

The Philadelphia Inquirer

BORDERS, A WEEK OLD, LURES THE LITERATI FOR THE STORE'S FIRST READING AUTHOR RACHEL SIMON WORE A WEDDING DRESS. WHAT WOULD YOU EXPECT AT A STORE WHOSE CLERKS MUST PASS A LITERARY TEST?

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Can a "literary" bookstore hit the bestseller list the first week out?

Can it make No. 1 the moment it launches a classy reading series? Can it defy the mass sensibility of chain bookstores and print media that boost music, TV, film and video over books in a supposedly logical attempt to reach "readers"?

It's all right to ask questions like that about Borders Book Shop & Espresso Bar, the huge (120,000 titles, 18,000 square feet) outlet at 1727 Walnut St. that opened on Oct. 19, because the Ann Arbor, Mich.-based group of quality bookstores famously grills prospective sales staff with a 64-question exam.

In a world where bookstore clerks place Allan Bloom in Gardening, Borders prospects face queries like "In what subject area would you look for books by or about . . . Gustav Klimt . . . Gustav Mahler . . . Carl (no Gustav?) Jung"? Even if the exam doctors do misspell Gabriel Garcia Marquez's last name, they and their fledgling students of retail generally know their stuff. Like Allan's long-lost sister

Molly, you want to answer those opening questions, "Yes I said yes I will yes."

One Q&A, anyway, is now glorious history. Did Borders draw a standing-room-only crowd Thursday night for just-published local short-story writer **Rachel Simon** (Little Nightmares, Little Dreams)?

C'mon! Can 200 Rachel Simon fans be wrong?

"I've always missed having what would be a college-town-type bookstore," semi-sighed Holly Brown, a 30-year-old corporate lawyer sitting at the Espresso Bar, who looked like anything but in her floppy green hat, bold purple dress, as she was reading European Travel and Life. She said she'd been "excited" and "impressed" by the "mob scene" at the store on its first Saturday, its "grad school" feel. So, even though she doesn't go to readings, she came.

Brown had been a University of Michigan undergraduate, and knew and loved the Ann Arbor Borders, like Huong Hoang, a 29-year-old University of Pennsylvania financial administrator browsing the art books for the third time since opening day.

Brown instantly loved the new one: "I think this town has needed a good bookstore for a long time."

Elsewhere around the 28-seat cafe, reviews sparkled regardless of career or age. Nineteen-year-old Jacob Mattison, on leave from Swarthmore College, studied a copy of the New York Review of Books borrowed from the cafe's news rack. Adding color to the store motifs with his coiffured box braids (little square hair patterns bound by multicolored rubber bands), Mattison was also at his first reading in Philadelphia, and he pointed out, "I can get one espresso and sit here all night."

Dorothy Heller, a Center City resident retired from the airline industry, confessed to "haunting Borders" since opening day: "I've been so discouraged by all the bad news, and I come here for my Borders fix." Her friend Marjorie Griffiths, a retired home economist "over 60," admitted to browsing Borders "twice a day" so far, having given up "Bassett's for Borders."

"The city's starving for something like this," said Deirdre White, a 25-year-old artist from Northern Liberties, who was sitting nearby with a coffee-table collection of Bosch that she planned to buy. "In other parts of the country, things like this are going on." With her was housemate Jennifer Baker, also 25, a production assistant and New Haven native who fondly recalled that Connecticut city's Atticus Bookstore & Cafe.

"Why not something like that in Philadelphia?" she asked.

Borders agreed. So it decided to give Philadelphia a literary bookstore, with regular readings by authors, a store of the sort enjoyed by every other sophisticated U.S. metropolis. That is, a kind of Book Store Paradiso, with soothing green carpets,

wooden shelves and benches, art posters in the loo, sofas for the decadent, gentle jazz and classical in the background, foreign newspapers delivered daily.



DRESSED TO MARRY

Rachel Simon, a 31-year-old Abington resident whose short stories from Houghton Mifflin have been called "quick-witted, sexy and full of heart" (novelist Charles Baxter) and "weird and funny" (weirdness expert Mary Gaitskill), honored the sense of occasion.

As Borders PR director Jim Gladstone announced to the crowd milling about the second floor that "Rachel said that she's married to her work," Simon ascended on the escalator behind him, resplendent in 1950s wedding dress and veil, clutching a mixed bouquet of ballpoint and felt-tipped pens. She issued a hearty "Hi, everybody."

The amused main audience listened patiently despite being shoehorned into a space more suitable to a chess game and four aisles previously reserved for Animals and Humor (latecomers drifted around the fringes).

Simon read her title story and then "Skirts," a raunchy "bad girl" tale for which she heuristically removed her veil and hiked that wedding dress over her knee ("You'll see shortly why this is necessary," she warned).

Between stories, in a move chic New York bookstores might emulate, Gladstone asked listeners to play musical chairs, so that everyone could get close for at least one story. Thanks to the lure of the cafe, it worked, easing the awkwardness caused by the unexpectedly large turnout.

After the reading, Simon parked herself at a desk, next to a giant-size bottle of Cordon Negro Brut, to greet the faithful ("I'll sleep here tonight if need be"). Philadelphia got a rare earful of the "signing" exchange, an oral art form some shrewd writer will eventually use to update the epistolary novel:

Can you make it to "Roy in the desert"?

Sure. How do you spell "desert"?

Several Thursday-night literati, including the guest of honor, espresso-ed the thought that Borders would become the place for Philadelphia's literary and intellectual singles to meet others of the species.

MOVE RIGHT IN

"If I were single," Simon gushed, out of earshot of her boyfriend of eight years, Hal Dean, "I would move into the Espresso Bar." Borders, she suggested, could act as quality-control supervisor for singles: "Once you walk in here, you immediately cancel out a lot of people."

On that point, Espresso Bar attendant Maria Chan, 20, a veteran of the Pink Rose Cafe, rated the Espresso Bar as "a lot less pretentious" - it leans, like the store, to business types during the day, artsy-fartsys at night: "It hasn't been one type of person so far, which is really cool."

She acknowledged that the "No Smoking" rules had miffed some would-be bohemians, sure of a crime against their nature, but that they'd been well-balanced by others pleased by the mellow atmosphere and price of the coffee (complimentary until the bar becomes fully operational). Gladstone described the reigning ethos as "No rules until rules are necessary."

"The whole idea," said Chan, "is that people should be able to stay as long as they like. And they're allowed to walk around the store with coffee as long as they have the lid on."

As for the cash register, well, Mattison bought a Dick Francis novel and a Masters & Johnson guide. Hoang bought a thesaurus. Baker bought a collection of Barbara Kruger photos.

And Simon? Borders sold 42 copies of Little Nightmares, Little Dreams. Did she think Borders would survive future fictioneers' unceremoniously wearing mere flannel shirts?

"Oh, God, yeah," she said. "Everyone I've talked to has said Philadelphia needed a place like this."

