

ARTS & CULTURE | LIT FEATURE

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## Peruse these virtual bookshelves

Ditch Amazon and support local bookstores.

By S. Nicole Lane @snicolelane

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Pilsen Community Books

STEEL BROOKS

ou've probably bought a book from Amazon before but before you press "add to cart" one more time, you should know that **Y** Amazon's way of selling books is hurtful to authors, publishers, and booksellers. While some sellers on Amazon are legitimate, many third-party sellers sell books that are free promotional copies which means publishers and authors make zilch.

Amazon employees are working in distressing conditions, with at least ten facilities reporting positive coronavirus cases, and are shipping nonessential items like books (and thanks to this Detroit employee, dildos), which can all be bought through small businesses locally.

Instead of buying from another facility, why not dive into Chicago's bookstores to keep your reading habits alive? Here are a few local options to choose from when selecting your next read.

### **Pilsen Community Books**

Founded in 2016, Pilsen Community Books was bought by Mandy Medley, Tom Flynn, and Katharine Solheim, who have a combined experience of 40-plus years, in March 2020. Opening in the midst of a pandemic isn't ideal, and Solheim tells me that "COVID has dragged us kicking and screaming into the 21st century!"

They hosted their first virtual event last week with Jenny Brown, author of *Without Apology*, and Annie Finch, editor of *Choice Words*. The event was a fundraiser for the Chicago Abortion Fund and was cosponsored by Chicago DSA Socialist Feminists. "We're trying to tie our virtual literary events to a group organizing on the ground in the city to both support their work financially and raise awareness of their work in the community," Solheim says.

The shop is collaborating with Liberation Library, which provides books to young people in Illinois prisons. So far, Pilsen Community Books has raised more than \$1,500 in its efforts to respond to the drive.

Medley and Solheim are both in the shop during the stay-at-home order as they process orders, pack books for delivery, and offer no-contact curbside pickup.

The bookshop recommends reading Rita Indiana's *Tentacle*, which they describe as a "radical, queer, time-traveling eco-dystopia that will incense and delight adventurous readers." Sara Mesa's *Four by Four* is another intense read that they describe as a "devastating private school novel you didn't know you need[ed], that'll also galvanize you at the end."

Stay up to date with their Instagram and Twitter.



The handwritten sign posted on the Book Table door on the last day before the Illinois order went into place.

RACHEL WEAVER

## The Book Table

The Book Table opened in 2003 after the owners, Rachel Weaver and Jason Smith, met working at an indie bookstore in 1998 (and subsequently fell in love). The Oak Park location is closed to the public but is fulfilling web orders.

Weaver says they are trying to implement social media more into their workflow. “We’re continuing to send out weekly email newsletters, in part just to keep people updated on where we are with order volume—when we’re falling behind, and even more importantly when it’s gotten too slow. Our customers want to help; they want us to survive this, so we’re being a little more blunt than we would under ordinary circumstances.”

About a week into the shelter-in-place order, the Book Table did an Instagram and Facebook series—which proved to be incredibly popular—where they highlighted staff members and their book recommendations. “Most of our staff has been with us for many years, so they’re as much a part of our identity as Jason and I are. And our customers totally play favorites—there are Patrick groupies and Lynda groupies—so, many people have a go-to person on the staff for book recommendations because they found their reading love-match with them. So those social media posts were really great for reconnecting, and also for reminding people that they can browse our staff picks online too and not just in the store.”

The Book Table is doing 95 percent of its shipping through a drop-



list that will be distributed throughout the city.

In order to keep things safe during quarantine, Open Books has increased the frequency and depth of their cleaning regimen. “We are working with minimal staffing, running split shifts to eliminate any excessive overlap of team members. We are also letting all donated books sit for at least 24 hours before handling,” Jackson says.

Folks can support Open Books with a tax-deductible donation, by purchasing books, or by donating books contact-free at their two drop bins (one in the alley behind the West Loop store at 651 W. Lake, on the corner of Halsted and Superior, or at the Pilsen warehouse at 905 W. 19th).

Jackson recommends reading Olga Tokarczuk's *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, which is a “well-plotted crime novel, written with both humor and depth, that also deals with the tenuous relationship between humans and the natural world.”



Women and Children First orders going out to customers.

SARAH HOLLENBECK

## Women & Children First

Events are a key part of Women & Children First, which first opened in 1979, so when they were forced to immediately adapt, they did what most businesses (and people) are doing, they held a virtual event. Since their first event with more than 200 attendees, they decided to keep going and have hosted a half a dozen events on Facebook and Instagram Live. A 300-person Zoom call with comedian and author Samantha Irby and author Megan Stielstra was hugely successful. “We have been obnoxiously active on social media with Instagram,” says co-owner Sarah Hollenbeck. “Miss Linda has been doing storytime since 1984 and a global pandemic isn't about to stop her, so we've moved that to video streams on Facebook and Instagram.”

“Our small team also loves getting virtual love from our customers.

When folks post photos on Instagram of their orders arriving on their doorstep or tag us in a post about what they're reading this weekend, we feel a little more connected across the social distancing. It's also remarkable how much a glowing review on Facebook or Yelp or Google brightens our day," says Hollenbeck. The shop also has a nonprofit called Women's Voices Fund, which funds programming, so donations for the nonprofit are always appreciated.

The Andersonville bookstore only has two to three essential staff on-site wearing cloth masks, and the rest of the staff is working remotely. Before the pandemic, 20 online orders was a decent day for W&CF. Now, they are receiving 75 to 100 orders a day.

Folks can support W&CF by ordering a book or grabbing a gift card on their online store. H. Melt, the staff bookseller (and *Reader* contributor) is working remotely and updating the website with curated recommended reading lists.

W&CF recommends diving into some escapist romance novels as well as poetry like *Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude* and essays like *Book of Delights* by Ross Gay. "The two novels that got me 100 percent off the treadmill of my own current anxiety was *Nothing to See Here* by Kevin Wilson and *Writers and Lovers* by Lily King," Hollenbeck says. "I also just finished Cathy Park Hong's *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning*. Everyone should be reading this book right now. While it is good and healthy to turn to books right now for solace and escape, we must also use and respect books for the tools they are in the ongoing fight against this country's legacy of white supremacy." Hollenbeck also suggests that people who are looking to dive into audiobooks should ditch the Amazon-owned Audible and get Libro.fm, which benefits independent bookstores.



COURTESY OF PARAGON BOOK GALLERY

## Paragon Book Gallery

Paragon Book Gallery began in Shanghai in 1942, moved to New York City, and settled in Chicago in 1991. In 2020, its brick-and-mortar-shop opened in the Zhou B Art Center in Bridgeport.

Jennifer Huang tells me that the shop is staying connected to their community through social media, “where we regularly post fun and thoughtful content on our Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter platforms.” Additionally, they are sending out newsletters to subscribers once or twice a week on specific themes. “For example, on Earth Day, we introduced famous Japanese and Chinese landscape paintings and prints. In the recent past, we’ve also discussed silk textiles and snuff bottles. We are also keeping our blog active and featuring some of our favorite local and international artists.”

Because their move into Zhou B was recent, they are depending on the community’s donations and recently started a GoFundMe to keep their connection between American and Asian culture, arts, and literature strong. Huang says, “We know this is a financially challenging time for many of us and understand if a monetary contribution is not feasible given this crisis, but the public can continue to support our bookstore by sharing our message widely among their communities, following us on social media, and/or placing orders through our website or our bookshop.”

The book gallery suggests purchasing the catalog *The Allure of Matter: Material Art of China, Reinventing the Past: Archaism and Antiquarianism in Chinese Art and Visual Culture* by Wu Hung and





COURTESY OF SANDMEYER'S BOOKSTORE

## Sandmeyer's Bookstore

Since 1982, Sandmeyer's Bookstore has served Chicago's South Loop area by husband-and-wife owners, Ellen and Ulrich Sandmeyer. Like most nonessential businesses, Sandmeyer's is closed to foot traffic but online orders can be taken by phone (312-922-2104) and email ([books@sandmeyers.com](mailto:books@sandmeyers.com)). The shop offers curbside pickup daily between noon and 3 PM, or folks have the option to have it shipped.

"The neighborhood has been extremely supportive, as have longtime customers," Ellen Sandmeyer says. She and her husband have a strong connection with the community and this connection goes beyond Chicago and across the country. "I am working alone in order to protect my staff, but am counting the minutes until we can reopen and have all our terrific booksellers on hand. And of course, I long for browsing and in-person interactions to resume."

Besides buying books from Sandmeyer's, folks can purchase gift certificates or can establish a personal account in their name or gift it to someone else.

Sandmeyer's quarantine reads include: *Wow, No Thank You* by Samantha Irby, *Deacon King Kong* by James McBride, *Southern Exposure: The Overlooked Architecture of Chicago's South Side* by Lee Bey, *The Soul of an Octopus: A Surprising Exploration into the Wonder of Consciousness* by Sy Montgomery, *The Splendid and the Vile: A Saga of Churchill, Family, and Defiance During the Blitz* by Erik Larson, and *Redhead by the Side of the Road* by Anne Tyler. 📖

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