Introduction: Bookstores in Fiction

The place of the bookstore in the creative imagination (the fantasies of the bookstore) through a study of novels in which bookstores play a prominent role in the setting or plot is the subject of this Element. A bibliography of more than 490 novels was compiled through a series of online searches of catalogues and social media lists. The Amazon.com catalogue was searched for the terms ‘bookstore’ and ‘bookshop’. A similar search was conducted through the second-hand book catalogues of AbeBooks and Alibris, which added books that are now out of print. An additional search was conducted of the Goodreads’ social media list ‘Books about Bookstores’, which included more than 280 titles. Blurbs, reviews and content from the books in these lists were investigated to separate fiction from non-fiction titles and to identify the role of the bookstore in the fictional works. The results of these searches were further developed through searches of book discussion sites, literary journals, bookseller catalogues and blogs. A total of 501 novels available in English (including eighteen in translation) published since 1917 were identified as what might be termed ‘bookstore novels’.

The complete bibliography is available online at https://bit.ly/bookstore_novel. Independent, used, antiquarian, second-hand, new and specialist bookstores have not been differentiated in the bibliography. Subcategories from the bibliography are provided in the online Appendix to the Element (Bibliography of Bookstore Novels) broken down into individual categories of fiction.

The bibliography, although extensive, cannot be described as definitive. In addition, the choice for inclusion or exclusion was sometimes necessarily subjective. Not every novel that included a bookstore in the narrative was included in the bibliography. The bookstore needed to be judged to play a prominent role in either the setting or the plot. Although a bookstore does appear in *Oliver Twist* (and its appearance is referred to in Section 1), for example, it would be misleading to refer to Dickens’ novel as a ‘bookstore novel’. Additional novels were added to the bibliography during the writing of this Element and it is hoped that the online bibliography will continue to be developed by other contributors. Further work in non-fiction books that
are centred around bookstores is needed but that is outside the scope of this Element.

Murder and crime stories account for more than two-thirds of the bookstore novels identified. Murder among the shelves has been a popular theme at least since booksellers started dying in The Whisper on the Stair (Mearson 1924). The modern bibliomystery series, usually featuring a bookseller or bookstore owner who regularly becomes involved in murder, began when Lawrence Block introduced the bookseller-cum-burglar, Bernie Rhodenbarr, in his 1977 Burglars Can’t Be Choosers. Since then, more than 300 books have been published in forty-seven individual series, most recently with Beth Wiseman’s The Bookseller’s Promise (2022). The longest running of these series, Caroline G. Hart’s Death on Demand mysteries, produced twenty-seven volumes over the period of thirty years from 1987–2017. (A listing of these series in chronological order is available in the Appendix to this Element.)

Many of the bibliomystery series are self-described as ‘cosy mysteries’, a subgenre that typically includes romantic interests. Another seventy of the bookstore novels may be categorized as ‘romance fiction’. Eighteen of the novels are categorized as LGBTQ+ or ‘gay fiction’. These include the seven volumes of Josh Lanyon’s Adrian English Mysteries, as well as Seana Kelly’s two fantasy novels featuring Sam Quinn, a werewolf who runs a bookstore that caters for the supernatural community. In total, more than fifty novels of the fantastic were identified (including seven fantasy series) as well as fifty-five children’s or young adults’ novels.

The earliest novels in the bibliography are Christopher Morley’s 1917 Parnassus on Wheels and its 1918 sequel, The Haunted Bookshop. However, the bookstore novel is mostly a twenty-first-century phenomenon. Only eighty-four of the books discussed in this Element appeared before 2000. In contrast, during the slightly more than two decades of the twenty-first century, starting with instalments in three separate mystery series (Death on Demand, Dido Hoare and Honey Huckleberry), more than 400 novels have appeared.

The increase in the bookstore novel since 2000 correlates with changes within the publishing industry itself. As Laura Miller has noted in her study of bookselling, Reluctant Capitalists, although the American Booksellers...
Association (ABA) had historically included chains and independents, it noted a split in the needs and identities of these two retail groups in the 1980s and 1990s. In 1999, it shifted its membership to include only independents and started the Book Sense marketing campaign to support independent bookstores (Miller 2006, 183–4). In 2008, Book Sense was rebranded as IndieBound. A search using the Google Books Ngram Viewer for combinations of indie, independent, bookstore and bookshop shows no results for ‘indie bookstore’ or ‘indie bookshop’ before 2000. The first use of ‘indie bookstore’ is in Alt.culture: An A-Z Guide to 90s America in an article referring to ‘indie bookstore bestsellers’ (Daly and Wice 1995, 167). The number rises gradually until 2008, the year that the IndieBound marketing campaign began, totalling approximately sixty results. In the following ten years that triples to more than 270 resources using the term ‘indie’ to describe a bookstore or bookshop, suggesting the term ‘indie’ has gained in popular use. Given this context, it is worth noting that all the novels identified in the bibliography are set in independently operated bookstores rather than big box chains.

Throughout this Element, as reflected in the title, I have chosen to use the term bookstore rather than bookshop. The former term dominates in the American media, while the latter is more common in the United Kingdom. The Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘bookstore’ as ‘a bookshop’ and ‘bookshop’ as ‘a shop where books are sold’ and Merriam-Webster offers the inverse. While one term emphasizes the collection (store) of books, the other stresses the commercial sale, reflecting perhaps the nature of these places as what Osborne described as a ‘counter-space’, ‘revising the imperatives of commercial exchange supposedly defining the bookshop’ (Osborne 2015, 143). The choice of ‘bookstore’ as the standard term throughout this Element, therefore, reflects my origins in America, but also my inclination toward the fantasy of these places as stores of books that are for sale.

This Element concentrates on novels available in English. Creative responses in other languages are only represented by the limited number of translated books. Films and short fiction have been introduced briefly for a wider context, but the examples provided are only indicative of a broad range of material to be explored. The International Movie DataBase includes more than 100 films that have ‘bookstore’ or ‘bookshop’ in the plot summary,
starting with the 1916 silent film *Man and His Angel* (King et al. 1916). Gibbs Smith’s *Art of the Bookstore* (Smith 2009) is an example of the visual responses. Although few video games to date have made use of bookstores, there is no reason to think the fantasy of the bookstore will not inspire them in the future.

The literature of bookstores extends beyond the novel. John Dunton’s 1705 memoir, *The Life and Errors of John Dunton, Citizen of London With the Lives and Characters of More Than a Thousand Contemporary Divines and Other Persons of Literary Eminence* (Dunton 1818), may have been the first bookseller memoir to be published in English; it has been followed by a growing number of booksellers eager to share their experiences with books and book collectors. Carol Ann Duffy (Duffy 2016) and others have celebrated the bookstore in poetry. Bookstore tourism has spawned a genre of travel writing appearing frequently in many newspapers and magazines. The threat of bookstore closures brought on by the failure of Borders and the rise of Amazon created its own journalistic responses. Biographies, histories, recollections of bookstores and guides to the proper operation of bookstores – written by browsers, collectors, booksellers, academics and novelists – provide a rich source for study beyond the scope of the current work.
1 The Bookstore as Meaningful Location

In *Oliver Twist*, Charles Dickens introduced the respectable Mr Brownlow being robbed at a bookstore, using the store as a border-space between the criminal world of Sikes and Fagin and the respectable world Brownlow inhabits. In the film version of Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* (Hawks 1946), Philip Marlow visits two bookstores Geiger’s Rare Books and the ACME Bookshop, identifying a similar border. Geiger’s store is an obvious front for a pornography ring; the ACME Bookshop is a respectable-appearing store that closes suddenly for a romantic moment between the detective and the bookseller. As Paroma Chatterjee has pointed out, it is in the ACME Bookshop ‘that we find the very heart of the twisted universe inhabited by the Sternwoods, Geigers, Marses and Marlowes’ (Chatterjee 2020).

The bookstore is, by its very nature, a site of contrasts, providing a liminal space between commerce and culture, but also one between respectability and experience. Marlow’s erotic adventures contrast sharply with Geiger’s antiquarian respectability and ACME’s intellectual clarity. But the used book trade in the 1930s did not often live up to these models. Jack Biblio and Jack Tannen, booksellers at Biblio & Tannen on New York’s Book Row in the 1930s through 1950s, describe the space between culture and law that bookstores straddled:

> In the late 1920s and 1930s nearly all used bookshops in New York and in other cities around the country relied for at least part of their income on the sale of erotica – or, more accurately, pornography, since the sale of such material was outlawed and the laws were often vigorously enforced. This was before the landmark challenges to such censorship had gone through the courts and many booksellers found it necessary to risk handling the material under the counter in order to survive. (Chernofsky 1986, 1668)

The bookstore is a retail establishment that deals in packaged ideas. The value that it provides customers may be the ideas, the packaging or the space that contains the multiplicity of ideas. It provides the creative writer...
with what human geographers term a ‘meaningful location’ (Casey 1996; Cresswell 2009; Malpas 2018): a place defined by the possibility of unexpected and unplanned connections. As such, it is a mutable resource for creative writers. The potential of the store depends on its location, its layout and the books that it gathers. It is a collision point for numerous vectors: social, cultural, commercial, legal, respectable and dangerous.

A bookstore is also a physical place, as described by Lewis Buzbee in his memoir, *The Yellow-Lighted Bookshop*: ‘A bookseller is, first and last, the custodian of a wonderful space, a groundskeeper concerned with the order and care and stock of that space. . . . Day-to-day bookselling is more about the physical world than the loftier realms’ (Buzbee 2008, 107). As a physical place, the bookstore exists (even in a fictional existence) within what Jeff Malpas describes as ‘a particular region of physical space or a location within it’. Malpas quickly expands that definition of space beyond its Cartesian limits, adding that place is also ‘the frame within which experience (along with conceptions of self-identity) is to be understood’ (Malpas 2018, 13). In other words, ‘place’ can be understood as a ‘meaningful location’, a space with an identity that persists and shifts within a spatio-temporal context. The relationships within the physical space (made possible by that physical space and happening across time) create a meaning that defines the place.

Doreen Massey describes of these relationships as creating ‘chance of space’:

> Space entails the unexpected. The specifically spatial within time-space is produced by that – sometimes happenstance, sometimes not – arrangement-in-relation-to-each-other that is the result of there being a multiplicity of trajectories. In spatial configurations, otherwise unconnected narratives may be brought into contact, or previously connected ones may be wrenched apart. There is always an element of ‘chaos’. This is the chance of space; the accidental neighbour is one figure for it. (Massey 2005, 111)

John Agnew defined a ‘meaningful location’ as a space that provided a sense of place, ‘the personal and emotional attachment people have to a place’ (Cresswell 2004, 14). Cresswell expanded on the concept, defining place as a combination of location, locale and sense of place:
Location refers to an absolute point in space with a specific set of coordinates and measurable distances from other locations. Location refers to the ‘where’ of place. Locale refers to the material setting for social relations – the way a place looks. Locale includes the buildings, streets, parks, and other visible and tangible aspects of a place. Sense of place refers to the more nebulous meanings associated with a place: the feelings and emotions a place evokes. (Cresswell 2009, 1)

The use of the store as a ‘meaningful location’ will be considered in each of these texts. The fictional bookstores will be considered in terms of their locations, locales and the sense of place they create.

Location

As Cresswell makes clear, place is grounded in space, a geographical location where the place can be found. On its surface, this would appear to be the simplest aspect of place: its geographical coordinates, the intersection of its longitude and latitude, the GPS position, its what3words indicator. However, location also implies a relationship to other things, other places. A bookstore located at 41.70°, -70.24° is north of 40.69° and south of 42.71°. A store located at 222 Old Kings Highway may be expected to sit between numbers 221 and 223. Providing directions to a location, we typically use other landmarks: we might say ‘it is just across the street from the restaurant’ (Passini 1996; Hund, Schmettow and Noordzij 2012). A bookstore across the street from a restaurant is likely to differ in its sense of place from one on an isolated rural road. The former might attract diners who walk over while waiting for a table while the latter may require signage to attract people passing by in their car.

Location is not limited to spatiality. A place is also located in time. A mobile bookstore may be in a village square on Monday, a beach parking lot on Tuesday. The location, and its relationships to the other places, shifts each day. Likewise, a bookstore located near the ocean has a different set of relationships during the summer from the winter or during a hurricane or economic downturn. Staff in the store change from year to year (if not more frequently). The new store on the block may become an established business
over the years and its owners may marry, divorce, have children or choose not to, suffer hardships, become bankrupt or simply age over time. Each visit to the store (fictional or not) becomes a snapshot of that specific time and place.

**Locale**

Events are made possible by the locale in which they occur, ‘the material setting for social relations’. If a store stocks only English-language books, a non-English speaker will be limited to the covers, recognizing the names of authors or admiring the book designs. If a bookseller places a dollar-book table by the front door, they create the potential for people to gather there and hunt for bargains. They also define what the browser can expect on the other side of that door. Rules and conventions are also part of the locale, as are the customers who gather in the shop. A store that specializes in rare and antiquarian volumes may create an elitist setting, while a children’s store is likely to be colourful and friendly.

The locale of the place gathers people, objects, histories, rules, languages, thoughts and conventions at a location, creating the possibility of action, interaction, movement, exchange (Casey 1996). The place thus becomes ‘more an *event* than a *thing*:\

Rather than being one definite sort of thing — for example, physical, spiritual, cultural, social — a given place takes on the qualities of its occupants, reflecting these qualities in its own constitution and description and expressing them in its occurrence as an event: places not only are, they happen. (And it is because they happen that they lend themselves so well to narration, whether as history or as story.) (Casey 1996, 27)

**Sense of Place**

De Certeau describes space as ‘practised place’ (De Certeau 1984, 117) — a space becomes a meaningful location when practised. If a bookstore is understood to be a meaningful location, that meaning must be created through the dynamic play of the potential provided by its location and its locale by those who interact with or in that location. Game design theory is
Fantasies of the Bookstore

concerned with the creation of virtual but meaningful locations with which players can interact and its Mechanics-Dynamics-Aesthetics model is a useful tool for understanding the physical creation of meaning locations. Location and locale are the rules (mechanics) of a game world. They create the potential dynamics of the experience within that space. When an actor (a player in the game, but one of many possible roles in a bookstore – owner, browser, buyer, seller, author, staff) engages with the space, they bring their own contexts and preconceptions to the space. The interactions realize the potential of the location in an aesthetic experience (Hunicke, LeBlanc and Zubek 2004; Sicart 2008; Walk, Görlich and Barrett 2017). This Element refers to that experience, as it is expressed in the bookstore novels collected here, as the ‘fantasy of the bookstore’.

Huw Osborne, in his study of The Rise of the Modernist Bookshop, describing the progressive bookstore in particular, notes that the bookstore gathers together both the commercial and the cultural into a single space. He describes the result as ‘spaces that hijack dominant spaces and repurpose them to leisure or liberating ones. In doing so they question or change the nature of that dominant space’. He describes the bookshop as ‘a counter-space, revising the imperatives of commercial exchange supposedly defining the bookshop’ (Osborne 2015, 142–3). The confluence of culture with commerce means every bookshop is a disruption of both sides of the counter.

In her study of feminist bookstores, Kathrine Liddle identifies a model for a type of bookstore locale as ‘cultural interaction spaces’. In a feminist bookstore, according to Liddle, the confluence of ideas, booksellers and audience means that booksellers and other customers are ‘likely to share certain attitudes and ideologies that may have been less prevalent in mainstream venues’. While Liddle does not refer directly to meaningful locations as a concept, she does identify elements that echo Cresswell’s triad of location, locale and sense of place. For Liddle, the elements are specific to bookstores and include staff and booksellers; books (the cultural products); physical space (its layout, design, visual attributes); atmosphere (language, behaviours, attitudes, inclusivity or exclusivity); interactions; customers and audience (Liddle 2019).

These elements combine to create an identity for the store and the potential for a community with common interests. It is this active
combining, a constant gathering together that causes the intersection of vectors (lives, ideas, movements), that allows for particular actions. One example is Oldenburg’s ‘third place’ (the other two being home and work), accessible spaces that ‘serve to level their guests to a condition of social equality’ (Oldenburg 1989). The space of the bookstore, in its various permutations of location, locale and sense of place, encourages communities around such common interest as LGBTQ+ rights, Marxism, Christianity, Black Lives Matter, Judaism, Arabic studies, Spanish-language writing and science fiction to name only a few of the types of specialist bookstore that exist.

The dynamic nature of a bookstore as a place that is an event, the many vectors that intersect by chance or design within any bookstore, create the potential for complex fantasies of the bookstore. This Element will apply the idea of a bookstore as a meaningful location to the bookstore novel. It will explore the sort of event the bookstore location has been for writers. An examination of the fictional bookstore as location and as locale will set the scene, followed by an examination of how the event plays out to create senses of place, in particular, the somewhat contradictory senses of the bookstore as a place of murder and mystery or as a place of safety and haven.