topics that the store's inventory occupied only a single shelf.



A historical marker outside Giovanni's Room in Philadelphia tells the story of the shop that claims to be the nation's oldest gay bookstore. When the store opened at its original location in 1973 — it has moved twice and changed ownership since then — there were so few books available on LGBTQ topics that the inventory occupied a single shelf. 2014 AP PHOTO.

“One of my favorite things about the store is when a young person comes in and realizes they’re in a space made for and by the queer community. Their eyes light up. ... Seeing themselves represented in a book for the first time is indescribably huge.”

Will Clark
a manager at Giovanni's Room in Philadelphia

The store didn't survive long in its original location. Just a year into its lease, the landlord discovered what kind of bookstore it was and raised the rent, forcing it to move. Its second location was equally inhospitable, according to Clark, who said the landlord collected rent outside on the sidewalk because he refused to enter a gay business. Giovanni's Room finally settled in its current location in 1976 — a former butcher shop at 12th and Pine.

"At that time, the community came together to gut the place and turn it into a bookstore," Clark said. "So the shelves we still use today literally were built by the gay community in Philadelphia."

When longtime owner Ed Hermance retired in 2014, he sold the business to local nonprofit Philly AIDS Thrift, which owns and operates it today.

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Unabridged Bookstore (Chicago)

Ed Devereux has been selling books since 1972, when he got a job at the campus bookstore at the University of Illinois.

"I just fell in love with it. All I wanted to do was work at a bookstore," said Devereux, who earned an MBA and eventually became a systems analyst at Wells Fargo Bank. He hated it. Less than a year into his new career, he quit to work a minimum-wage job at a chain bookstore,

Continued on Page 60

GAY PRIDE MONTH

Continued from Page 58

after which he became a regional sales rep for Random House. Then in November 1980 he opened his own place, Unabridged Bookstore (*unabridgedbookstore.com*) in Chicago's Northalsted neighborhood.

"I wanted to sell all kinds of books, but every bookstore has a specialty. So I decided to be a general bookstore with a gay specialty," Devereux said. His LGBTQ section initially occupied a single bookshelf but now dominates the better part of an entire room. "We're a neighborhood bookstore, and I wanted to reflect the neighborhood."

Today, the neighborhood is more diverse — and so is the store, which has a

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Ed Devereux
Unabridged Bookstore

sizable children's section, large transgender and lesbian sections, and even a growing selection of young adult gay fiction.

"Gay literature has exploded, and it's bringing in a whole new generation of clientele," Devereux said. "It's really gratifying to see so many young people discovering us and appreciating us."

**Firestorm Books & Coffee
(Asheville, North Carolina)**

To a lot of people, "queer" and "Southern" may seem fundamentally incompatible. At Firestorm Books & Coffee (*firestorm.coop*), however, they couldn't be more complementary, said co-founder Libertie Valance, who helped establish the worker-owned business in 2008.

"We want folks to know that the South is full of vibrant, radical queer and trans communities," Valance said. "Our region isn't 'backwards.' It's the frontline of a national struggle against bigotry and authoritarianism."

Firestorm is a means to support and honor that struggle, Valance said. The store specializes in books that are "oriented towards social movement," she explained. "We want the books we stock to be relevant to marginalized communities in the South, so we skip a lot of national



Owner Ed Devereux describes Unabridged Bookstore in Chicago as a neighborhood store that reflects the area around it. It's located in the Northalsted neighborhood, a heavily LGBTQ enclave that was long known as Boystown but was recently rechristened by community leaders to promote inclusion. 2014 PHOTO BY ALYSSA L SCHUKAR FOR USA TODAY



Libertie Valance, center, says Firestorm Books & Coffee in North Carolina aims to stock material "relevant to marginalized communities in the South." With Valance in this 2016 photo are Joey Kasanke, left, and Jamie Theophilos. FIRESTORM

bestsellers and heavily feature titles by Black, native, queer and trans authors."

Like so many other LGBTQ bookstores, Firestorm prides itself on being not just a store, but a gathering place.

"It used to be that if you wanted to be in a queer space, that probably meant going to a bar," Valance said. "But over the last 10 years we've seen growing interest in queer spaces that don't center around alcohol. We want Firestorm to be a space for queer youth, folks in recovery and others who — for whatever reason — are looking to find community without having a drink."

Fabulosa Books (San Francisco)

Fabulosa Books (*fabulosabooks.com*) is a new store with a long history. Owned by writer Alvin Orloff, author of *Disasterama! Adventures in the Queer Underground 1977-1997*, it opened in 2021 but

Continued on Page 62

GAY PRIDE MONTH

Continued from Page 60

its lineage dates to 1985. That's when A Different Light, a now-extinct chain of LGBTQ bookstores, opened a beloved branch in the Castro District of San Francisco. The store thrived for 26 years before closing in 2011. Local bookstore Dog Eared Books opened a branch in the location in 2016, then sold it last year to Orloff, who managed the store and subsequently turned it into Fabulosa.

"Although we're not exclusively LGBTQ, we have a really large LGBTQ section — the largest in the city, certainly, and maybe even the state," Orloff said. He said his favorite customers are LGBTQ tourists, many of whom make pilgrimages to gay-friendly San Francisco from less progressive places.

"A lot of people grow up not learning about gay history or culture, and they discover it by accident just by walking into our store," Orloff said. "They come here from places like Texas or Nigeria, and they can't believe a place like this exists. A lot of times they're practically in tears, and that really means a lot to me."

Charis Books & More (Decatur, Georgia)

Lesbian-owned Charis Books & More (charisbooksandmore.com) is the oldest feminist bookstore in the South, accord-

ing to co-owner Sara Look, who began working there in 1994 — 20 years after founders Linda Bryant and Barbara Borgman established it.

Now in its third location — on the campus of Agnes Scott College, a private women's college — Charis is as much a queer bookstore as a feminist one. "For us, that means holding space for radical and independent voices, and for people who are the most marginalized," Look said. The store's specialty is diverse and multicultural children's books, including books for and about transgender youth. "As long as there have been books about LGBTQ families and kids, we have had those books," Look said.

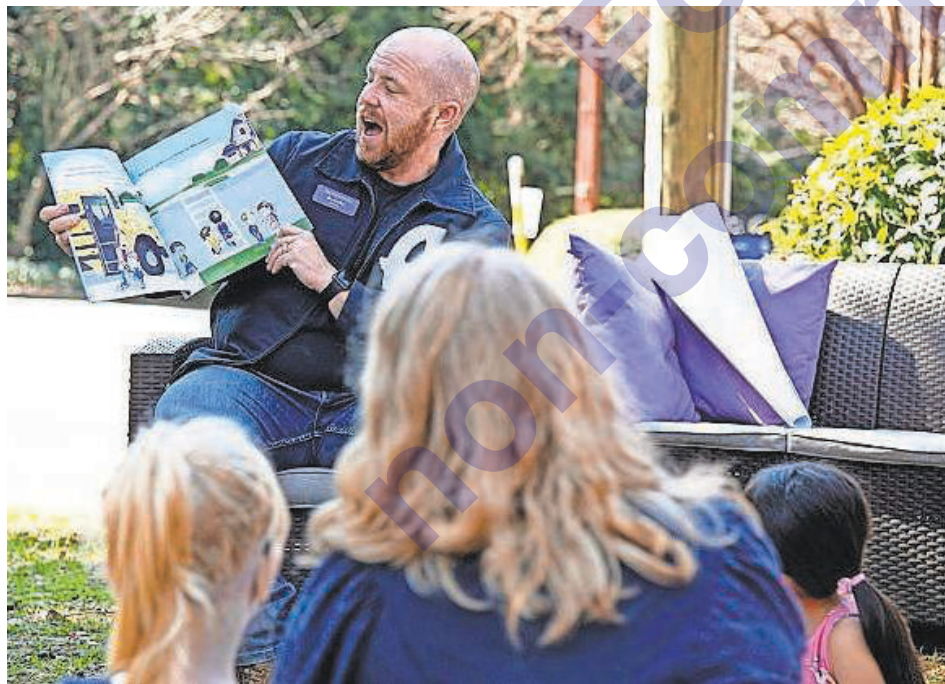
Charis — the Greek word for "grace" — has its own nonprofit, Charis Circle, that organizes literary discussions, author events and community programming, including race-conscious and gender-creative parenting groups and support groups for transgender youth and adults.

"The 'More' in Charis Books & More has always been in our name because we offer more than books. We offer community," Look said. "Even in the digital age, people need actual, physical places where they can be themselves. We're a public, queer and feminist space that's open seven days a week.

"You don't have to buy anything. You can just come and be."



"You don't have to buy anything," says Charis Books & More co-owner Sara Look, who considers her store a community space. "You can just come and be."



E.R. Anderson reads to kids at an event sponsored by Charis Books & More, a lesbian-owned shop in Decatur, Georgia, that says it is the oldest feminist bookstore in the South. PHOTOS COURTESY OF CHARIS BOOKS & MORE