

The Laboratory: Delighting in Independent Bookstores

by Ross Gay, author of *The Book of Delights*

WHEN I WROTE THIS I was sitting in a nook in Three Lives & Company, and given as Three Lives is itself a nook, I was actually sitting in a nook-nook. Beyond the nook-nook where I was reading was a fairly raucous chat happening between one of the workers and a couple of customers. Laughter. Questions. Thank you. A recommendation (she wants a good story minus the murder): “Have you read Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*?” Et cetera. Again and again this happens.

It’s a bit of a miracle to come upon such a real neighborhood place, such a real place, in the midst of what by all accounts is, I know it’s a cliché, the gradual conversion of this city into an exclusive luxury boutique. (That’s the word on the street.) Partly, of course, it’s because independent bookstores have a different relationship to commerce and scale and growth, which is to say, I think I have this right, you mostly do not get rich owning one. (Will someone please tell everyone that growth is not an automatic good? Someone, please?) Which is to say, independent bookstores trouble conventional notions of wealth, trading the world-destroying one that has us emptying the earth of its resources and species for the one that suggests our wealth is in the strength of our communities, our ability to come together and care for one another. A good little bookstore, like this one, like all the ones I love, is a laboratory for our coming together.

A bookstore like this provokes in one (I usually mean “me” when I say “one,” FYI) a feeling of wondering and wandering (“wonder” and “wander” kissing cousins—see Rebecca Solnit’s book *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*). I am invited to be an intellectual loiterer, which, thank you, give me more of that. Perhaps that is why I so adore these places, why they delight me, and why upon entering them I become very alert and weirdly relaxed at the same time. My eyes get real rove-y, caressing the many books whose covers and titles seduce me, but I also want to lie down in a nook-nook with a mound of my book-books. Yes, part of the delight of an independent bookstore is touching the books. As, probably, we ought, if we want the books to touch us.

One of my very favorite bookstores (of course I have many favorite bookstores!), the wonderful and inimitable Book Corner in Bloomington, where I live, has big west-facing windows and beautiful wooden floors. You enter through a gauntlet of new releases and *New York Times* bestsellers on the right side, and on the left side there are books about house design and stuff like that (which I am not *not* a sucker for). It is filled with shelves, and occasionally if there is a rush you will have to do a little dance with one of your co-patrons to make your way to the register or the gardening aisle. You might even be inclined to make eye contact and say something like “Whatcha reading?” while dancing. If it’s extra busy in the Book Corner—I’ve seen this happen a few times—this can go on for a while, several people joining, incidentally at first, the “Whatcha reading?” dance, until it becomes kind of like a party.

They generously keep a few of my books on the counter up front because *they know me*. I live in their town and come here on my bike and I ask them to order books for me just about every other week. I am always delighted when I see their number, which I have memorized, lighting up my phone to tell me my books have arrived. In fact, I evidently order from them often enough that Margaret, the owner, once explained to one of her employees that I spent my whole salary in her shop, which was the most backhanded fiduciary advice I’ve ever received. A good bookstore can tease you, too. That’s because a good bookstore, I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again, knows who you are. A good bookstore is your friend. And I hope you’re a good friend to your favorite independent bookstore by supporting them on Small Business Saturday, November 24, 2018. Let’s make it a national Whatcha Reading day. A national Whatcha Reading party! Doesn’t that sound delightful?

ROSS GAY is the author of three books of poetry, including *Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude*, winner of the 2015 National Book Critics Circle Award and a finalist for the 2015 National Book Award in Poetry. He teaches at Indiana University. *The Book of Delights* will be published by Algonquin Books in February 2019.

