



Leap of faith: Trish Hennessy opened her shop in 2019

by **Jenny Friel**

AFTER years of dreaming, planning and searching for the perfect property, Trish Hennessy opened her children's bookshop, Halfway up the Stairs, in October 2019.

In the few short years since, it has become a beloved institution in the bustling harbour town of Greystones, Co. Wicklow.

It's not hard to see why — it's an Aladdin's cave of imagination and creativity. White shelves are stacked with hundreds of colourful books, from stiff cardboard picture books for babies, to graphic novels for teens and young adults. From titles that many of us would recognise from our own childhoods to

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newly-published works by debut writers, they're all carefully curated by Trish and her small team of experts.

Stock is chosen based on their belief that the product is worthy of inclusion. You might not always find the mega-sellers found in the chain stores, instead it's an eclectic mix of classics, brand new fiction and factual books they believe will engage and enthrall young minds.

The approach is clearly working. This year it is one of two nominees from Ireland on the shortlist for Independent Bookshop of the Year in the prestigious Booksellers Book Awards 2023. Up against Little Acorns Bookshop in Derry, the winner of this regional final will be announced in mid-March and then it's onwards to a glitzy awards ceremony in Grosvenor House Hotel in London.

It's the second year in a row it's been nominated in this category, and in 2021 it was longlisted for the An Post Awards Bookshop of the Year — an incredible achievement for such a young business. If it gets through again, it will be up against

independent bookshops of all kinds from across the UK.

'We're delighted, it's about celebrating bookshops and getting a brilliant opportunity for people to see who we are,' says Hennessy.

There was more good news for Irish independent bookshops this week. At the annual Irish Book Trade Conference, held this year in Cork City, it was revealed that membership of Bookselling Ireland and UK for independent outlets was up by almost 5 per cent on last year.

In an era of online superpowers that can afford to sell at heavily-discounted prices and the advent of e-readers, which once threatened the very existence of smaller bookshops, it's heartening to hear that they're holding their own.

Especially when just last week we learned of the closing of yet another Dublin institution, the McCullough Pigott music shop on South William Street in Dublin, where for 200 years tens of thousands of music students bought their instruments and sheet music.

Like many other similar types of businesses, parent company Hal Leonard Europe, who took it over in 1993, has decided to close the bricks and mortar shop along with six other retail premises in the UK, to concentrate on online sales.

With high rents and rates, not to mention soaring energy costs, it's perhaps not a surprising tack to take. Indeed, many smaller and independent stores have disappeared forever from the streets of towns and cities across the country over the last few decades, with the birth of mega malls and retail parks.

But there's something about bookshops that seems to exercise people into

**Optimistic:
Dawn Behan
of Bookselling
Ireland**



How BOOKS became bestsellers AGAIN

E-books predicted a bleak future for hard copies, but now the page-turning news is that sales are on the rise

taking action. When it was announced that Chapters was closing its doors after the owner retired in early 2022, there was a sizeable public outpouring of dismay at the loss of the Dublin city bookstore.

Famous for its huge selection of second-hand books, as well as new titles, new owners stepped in and it reopened a few months later. It was interesting to hear the news that it has now joined eBay. Chief executive Mick

Finucane explained that because its second-hand stock has such a 'sprawling range' of titles, it made sense to join up.

'Trying to make our range available to as many people as possible, needed a creative approach,' he said.

'Although we're all so familiar with eBay and what it does, we forget that it is a really creative, vibrant retail environment that gives space to independent sellers and innovative practices. It was a perfect match for us.'

Books are still big business. Despite the cost-of-living crisis, like a lipstick or a takeaway coffee they're an affordable luxury. Indeed, for many they're a necessity that they're willing to stretch to.

With the explosion of BookTok, where younger readers recommend authors they love on the social media platform TikTok, many first-time buyers have entered the market with gusto, pushing previously unknown

writers like Colleen Hoover and Alex Aster to the top of the charts. According to Forbes, six of Hoover's books were in the top selling ten of 2022.

Overall, book sales are in rude health here too. The Nielsen figures for last year show that 13 million books were sold in Ireland, making it the eighth consecutive year of growth in book sales by value and volume. That translated into €170 million, the highest figure on record.

According to Bookselling Ireland, which represents 136 businesses, including 19 in Northern Ireland, children's books and fiction have both seen record growth. However, there are issues of concern within the Irish book world, including the rising costs of paper.

'There's also uncertainty around the free primary school book scheme that was announced in Budget 2023,' explains chairperson of Bookselling Ireland, Dawn Behan. 'According to a member