



**Popular: Halfway Up The Stairs in Greystones**

survey we carried out in October 2022, 54% of Irish bookshops sell school books. At least one in ten bookshops in Ireland are at risk of closure if they're no longer able to sell primary school books.

'As yet, guidelines have not been issued by the Department of Education for the implementation of this scheme.

'Then there's the cost of living. As with all other businesses, bookshops are experiencing some serious rising costs, including utilities, energy and transport.'

Indeed, last month a bookshop owner in Ramsgate in England tweeted how they needed to make £800 (€900) by the following ~Tuesday if they were to stand a chance of covering their bills. They then posted a photo of inside their shop, which was empty of any customers.

By the next day the shop was packed and online sales went through the roof.

Last Tuesday they paid their bills and did multiple media interviews

about the kindness of book lovers and the effects of the cost-of-living crisis.

'You see that a lot more in the UK than in Ireland I think,' says Behan.

“YOU DON'T GO INTO SELLING BOOKS TO MAKE LOTS OF MONEY”

'People go online or instore to help them because they don't want bookshops to close.'

Owner of the Woodbine Bookshop in Kilcullen, a town of about 4,000 residents in Co Kildare, Behan has been open since 2016

and says things are ticking along nicely. 'You don't go into selling books to make lots of money,' she smiles. 'You do it because you love books and you want to share that passion with others, while surrounding yourself with books and getting to talk about them all day.'

'It's always quiet this time of the year but it's not as quiet as this time last year. I think everybody is finding that. During lockdown we delivered and posted but as soon as we were open again the customers were straight back in, they really missed us. That's kept up, I think that's the general feeling throughout the industry.'

'People like to say there's a bookshop in their town, it makes it feel special. Some new ones even opened during and just after the pandemic. I think people had a chance to think about what they really wanted to do, they got out of the rat race and didn't want to go back.'

'Not all our new members are

new shops, some only sell school books and with all the uncertainty, they wanted some kind of national representation at a national level. But there are new shops and branches of existing chains. For instance, Seanchai in Kildare town opened a year ago and it's thriving. It's a gorgeous place and the locals are so happy there's a bookshop in their town.'

Certainly Greystones locals are very proud of their children's bookshop. Trish Hennessy was confident there was a market for such a store in the area. Previously a bank employee, after having her three children she sold Usborne books part-time from home to supplement the household income.

'There are lots of families, several schools and people who are very invested in their children's education,' she explains. 'When I started thinking seriously about opening my own place, I decided I needed experience, so I went to work in Easons for a few years.'

Using her savings, help from the bank and a short-term enterprise allowance, she set her dream in motion. 'There aren't many children's bookshops in the country —

this shop are ones we recommend to a customer, we literally hand-sell them.'

'You won't see the same names on our best-selling list that you see on other lists. We get behind the books we sell, we believe in them, that's why people come back to us. The service we provide is what gives the value.'

Just back from the booksellers conference in Cork, she was delighted to hear about the slight rise in independent shops.

'I've given advice to a few people over the years,' she says. 'The Booksellers Association runs an open your own bookshop course, I did it in London in 2019, but there's one now in Ireland, which shows there's a demand for it.'

While business is OK, she has noticed that people are being more careful with their money, so they need to work hard to 'give people reasons to come to us'.

The shop has an events manager, the writer Sarah Webb, and last year worked with more than 50 writers for their online and in-person events. 'Every week we do a Saturday storytime,' she says. In the last few weeks they had had Shane Hegarty reading from his new book and Marita Conlon McKenna signing her new book, *Fairy Hill*.

It also has an ingenious subscription service, where you can sign a child up for three months or six months, and staff will handpick a book for them based on their interests and post it out.

'It takes a lot of work and effort to keep an independent open,' she says. 'With the high costs involved, you can't compete on price. A big part of the discussion at the conference was how our industry needs to highlight the value of the service we offer.'

'There's a place for big chains and independent bookshops, but a thriving independent industry is really important because we all have our own flavour. Every bookshop reflects the tastes and interests of the people that work there, that's what makes them special and different.'

'There is a future and a potential for growth, there are also loads of wonderful new books coming out all the time, especially Irish ones. When I first opened, I got asked a lot if children are still reading, and the answer is yes, they are, despite the devices and all the screens. There's so much wonderful material out there, our libraries are busy as well.'

'But we do need to remind customers to buy locally, that OK, they might get a book for a couple of euro cheaper online, but what they don't get is the service, the expertise, the loyalty, the feedback and the follow-up.'

'When new books come in, we often know the customers who will love a particular one, we know their tastes and preferences. We can properly curate what we'll show them, it's not an algorithm — that's the difference.'

■ SARAH Bowie will be reading and drawing from her new book *Kevin's In A Mood* at 3pm this Saturday at Halfway up the Stairs in Greystones.

“WE CAN PROPERLY CURATE WHAT WE'LL SHOW OUR CUSTOMERS”

as far as I know there's two, us and one in Bray,' she says. 'Tales for Tadpoles is a gorgeous shop, and there are some online.'

'Finding a premises wasn't easy but I was lucky — through word of mouth one came up here.'

She opened Halfway Up The Stairs in the winter of 2019. Five months later, Covid hit.

'It was really stressful and there were times when things felt bleak, but it also brought a lot of opportunities,' she says. 'We quickly got a reputation for being able to help people and the big connection we had was with grandparents. They were coming to us for advice on fiction and activities books, asking us to send them all over the country and we got a couple of shout-outs in media.'

'We learned a lot very fast and then built a website with help from the Booksellers Association. When we finally reopened for good, customers came in and told us how we sent them books during Covid. They came from all over — some had planned their holidays around dropping into us.'

Online competition is obviously a challenge. 'But with children's books in particular, what people want is expertise, they want advice and personal service, which they won't get from big online giants,' she explains. 'Price is important but it's not the main thing. The vast majority of books we sell in