

Reluctant Capitalists: Bookselling and the Culture of Consumption. *By Laura J. Miller.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006. x + 316 pp. Appendix, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$35.00. ISBN: 0-226-52590-2.

Reviewed by Michael Winship

In May 1990, Crown Books, a leading chain, opened its first “Super Crown” bookstore, with a stock of thirty to forty thousand different titles, in a strip mall in Alexandria, Virginia. That same year, Walden Books and Barnes & Noble followed suit, thus initiating the now familiar phenomenon of the suburban “superstore” of the national chain bookselling corporations. Laura J. Miller views this as a signal moment in the move to increased rationalization of retail bookselling in the United States during the final four decades of the twentieth century, a process that she describes as the ability “to calculate the most efficient means to sell books and then develop organizational forms and procedures necessary to that task” (p. 4).

This book chronicles and explores this development, based chiefly on numerous conversations, forty-four “semistructured” interviews with “booksellers, wholesalers, editors, publishers’ sales and marketing personnel, consultants, and others,” less formal interviews with customers, as well as a review of trade journals and other literature, including “promotional material of publishers and distributors, annual reports and investment analyses, financial statements filed with the Security and Exchange Commission, legal documents from various court cases and the Federal Trade Commission, and archival material pertaining to price maintenance campaigns” (pp. 19–20). The focus is exclusively on trade books, those aimed at the general population, and care is taken to place these changes in retail bookselling in context, both historically and economically, by showing how they relate to earlier ones and to those taking place in other retail markets.

Miller explores a number of other factors that, in addition to the spread of the chain superstore, she claims contributed to the rise of a more rational book-retailing system. One was the increased participation in the bookselling business by large corporations: first department stores early in the century, then chain stores that eventually

followed the consumer from center city to suburbs and malls, and more recently, Amazon.com and other Internet retailers. Another was a shift in the role of the bookstore employee, no longer seen as an arbiter of taste who advised customers on what they should read, but now viewed as someone whose function was to serve the needs of sovereign customers. Bookstore floor plans became more customer-friendly. Books were displayed and arranged with the customer in mind, and layout was standardized from branch to branch across the chain stores. Coffee shops were added and book-related events planned. All this turned the bookstore into a center of community and entertainment, as well as a place of commerce. Finally, the decade saw the introduction of widespread and regular discounting, chiefly enabled by more efficient systems of inventory control and wholesaling that computing enabled; customers were appealed to as rational, self-interested, and bargain-seeking consumers.

As suggested in the subtitle, books have a special place in the “culture of consumption,” functioning not only as commodities but also as highly valued cultural objects in and of themselves, and the tension between these two roles is what particularly interests Miller. The changes chronicled here have certainly occasioned an oft-heard lament that the traditional independent bookstore will soon be forever gone, reflecting both nostalgia and widespread anxiety that consumerism will come to dominate in our culture. Large corporations may have been mainly responsible for the rationalization of book retailing, but independent booksellers also contributed, responded, and benefited. The independents pioneered the trend toward making the bookstore a center of community and entertainment, a move that was quickly imitated by the chains. In the 1990s, under the auspices of the American Booksellers Association, the independents successfully sought legal redress from publishers for what they showed to be discriminatory discounting practices favoring the chains. Nevertheless, Miller clearly remains concerned for the future of the independents. In her final chapter, she optimistically envisions a potential role for bookstore employees and “citizen-consumers” as activists who could serve as moral and political agents in curbing what, in her view, are the excesses of corporate consumerism.

Miller writes as a sociologist and places her work within the framework of questions raised by Max Weber (she cites especially the work of Mark Granovetter and

Paul DiMaggio), rather than following in the direction mapped out by Alfred D. Chandler and his followers. The special value that our society places on books has meant that they have attracted the attention of academics from many disciplines, witnessed by the rise over the past decades of a new interdisciplinary field known as the “history of the book.” The field has been dominated in recent years by cultural historians, but book historians have begun to recognize the importance of business history to their work, as indicated by the impact of William St Clair’s *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Era* (2004), written by a former senior official in the British Treasury. Miller has produced a diligent and fascinating account of important new developments in the distribution and retailing of trade books in the United States. Anyone with an interest in the study of books, business and book historians both, will find much of interest in here.

Michael Winship is Iris Howard Regents Professor of English at the University of Texas at Austin. He is author of numerous studies of American publishers and publishing, including American Literary Publishing in the Mid-Nineteenth Century: The Business of Ticknor and Fields (1995), and he is a coeditor of and contributor to the forthcoming The Industrial Book, the third volume in the History of the Book in America series. At present, he is working on a study of American book distribution from 1825 to 1940.