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Bookshops are bucking the high street trend. There are lots of reasons why

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With shop closures on the UK high street and rising living costs both well documented, it's a surprise to note that the number of independent bookshops remained largely stable last year. Fifty-one new indies opened, despite some serious [challenges](#) outlined by trade body the Booksellers Association. These included “recession, inflation, labour shortages, massive cost increases, tight margins, the cost-of-living crisis and unequal tax burdens such as business rates”.

This all paints a fairly bleak picture. But still, given the British high street lost more than [10,000 shops](#) in 2023, booksellers are nonetheless bucking the prevailing trend.

A 2022 report, [Booksellers as Placemakers](#) by the Institute of Place Management, concluded that bookshops are making a significant contribution to the vitality and viability of high streets. Not only do they contribute in ways that may have been expected, such as their retail offer, merchandise and diversity, but many also add to the appearance of towns and the collective marketing effort, and host events and festivals.

In short, a bookshop brings wider benefits to a high street, as well as footfall. These days, they are proving indispensable, in so many ways, to their local networks.

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George the Poet for Independent Bookshop Week.

What makes a bookshop a different kind of retail space is the huge variety of titles available to booksellers. What they choose to stock means that the curation in every space is different, leading readers to imaginative, intellectual and creative ideas they would perhaps never otherwise have found.

But it is more than this. Bookshops are different because they rarely evoke neutral responses from shoppers: you remember the airport bookshop where you bought the title you read on that memorable holiday, or the bookshop you went to as a youngster, and where you or your child discovered Paddington Bear.

Bookshops are memorable spaces, which as I have argued, have an appeal beyond places that contain other kinds of cultural objects.

In a time when people seek out “destination” experiences, bookshops are getting savvier about not just being a gateway to a myriad of worlds and perspectives, but also becoming spaces that are aesthetically rewarding to visit.



Embrace the aesthetic – bookshops like Richard Booth in Hay-on-Wye are attractive spaces to visit.
cornfield/Shutterstock

And “aesthetic” is a key asset here. Social media platforms are packed with posts about books, and bookshops. “BookTok”, “Bookstagram” – gen Z have embraced [#reader-core](#) with (to this gen X-er at least) a bewildering array of book-related tags and content.

Bricks-and-mortar bookshops counter this, encouraging self-driven rather than performative browsing, and fostering ways to make people feel welcome. Here you can wallow in collections of books beyond anything most of us could ever amass.

There is no entry fee, and no compulsion to buy anything (although it’s obviously better for the longevity of the bookshop if you do).

A social purpose

In the context of the continuing decline of our [public libraries](#), bookshops are increasingly becoming community hubs, and diversifying in terms of what services and events they offer beyond selling books.

[The House of Books & Friends](#), a community-led bookshop in Manchester, has a mission to combat loneliness and depression. [Kett’s Books](#), in Wymondham, another community bookshop, has a list of objectives that includes promoting reading and literacy.

And the growing number of bookshops specialising by subject or genre is also showcasing how expert curation of stock can draw people from a wider area to what are becoming destinations in their own right. [Folde](#), in Shaftesbury in Dorset, focuses on “nature-inspired books, art and craft” and [Book Lovers Bookshop](#) in Edinburgh, stocking only romance fiction titles, is the first such bookshop in the UK. [Gay on Wye](#) in “book town” Hay-on-Wye in Powys, Wales, calls itself “a celebration of the LGBTQ+ community’s history, struggles, and achievements”.

[RISE Bookselling](#) is an EU-funded group that pulls together booksellers from across Europe. Its latest campaign is [#MYbookshopOURspace](#), defending the value of bookshops in a period of political and ideological polarisation. Bookshops have a unique role in fostering values of peace, democracy and tolerance, and following the [EU elections](#), it is vital to remind policymakers and stakeholders how crucial support from democratic institutions and book-friendly policies are for societies.

So, bookshops are persisting because they fulfil several layers of need. The booksellers who work in these spaces have to contend with low salaries, small margins, big competition from discounting in supermarkets and on Amazon, as well as high rents and rates. But despite all this they demonstrate a remarkable tenacity in terms of commitment to their customers. Often, they also excel at using the opportunities from social media to market their shops more widely.

You have only to look at the [Individual Bookseller of the Year Award](#) to see what a stellar group of professional booksellers are. This year’s winner, [Amanda Dunne Fulmer](#) of Cork bookshop Halfway up the Stairs, is a passionate advocate for the importance of children’s books. In a post-award interview she expressed a view that I believe also characterises many (if not most) booksellers – that they “are doing this for love, not for money”.

Given all that, how can we doubt that the bookshop’s future is something we should all invest in? Let’s help make sure the numbers do not drop any more. Go and explore – amazing encounters await.