

RETURNING TO THE PRINTED PAGE

Independent bookstores in Europe are growing, despite the competition from online and large brick-and-mortar bookstores. A report from Germany.

PROUST is in the middle of the city of Essen.

The name of the French writer is honored at a bookstore in Essen, a small town in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, not far from Dusseldorf, Germany. One evening in early autumn last year, the Essen bookstore was filled with visitors for a book discussion.

With its cozy and modern feel, and books stacked horizontally, Proust Bookstore differentiates itself from the many other independent bookstores I have visited, like the large Dussmann Bookstore in Berlin. Also from chains such as Thalia, Hugendubel and Mayersche, where vertically stacked books fill the shelves.

“We told interior designer Ekkehard Schröder that he was free to do anything he liked as long as our shop did not resemble other bookstores,” Beate Sherzer, one of the founders of Proust Bookstore, told *Tempo*.

The greatest difference between Proust and many other bookstores is how the books are displayed. They are placed on the shelves horizontally. This horizontal design serves as a modern decoration called the ‘Wall of Books’. This is what most draws the attention of customers who drop in to the shop.

Proust Bookstore is a treasure in the city of Essen not only because of its design but because it offers books rarely found in large bookstores. The store is one of thousands of independent bookstores in Germany that regularly hold book discussions and readings with authors—events that inevitably draw a crowd. It appears European readers, Germans in particular, prefer printed books and bookstores to e-books.

Perhaps the words once uttered by Amer-

ican author Ray Bradbury are in fact true: “You can’t hold a computer in your hand like you can a book. A computer has no smell. There are two perfumes to a book. If a book is new, it smells great. If a book is old, it smells even better.”

And perhaps this is what those who attended the discussion that night at Proust Bookstore felt. Every two weeks, such places as Transfer Bookstore in Dortmund, Weltenleser Bookstore in Frankfurt and Buchhandlung Böttger in Bonn hold similar events. These events are not just about discussing literature, sipping wine and enjoying the tasty cheeses—they are part of the marketing of books, a common practice in the world of German publishing.

It is even more interesting that attendees are often charged a fee, not only because they can have wine and cheese and talk with the author, but because it allows for something that cannot be done in the virtual world—socializing with fellow readers.

According to Beate Sherzer, the German book industry has been around since the 18th century so it is no surprise that Germany has the most independent bookstores in Europe. Stefan Weidle, founder of the German Independent Publishers Association and the Weidle Verlag publisher, pointed out that around 20 years ago, large bookstores such as Thalia, Hugendubel and Mayersche controlled the market, while independent bookstores in Germany found it difficult to make money. “But things have changed over the past three years. The finances of large bookstores are hemorrhaging because they expanded too rapidly. As a result, they have had to close down many branches,” Sherzer said.

This vacuum, according to Sherzer, was filled by independent bookstores such as Proust. Old friends Peter Kolling and Sher-



zer were ready to open a new independent bookstore in Essen once the situation in Europe improved. They already had a location, books and capital. They only had to choose a name for the store. Kolling and Sherzer agreed it should be named after an author they both liked. Dostoyevsky was too long, Hemingway sounded like a coffeehouse and Brecht was too old-fashioned. And so they settled on Proust, the French writer: the name was short, easy to remember and matched their desire not only to sell books in German but also in English.

The rapid growth of independent bookstores indicates that despite the Internet boom—which led to the birth of the e-book, Kindle and Amazon—traditional print books with their distinctive aroma of paper are still preferred by avid readers. Sher-



zer said not all Germans were book lovers. “But if ranked among the other European nations, I think that German readers would rank high.” Sherzer said that readers from Scandinavian countries were the most avid readers.

“But I can guarantee you, visitors and customers at our bookstore are avid readers. They purchase German books and international ones, too,” Sherzer said.

With competition from Amazon increasingly affecting independent bookstore owners, the German Independent Publishers Association are seeking a way to ensure profitability. According to Stefan Weidle, there are two threats to the continued existence of independent bookstores in Germany. The first are the gigantic bookstore chains that have up to hundreds of stores in

Proust bookstore in Dusseldorf, North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany.

the major German cities. The second is Amazon and the online book dealers, which make up 16 percent of total book sales in Germany.

Facing this challenge, independent bookstores have had to rev up their creative juices and conduct programs not available in major bookstores. Such a strategy has been pursued by Buchhandlung Böttger in Bonn, which has held painting exhibitions, book discussions and events of a similar ilk for a cover charge. In addition to being able to enjoy wine, cheese and other deli-

cacies, what’s more important for customers to Proust Bookstore in Essen or Böttger Bookstore in Bonn is the opportunity to chat with authors.

However, not all German bookstores charge an entrance fee for a discussion. At Weltenleser Bookstore in Frankfurt, meet-the-author discussions are free of charge, as they are in Indonesia. Maria Lucia Klockner and her colleague established Weltenleser Bookstore two years ago. This bookstore in downtown Frankfurt has a classic design, similar to independent bookstores commonly found in America: wooden racks covering the walls; comfortable chairs and beautiful flowers scattered around the room.

According to Lucia Klockner, they wanted readers to feel they were taking a dive into world literature. That is why they named their bookstore Weltenleser, which means ‘world reader’. They arranged the books by country, which makes readers feel they are trotting around the globe. “The concept of our bookstore is armchair traveling, a journey through the literary world,” said Klockner.

Holding various cultural programs to attract visitors and customers is the most important feature of independent bookstores. It is no surprise these independent stores have the most rich cultural offerings, and consistently receive awards from the Association of Independent Publishers, in cooperation with the German ministry of culture. The awards, according to Stefan Weidle, are provided for the hundreds of independent bookstores so they can overcome the threat posed by chain bookstores and online book dealers. In order to obtain an award, independent bookstores must not only hold regular book talks and other events, they must be run by individuals with a love and a passion for books.

Despite not turning major profits like the big chains, independent bookstore owners run their small businesses with passion and a love for readers and their books. “It is true that we do not make incredible profits, but our income is not small. We do this without regret,” said Sherzer.

Proust, like hundreds of other independent bookstores all over Germany, appears to be doing just that. Despite the Internet, printed books and bookstores are still in demand thanks to the passion and love of dedicated readers.

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