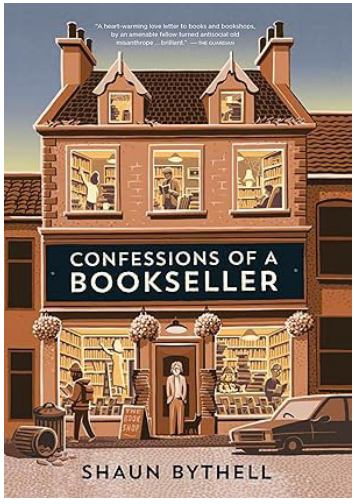
Book Review: *Confessions of a Bookseller* by Shaun Bythell

Reviewed by Savannah Aleksic



Bookstores are a haven for the book-lovers, the historians, the introverts, the wallflowers, the academics, the curious, and most importantly — they are home to other worlds, endless knowledge, and words waiting to be discovered. If you have ever wondered what lies behind the register of one of these institutions, *Confessions of a Bookseller* by Shaun Bythell will answer some of those questions.

Wigtown, a small town nestled in the Dumfries and Galloway region in Scotland, has been known as "Scotland's National Book Town" since 1997. This is due to the The Wigtown Book Festival, which was first held in 1998 and has since grown to be the second largest book festival in Scotland. *The Bookshop*, widely assumed to be the largest secondhand bookstore in Scotland, is owned and operated by Tom Bythell, whose book *Confessions of a Bookseller*, is just one of many volumes he has written documenting his day-to-day experiences as a bookseller of secondhand books in the quaint town.

Bythell often reflects on customers who wander around the bookstore for a few minutes, ask questions about the stock and the pricing, to ultimately state

> “This is undoubtedly the best part of the second-hand book trade, and probably of book-collecting too: finding and handling something rare and important.”
>
> —SHAUN BYTHELL, BOOKSELLER AND AUTHOR.

that they will just buy it off of Amazon for cheaper. *Confessions* illuminates the unseen side of the secondhand book trade, which is the protection of used books and finding them a new home. There is the occasional treasure trove of rare mint-condition editions of tomes that go for hundreds, but more often than not, customers haggle booksellers over pennies. Furthermore, most of these stores rely on volunteer labor as they are barely able to keep the lights on.

Confessions showcases the harsh realities of booksellers in the modern era where there are cheaper and more convenient alternatives to the traditional brick and mortar location. For some context, in 2021, there were only 1,701 independently-owned bookstores in the United States, the lowest since 2014. However, as of 2024, that number has skyrocketed to 2,433 independently-owned and operational bookstores in the United States — the highest recorded in recent history. Are bookstores having a comeback? If so, how are these bookstores able to compete with the modernity of online retailers and e-readers? If bookstores were to disappear, how does that impact reading initiatives on society as a whole?

Bythell’s snarky remarks about the occasional customer can be impudent, but his interactions with the various recurring characters throughout the book provide humorous anecdotes and authentic warmth as a reminder of the importance of community. Most, if not all, of the author’s interactions surround *The Bookshop*. These spaces harbor knowledge and encourage the protection of community-owned spaces.

I recommend this book to book-lovers and publishers alike, as Bythell provides informative insight into the world of the secondhand book trade in an easily digestible format. Additionally, Bythell’s appreciation for the book trade —the good and the bad — will make readers more aware of their own book-

buying habits to become a more conscious and ethical consumer by supporting their local bookstore and the communities that they create.

References

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