**TALES OF WOE AT CONCORD BOOKSHOP\***

It’s like a family quarrel that nobody wants and nobody knows how to stop.

\*David Mehegan, “Tales of Woe at Concord Bookshop,” *Boston Globe*, December 23, 2003, p. E1.

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The Concord Bookshop, a 64-year-old independent store regarded as one of the

best in New England, is beset by a bitter clash between owners and staff. The conflict

puts pressure on the store at a time when independent booksellers are reeling from

competition from chains and the Internet.\*\*

Eight of Concord Bookshop’s employees, including the trio of top managers,

have quit or given their notice. The staffers’ years of service add up to 73. The three

managers, including [the] general manager . . . have worked at the store for a total of

34 years. Meanwhile, a group of outraged local authors . . . has fired off a letter to the

owners supporting the staff.

The precipitating event was a surprise announcement last month by the owners—

a group of three families represented by a board led by President Morgan “Kim” Smith

of Concord—that a new general manager will be hired. No one was laid off, and no

one’s salary was cut. Yet many of the staff were outraged at the de facto demotions, as

well as by what they saw as the owners’ immovable stance . . .

“We asked for a meeting with the whole board,” says [a departing staff member].

“We presented our concerns, and they thanked us for our input and said, ‘We’re going

to do it our way, and if you don’t like it, each of you will have to make up your mind as

to how to proceed.’ Something in me died, the fragile alchemy that made it such a great

place to work had died. They had made their plans, we were expendable employees,

and we could take it or leave it.”. . .

“We’re heartbroken about it,” says David Donald, professor of history emeritus

at Harvard University . . . “These are people we deal with all the time. It’s a wonderful

store, beautifully arranged. They are knowledgeable and are glad to look things

up.” Adds Joanne Arnaud, director of the Boston Literacy Fund and a Concord resident

who also signed the letter: “What makes the Concord Bookshop different is the

people and their institutional memory and their memory for a customer. I can say, ‘I’m

looking for a book for someone who liked the last book by Nicholas Basbanes. Can

you help me?’ They are so warm and welcoming.”

The clash appears to be rooted in finances. Smith declined to give numbers but

portrayed the store’s financial situation as dire.

“Things have never been worse,” he says. “We are offering something important

to the town of Concord, which is wonderful, but it isn’t profitable.” Smith praises

the three managers but says, “The owners felt the three-way management was not

working out.”

The managers say finances aren’t so bad. They . . . issued a written comment:

“In explaining to us the change in management structure, the owners told us they

wanted to take the store in a different direction. We hold different opinions regarding

the financial health of the store. We are very proud of what we have been able to

accomplish these past five years.”

There’s no disagreement, though, that profit margins are tighter than ever, and

that the past few years have been rough on independent bookstores, especially in the

age of Barnes & Noble, Borders, and Amazon.com. Smith believes some of the store’sprograms should be reexamined, such as regular weeknight author appearances andsignings, which require paying staff to keep the store open.

“Increasingly, people are buying their books elsewhere and bringing them to

signings,” Smith says. “We had 70 people at the Tracy Kidder signing, but we sold

only 10 books. I discovered a guy coming in with five copies of the book that he

bought [elsewhere]. We want to preserve the store, but we need to make the finances

work.”

There’s no dispute, either, on Concord’s national reputation in the trade. “It is

one of the jewels of New England,” says . . . [the] executive director of the New

England Booksellers Association. . . “They are the kind of store that’s on everyone’s

A list. Publishers are interested in what Concord buys. They ask, ‘How is Concord

doing with the book?’ They are exemplars for reaching out to the community and in

cultivating authors”. . .

The conflict illustrates the special place a bookstore can have in a small community,

especially one such as Concord, with its numerous authors and links to such literary

giants as Emerson and Thoreau. The store is regarded as a community resource,

not just a business.

“This is Concord vs. Concord,” says Martha Holland, who is quitting after 18

years. “There were a hundred points where it could have been smoothed over. How it

got so out of hand, I don’t understand. The owners have every right to run their business

as they see fit. But if the staff goes, it’s just a bunch of bookshelves and carpets.”