

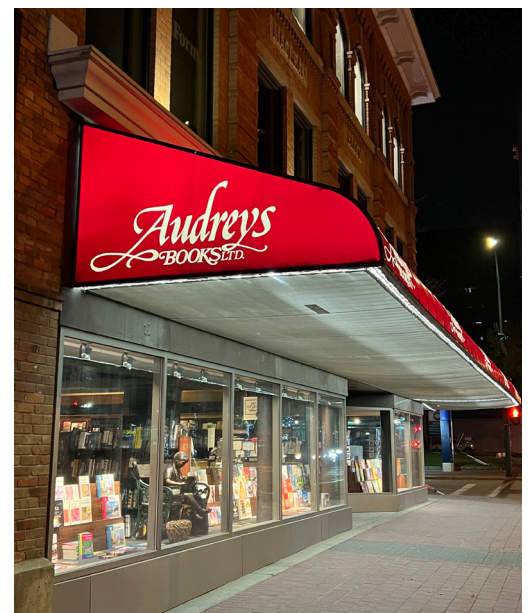
INDIE BOOKSTORE



Owning an independent bookstore over the past 25 years has not been for the faint of heart. Between the explosion of online purchasing options and big retail chain stores, these wonderful word merchants have had to find innovative ways to build their brands while attracting and retaining a loyal customer base. While many independents have had their share of obstacles to overcome, Audreys Books in downtown Edmonton is the very definition of a survivor. The bookstore on Jasper Avenue and 103rd Street was started up in 1956 by Mel Hurtig (founder of Hurtig Publishers), who later sold the store to Ewart and Audrey Whaley, who financed the purchase with help from financial partners Ammon and Audrey Ackroyd (which is why the bookstore's name is plural instead of a possessive). Audreys Books became incorporated in 1975 and has been feeding book-

worms' appetites for stories for nearly half a century. Purchased by Steve and Sharon Budnarchuk in 1988, the bookstore enjoyed many good years before the rise in popularity of big box bookstores and online shopping in the early 2000s.

"The only competition back then



(Top left) Audreys Books co-owners Steve and Sharon Budnarchuk have been operating the popular bookstore in downtown Edmonton since 1988.

SURVIVING AND THRIVING

AUDREYS BOOKS CELEBRATES HALF A CENTURY OF BOOKSELLING

By Andrew Snook

was small mall stores like Coles, WHSmith Books, Classics, and department store bookshops,” Steve recalls. “We had a long, tough period during the expansion of large format bookstores, Amazon, and other issues around Edmonton that affected our business (mass layoffs of government employees in the downtown core). We went from being a pre-eminent Canadian bookseller to struggling for 20 years.”

Very few business owners are willing to weather a financial storm for 20 years, but the Budnarchuks refused to close up shop during the hard times. “We’re fairly tenacious. Most people would have walked away years ago, but I can’t imagine having done anything else,” Sharon says, who has spent the past 50 years working in the world of book publishing and bookselling. Sharon recalls working countless late nights and early mornings over the years to keep the store running.

“We were willing to do long hours of the work that had to be done,

because we couldn’t hire a lot of staff. I can remember buying books until three in the morning and then dragging myself back to the store the next day,” she says. The history of the store as Edmonton’s oldest independent bookseller also played a factor in pushing the Budnarchuks to overcome all the hurdles thrown at them over the years.

“We didn’t want to be the ones to let the store fail. It had an important place in the community prior to us, and we didn’t want to see it disappear. So, we kept on going, and we survived the losses of other booksellers around us and kept plugging along,” Steve says. One of the ways the store was able to survive was Sharon’s ability to manage a healthy just-in-time



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Actor and comedian Dave Thomas poses for a photo with Steve and Sharon Budnarchuk.



Sharon Budnarchuk sits alongside Canadian music icon Anne Murray, as she signs copies of her autobiography.

inventory of books.

"She somehow managed to keep us in a good stock position of important backlist and new titles all through very careful, small-quantity buying. But doing it constantly, just reviewing our sales and constantly ordering more stock to keep a flow of books in the pipeline without ever having to invest in a ton of inventory all at once, which we couldn't afford," Steve says.

"What we tried to do during that time was create a collection in the store that was extraordinary," Sharon adds. "You wouldn't find a lot of the books we carried in the chain stores. In fact, the chains would often send people to us because they didn't even want a special order."

Despite having little budget for operating the store, Steve says they never used that as an excuse to reduce their staff.

"We didn't fire anybody because of weak sales and no money, but we did lose a lot of staff through attrition over the years, and there were plenty of times when we survived by burning off our inventory, only to replenish it as soon as we could manage," he recalls.

Another way Audreys Books survived those difficult times was through its activeness within the community.

"We took on all sorts of different events that were not just within our store. We were selling books absolutely everywhere," says Kelly Dyer, manager and buyer for Audreys Books, and daughter of Sharon and Steve. "When anybody needed books sold somewhere, Audreys would be out in the community, just trying to remind people around Edmonton that we were still here, what we offer, and that the community is important to us. So, we were stretched that way, too. We started doing book fairs in schools like a Scholastic would. We were just trying to find creative ways to keep ourselves relevant in people's minds and



As the second generation of the family-owned bookstore, Kelly has been learning how to take over the family business for several years as Sharon and Steve plan for retirement. Photos courtesy of Audreys Books.

hearts.”

The Budnarchuks would also attend large and small conferences regularly, exhibiting the bookstore as many places as possible, and spend time volunteering within the community.

“Constantly being everywhere, the name of Audreys continued to be an important name in Edmonton,” Sharon says. “I spent a lot of time doing community work. I was the first female chair of the Edmonton Downtown Business Association.”

Supporting local authors

Audreys also created a local book festival and sponsored the City of Edmonton Book Prize at the worst time for the store financially, because Sharon and Steve believed it was important for Edmonton to have a prize for writing and are passionate about supporting local writers.

“We didn’t really have the mon-

ey, but it had to have our name attached to it because the community of writers in Edmonton has always been absolutely fantastic,” Sharon says. “There isn’t a community writer that we haven’t approached to have an event at the store.”

Sharon says she has never counted how many author events they have hosted in any given year, but there was a time when three or four author events a week was the norm.

“I think the fall alone, before COVID, it was about 72 in-store events, and a good chunk are local, because we have such a great literary community in Edmonton and Alberta,” Kelly says.

For the last Canadian Independent Bookstore Day (April 27, 2024), Audreys Books approached all the other local bookstores in Edmonton to create a book tour and showcase local authors.

“People could collect a passport at

one store and go around to each store and get stamped and enter prizes, that sort of thing,” Kelly explains. “Each store did their own thing. We asked a bunch of local authors to come, and if they had time to spend an hour with us, talk to our customers and get to know them and introduce them to new audiences.”

In recent years, Kelly has dedicated a great deal of her time and energy into developing the bookstore’s Indigenous collection. There are some northern Indigenous communities and associations that now reach out to Audreys Books to let them know of new authors and books being released.

“That’s our part of reconciliation,” Sharon says. “We’ve spent a lot of money in that area and given Kelly the time to develop that, and it’s a very positive plus for the store.”



After two decades of navigating hard times through long hours, hard work, and dedication to the community, Audreys Books is back to being in a healthy financial position.

Turning the corner

After two decades of navigating hard times through long hours, hard work, and dedication to the community and its local authors, Audreys Books is back to being in a healthy financial position.

"We've been growing and we're back to profitability after losing a ton of money," Steve says. "We're back to being profitable in the last five years and have dug ourselves out of a deep hole. Now we're doing very well and perhaps have the best staff we've ever had."

The employees of Audreys Books are one the main reasons for the bookstore's success in recent years.

"Our staff is one of the most well read, passionate group of literate booksellers that we've ever had," Steve says. "One of the things that makes a difference for us is that they're on the front line talking to the customers all the time, and they're feeding information back to Sharon and into our computer program about what people are asking for, and what subject areas are becoming popular, so we are

responding. We are getting that kind of information constantly from our staff and from the public."

"An independent bookstore is nothing without its booksellers. They're going to help me carry the store forward, for sure," Kelly adds.

As the second generation of the family-owned bookstore, Kelly has been learning how to take over the family business for several years as Sharon and Steve plan for retirement. Sharon officially announced her retirement shortly before the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic but decided to stay on during that time to support Kelly and the store. Now that the store is back to doing well, Sharon and Steve plan to continue helping run Audreys Books a little while longer.

"I think now they're probably having too much fun, because it's become not so difficult, and they can enjoy the art of bookselling again," Kelly says.

For the time being, Steve and Sharon are focusing on training their staff and passing on addi-

tional responsibilities to Kelly, while brainstorming some fun ways to celebrate 50 years next year.

"2025 is 50 years since our incorporation. So, there's a lot of time and effort that's going to be spent on that," Steve says. "We're trying to figure out what might be special to celebrate 50 years in bookselling."

Looking back at 50 years in the world of book publishing and bookselling, Sharon has many fond memories: from learning the publishing process at McClelland & Stewart, where she worked as a sales rep before taking over Audreys Books, to meeting famous authors like Margaret Laurence and Margaret Atwood.

"We got pretty close to Margaret Atwood. She would have too much time before a flight when we were out of a hotel, so she would come, and I'd drop her off at the house to have tea. Then we'd go to Miami to the American Booksellers Association convention, and she'd walk across the room to say hello. That was pretty neat," Sharon recalls.