



In Toronto, a women's bookstore beats the odds armed with committed politics and a savvy business plan.

The BOOK BIZ

By Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha

Toronto Women's Bookstore staff manager Zahra Jacobs.

At the Toronto Women's Bookstore's 32nd anniversary party, there's free barbeque in the backyard and a line around the block. On the eighth day of a heat wave that's blanketed the city with smog, the joint is packed with customers chatting, fanning themselves and chowing down on burgers, salads and iced tea.

It's no small feat for any women's bookstore, not to mention one that's already survived one firebombing (back when it was below an abortion clinic) and faced down an

attempted post-9/11 boycott because the store carried "End the Occupation of Palestine" buttons. But there's something else you notice as you look around the room: 9 of the 12 staffers—many of them rocking "Bookstore Babes" T-shirts—are women of color. Instead of a "Women of Color" shelf, the bookstore has a wall neatly divided into brimming shelves labeled "African-Canadian," "Caribbean," "South Asian," "First Nations," "Latina," and "Arab." They manage to pull off 1,200-person events with sliding scale

tickets and free childcare. Staff salaries start at \$12 (or about \$10 in the U.S.) an hour and get health benefits, and last fall, they were voted Best Bookstore in Toronto by NOW, the city's free weekly.

How do they do it, when other women's bookstores are going bust and still being run mostly by white folks?

Boom, Bust, Rebirth

We all know the sad story about feminist bookstores. According to Feminist Book-

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LORNA WHITFIELD

store News (which itself went under), between 1997 and 2001, 30 percent of its member stores have closed. Many have shut down since. And it's not just the bookstores—presses have suffered, too. In the mid-'90s, independent feminist and queer presses like Press Gang, Firebrand or Kitchen Table were publishing lots of new books a year, many by queer women of color. By 2001, all four of those presses had closed shop. (Firebrand has since re-opened with a new owner.)

Toronto Women's Bookstore was in the red in the mid-'90s. A few years of an eco-

nom recession and the beginnings of the big box stores had taken their toll. After the store almost closed during the early '90s, May Lui and Anjula Gogia were hired and assumed managerial positions. Both were women searching for what they wanted to do with their lives. They never dreamed they'd end up running a feminist bookstore but learned they had talent for the business and loved it. While the store had a commitment to anti-racist politics, Lui and Gogia were some of the first people of color to work in managerial positions, and they went on to carefully select and hire many more staff of color from diverse communities. The shift in staffing and the shift in vision that came with it have included a hugely expanded customer base and ramping up the store's profile by producing large-scale events (1,000-plus audiences for bell hooks, Angela Davis, Alice Walker and Dorothy Allison, among others). That's what staff say got the store back in the black.

From smart moves like grabbing "womensbookstore.com" as a domain name to creating a 4,300-person e-mail list, these women emphasize that having business savvy is what has allowed them both to survive financially and to subsidize activities like \$5 queer-of-color poetry nights and free childcare at big events. When Gogia came on board, the store carried books for 10 courses. Now, they stock books for 130 courses, and course book revenue makes up almost 65 percent of the store's income. "I aggressively courted professors when I came on," says Gogia. "You could see what was happening with the big box stores and I knew we had to be ready. You have to have politics but you also have to be pragmatic about how to fund them."

A Bookstore for Many

Staff like Rosina Kazi have expanded the store's reach into communities that even feminist bookstores traditionally ignored. Kazi

is the lead singer for the South Asian underground band LAL and a mainstay of the local activist music community. She has worked hard to use the store as a venue for hip-hop poetry nights that are all-ages and accessible to youth. Janet Romero, the store's events coordinator, works with the Latina women's writing circle Lengua Latina and organizes queer Latina and Caribbean readings at the store. She also manages a crazy, beautiful events calendar that has Shyam Selvadurai, Mango Tribe, Winona LaDuke and queer Native science fiction writer Daniel Heath Justice on deck.

"We wanted it to be different from some other feminist bookstores," says Lui, "where when you walk in, there's all white women working there, Naomi Wolfe and Gloria Steinem on the posters and maybe a scary dream catcher or something."

When asked why so many feminist bookstores are closing, Lui says it's more complicated than just pointing the finger at Amazon and Barnes and Noble. "If the whole thing about feminism is for white women to access what white men had, a lot of that happened," Lui says. "So successful white women will go to the chain bookstores."

Gogia also thinks having a woman-of-color definition of feminism affects everything, from what books they stock to the atmosphere of the store. "When women of color are in a critical mass of leadership, the way we define feminism changes," says Gogia. "We don't just stock old-school women's politics. We have one of the best sections on globalization and Middle East issues in the city. We'll do events for Octavia Butler and Dorothy Allison, but we also do the ticket sales and book tables when Tariq Ali or Noam Chomsky comes to town." ■

Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha is a Toronto-based queer Sri Lankan writer.