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Independent Bookstores Wary of Amazon's Arrival to Chicago

Reuben Unrau | September 6, 2016 5:54 pm

When Teresa Kirschbraun heard the news that online behemoth [Amazon](#) was opening a brick-and-mortar bookstore in Lakeview, she was shocked.

"I thought they were going to a suburb or campus area," said Kirschbraun, owner of [City Lit Books](#) in Logan Square. "It seems like a throw down against neighborhood independent bookstores."

Kirschbraun is one of many local book retailers critical of Amazon's coming storefront, which is set to open at 3443 N. Southport Ave. in 2017. In a statement issued Wednesday by the [Great Lakes Independent Booksellers Association](#), a nonprofit that promotes independent book retailers in the Midwest, City Lit and 15 other Chicago bookstores laid out their concerns.

"The Amazon announcement represents an opportunity to expand the conversation booksellers have been having for years with customers about sustainable publishing, bookselling, and retailing," the statement reads in part. While local booksellers have been forced to deal with other corporate competitors such as Barnes and Noble and Borders in the past, Amazon's new storefront presents a unique challenge.

According to Deborah Leonard, executive director of GLIBA, the Lakeview location looks to mimic its online model by using consumer data to dictate the store's selection. It will only carry a select number of titles based on the highest customer ratings on its website. Instead of browsing price tags on books, shoppers will log in to their Amazon account and scan a book's barcode to see the latest online prices, which are typically much cheaper than the usual retail price. Amazon has managed to maintain low prices by striking lucrative deals with major publishing companies and investors, Leonard said. While City Lit sells the popular novel, "The Underground Railroad" for \$26, Amazon currently lists it at \$16.17.

"There is a real fear because their prices are so low and for some, that's all that counts," said Leonard.

The statement from GLIBA raises another concern about Amazon's failure to bring money back into the cities from which it operates. The group cites a [January report](#) co-sponsored by the American Booksellers Association that examines how online retailers impact local economies. The study, titled "Amazon and Empty Storefronts," alleges Amazon cost Illinois a total of \$59.8 million in revenue in 2014 by avoiding sales and property taxes. And although it offers employment in distribution centers, the retail giant has caused the loss of 7,802 jobs statewide, according to the report.

"They say they're going to bring all of these great jobs, but in the end the money goes out of the community," said Leonard. "We want to let the public know where their money is going when they spend it at Amazon."

Despite their concerns, Kirschbraun says that Amazon will be arriving at a time of "renaissance for indie bookstores in Chicago." Since she opened her store in 2012, several other bookstores have popped up citywide, including innovative shops like [Read It & Eat](#) – a food bookstore with a kitchen that offers cooking classes and culinary demonstrations. Kirschbraun says the experience of shopping at a local bookstore is what sets them apart from Amazon and that she will continue to highlight what makes them special in their neighborhood.

"This is an educational opportunity for us to say, 'We provide story times, we provide a space for local authors, we host book clubs and all of those things that create different communities,' she said. "You can choose to go there [Amazon], a place that is choosing their books based on algorithms, or you can come here where we base what we have on what you really want."

The Chicago Amazon location will be the fourth brick-and-mortar operation nationwide after launching in Seattle in 2015. The company also plans to open storefronts in San Diego and Portland later this year, according to [reporting by the LA Times](#).