

Booksmith Offers Challenging Menu

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

It's over 90 degrees, and your scribe is sitting in front of Baraboo's Booksmith, reading unintelligible (to me) gibberish (?) from James Joyce's "Ulysses". Moreover, I'm reading it out loud, to wary looks from passers-by.

"Ineluctable modality of the visible, at last that if not more, thought through my eyes. Signature of all things I am here to read. Seaspawn and seawrack...limits of the diaphane"....James Joyce. On and on it droned, as did I, sputtering over phrases incomprehensible to this only lightly lettered key tapper.

Inside the store is Annie Randall, the Inspirer of so many of us to do this insane thing, reading all 644 pages of this seemingly irrational book—out loud—to the Saturday throngs of farmer's market shoppers.

And why do we do this—because Annie Randall said it was done in sophisticated cities all over the world, so why not in Baraboo. The book's events all take place on June 16, Bloomsday, the single day in early 20th century Ireland which rated so many descriptive pages by Joyce.

This is her ninth year sponsoring the event. There were 45 readers, and it

required 34 ½ hours. A surprise reader was Bill Thomas, a stranger, who phoned from Pueblo, Colorado and read his part out loud for 30 minutes. He has no connection to Baraboo, but wanted to be part of our effort.

Which brings us to a consideration of the innovative Randall and her one-of-a-kind book store and performance emporium. For fourteen years its varied offerings have held forth on Oak Street, dating back to when this column was in its infancy.

The Booksmith is located directly in line with the bore of the Courthouse cannon, perhaps a symbol of the innovative independence of the offerings of the establishment. Inside is a small stage, only one step up, in a crowded conglomeration of unmatched tables and chairs, capacity perhaps an intimate 45, plus standing room in the rear all the way to the front entrance. On special occasions, there is seating for 75!

As for clientele, it is possible that some of the regular patrons of the establishment's venue have never purchased a book. Not a secret either is that not everyone drops a coin or bill in the not-so-prominent donation bucket on special entertainment nights. Annie welcomes most anyone anyway, and the events are generally free.

So what goes on at the Booksmith? In addition to poetry and language groups, an eclectic menu of performances has included 3 of Wisconsin's 4 poet laureates, impersonations of giants such as Mozart, Franklin, and Gershwin, reenactments of a 20's German Café, Downtown Abbey, plus Casablanca and Rick's Café—with red tablecloths, with impersonations from

Free French officers to hookers. Cinco de Mayo is a regular feature.

Other nights have seen complete readings of a novellas by Truman Capote, and plays by local playwright Darrell Kohlhoff. Readings from German soldiers as presented in "Last Letters from Stalingrad" were emotionally evocative. Birthdays are celebrated for international luminaries ranging from Lincoln to Cervantes, as well as occasional locals. Scotland's Robert Burns will be recognized soon from the small stage.

"Toast of The Town" is a regular monthly feature, where anyone is invited to stand and perform in most any medium. Another night might be a Spelling Bee or re-enactment of a Quiz show. There have been many travelogues in the past 14 years, and countless lectures on astronomy or history or whatever.

Add to the above, two wedding receptions, 3 funerals, one wedding dinner, and two wedding proposals made on stage. Add also dozens of stand-up comedians, and numerous book signings. Annie's membership in the "Cheddar Chicks" has caused many a dulcet tune to flow amongst the colorful backdrop of thousands of Annie's books—this is a bookstore too, remember!

And the décor! Scattered through the Booksmith, sometimes well above the bulging bookshelves, are such disassociated items as a stuffed Northern Pike, a pair of snowshoes, a dressmaking frame, a doll house, two bird houses, and of course a Christmas tree in July—a copacetic display that seems perfectly comfortable amidst it's sea of largely used books.

So, volunteers among us read out loud from a book, Ulysses, every year. Annie says we will read the entire book out loud in one hour next year—sound like cacophony? Stay tuned. Meantime, here's a parody heard in 2008 on the tenth birthday of the Booksmith— new words to a highly abridged Whiffenpoof Song:

"To the tables down at Annie's, to the place where Nellie dwells, to the Booksmith and the cannon's angry glare. To the Booksmithers assembled, with their paperbacks held high, If we're lucky Cheddar Chicks will come on by...So here's to the Booksmith, it knocks off your socks, daring to think outside the box, Annie has books, and secluded nooks, so Buy, Buy, Buy!" We'll spare you the additional verses.

In fairness, we also recommend the well-equipped BookWorld and the specialized Lifeline Christian bookstore, both on Third Street, both well stocked and managed. Baraboo's literary needs are easily fulfilled by its three bookstores.

