

# Novelist Fights the Tide by Opening a Bookstore



Josh Anderson for The New York Times

The novelist Ann Patchett, right, and Karen Hayes are business partners and co-owners of Parnassus Books in Nashville.

By [JULIE BOSMAN](#)

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**NASHVILLE** — After a beloved local bookstore closed here last December and another store was lost to the Borders bankruptcy, this city

once known as the Athens of the South, rich in cultural tradition and home to Vanderbilt University, became nearly barren of bookstores.



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Ann Patchett signed copies of her books, days before Parnassus Books' opening in Nashville.

A collective panic set in among Nashville's reading faithful. But they have found a savior in [Ann Patchett](#), the best-selling novelist who grew up here. On Wednesday, Ms. Patchett, the acclaimed author of "Bel Canto" and "Truth and Beauty," will open [Parnassus Books](#), an independent bookstore that is the product of six months of breakneck planning and a healthy infusion of cash from its owner.

"I have no interest in retail; I have no interest in opening a bookstore," Ms. Patchett said, serenely sipping tea during a recent interview at her spacious pink brick house here. "But I

also have no interest in living in a city without a bookstore.”

Ms. Patchett is well aware that brick-and-mortar bookstores are closing regularly under pressure from online sales and e-books.

The [American Booksellers Association](#), a trade group, currently has about 1,900 independent bookstores as members, down from about 2,400 in 2002.

But she is aspiring to join a small band of bookstore owners who have found patches of old-fashioned success in recent years, competing where Amazon cannot: by being small and sleek, with personal service, intimate author events and a carefully chosen rotation of books.

In Fort Greene, Brooklyn, [Greenlight Bookstore](#) opened in 2009 and reported sales of more than \$1 million in its first year.

The [Boswell Book Company](#) in Milwaukee was founded two years ago and has been profitable both years, its owner said.

But there are plenty of headlines chronicling the woes of struggling independents. In Manhattan, [St. Mark's Bookshop](#) in the East

Village has been teetering for months, saved by a last-minute rent discount from the landlord. The owner of [RiverRun Bookstore](#) in Portsmouth, N.H., said this month that he needed to raise more than \$100,000 to save it. More than 150 concerned people packed the store last week to discuss its fate. Ithaca, N.Y., residents helped keep the treasured [Buffalo Street Books](#) in business by raising more than \$250,000 and reopening the store as a co-op.

A similar outrage swept across Nashville late last year when the owners of Davis-Kidd Booksellers, founded in 1980, said that they intended to close the city's last independent bookstore that did not primarily sell used, specialty or religious books. (Barnes & Noble has two stores in the suburbs, and recently opened a college bookstore on the edge of the Vanderbilt campus.)

“It was a civic tragedy,” said Adam Ross, a Nashville writer whose novel, “Mr. Peanut,” was published last year. “The Nashville literary community went into a sort of Code Red situation.”

Cultural leaders convened meetings in the public library to discuss who could step in and

open a new bookstore. One idea, to start a co-op requiring small investments of \$1,000, never got off the ground.

“People were greeting each other in grocery stores, at holiday parties, wringing our hands,” said Beth Alexander, the president of the board at the [Nashville Public Library Foundation](#), the private fund-raising arm of the library. “We’re home to two dozen universities. We need to have a bookstore other than a campus bookstore, and people were looking at each other and saying, ‘We’re very concerned about this.’ ”

Ms. Patchett, meanwhile, [hatched a plan of her own](#). She had money, connections and countless time spent on book tours. Soon she began posing the question to friends: What if she started a bookstore?

In April, she met with Karen Hayes, a publishing veteran who had worked at the Ingram Book Company, a major book wholesaler, and at Random House, where she was a sales representative.

They decided to become business partners and co-owners. Ms. Patchett, who has a comfortable

income (her last book, “State of Wonder,” reached No. 3 on the New York Times hardcover fiction best-seller list), promised \$300,000 as an initial investment. They decided to name the store Parnassus after the sacred site in Greece that is associated with poetry, song and knowledge.

Then she left on a 15-city book tour in June, and promptly began doing research. “I would walk into these stores,” she said, “and the first thing I would say is: ‘How many square feet do you have? How many employees do you have? What are your hours?’ ”

Daniel Goldin, the owner of the Boswell Book Company, lavished her with advice over dinner at Beans and Barley, a health-food cafe on the city’s East Side. Put the children’s section as far away from the front door as possible. Hang signs from the ceiling, and customers will buy whatever is advertised on them. And make your store comforting and inclusive, smart but not snobby.

“The world has changed so much — it’s sort of everybody against Amazon,” Mr. Goldin said last week. “The customer relationship is way more important than it used to be.”

Parnassus, like hundreds of other independents across the country, will also sell e-books through Google, to lure the many customers who have shifted to Nooks, Kindles and iPads.

Stopping by Parnassus on a recent chilly afternoon, days away from its opening, Ms. Patchett inspected the rows of bookshelves in blond wood (salvaged from a local Borders that went out of business), gingerly stepped around construction workers and pointed out where a coffee bar, a cash register and paperback tables would go.

Ms. Patchett said that she is counting on her store to drive home a sharp, tough-love message to book lovers: buy books at independent stores, or the stores will go away.

“This is not a showroom, this is not where you come in to scan your barcode,” she said. “If you like this thing, it’s your responsibility to keep this thing alive.”