



BOOK REPORT

Old and new friends forged at UMBA gathering

There's so much bad news about independent bookstores going under or in deep financial trouble, I worried last month that the annual UMBA convention would be a stonewall drag.

What's UMBA?

No, it's not a South American dance step. It's the Upper Midwest Booksellers Association, an organization that represents independent booksellers in our region and has been for years one of the biggest such outfits in the United States.

Each year it stages a big convention in the Twin Cities, where bookstore owners and their minions come to see what publishers have to offer in the way of new books.

But with famous stores like Ruminator (formerly The Hungry Mind) in trouble so deep that famous authors from all over the country are donating everything from their eyeglasses to their manuscripts for an auction to help the troubled bookseller out of the hole, I figured this year's UMBA would be ill-attended.

It didn't help much when the city of St. Paul charged me 10 bucks to park my car, then sent me packing to the huge and largely empty convention center. Shortly, I met a puzzled author standing alone in a huge hallway gazing up at the 40-foot ceiling.

"How do I get to UMBA?" she asked.

I didn't know but I said, "Let's just follow some earnest looking

person carrying a canvas book bag. That usually works."

It worked.

As we walked I discovered she was Esmi Raji Codell, the famous children's author who's making a big splash with "How to Get Your Child to Love Reading" and was one of the convention's featured speakers along with writers like Charles Baxter and Wisconsin writer Jacquelyn Mitchard.

Once inside the hall, things picked up after I talked to Kati Gallagher, UMBA's assistant director, who told me that 1,216 folks were in attendance, that of the association's 260 bookstore members, 136 stores and their staff made it to the convention, up 27 from the difficult year of 2000.

"It's amazing," Kati said, "but we also have 200 authors here."

This (2003) was my 21st year at the convention, and I had a ball schmoozing with old acquaintances and newcomers to the industry. With limited space, I'll skip the New York reps, who always look a bit stiff when they come way out here for UMBA, looking as if they might meet someone from Lake Wobegon and have to ingest a powdermilk biscuit. Instead, we'll concentrate on local authors and publishers.

The first person I ran into was Allan Kornblum, founder of Coffee House Press of Minneapolis, a purveyor of quality literary fiction. How's business?

"It's just great. We're surviving the tough economic times better



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than I could have hoped," said Kornblum. "And we've got the most copasetic staff I've had in all these years."

Then it was time for coffee with Vicki Lansky, the irrepressible Minneapolis publisher who makes how-to books lots of fun.

What's new, Vicki?

"My book about the uses of baking soda sold 300,000 copies. Someone said, 'How many copies did your uses of vinegar sell?' I told him I didn't have such a book. But it'll be coming out this winter."

Like me, Lansky loves coming to UMBA, and complains that the national conventions, in financial trouble, have shortened meeting times, so that there's little opportunity to have the fun we used to in better days.

On to the Minnesota Historical Society Press, where I run right into an old office mate from the Minneapolis Star and Tribune, food writer Ann Burckhardt, who is signing and handing out free copies of her new book, "A Cook's Tour of Minnesota," a compendium of stories about great Minnesota food finds.

Ann and I are turning gray, but that's not the case down the aisle

at Brett Waldman's display. Brett's father Ned is the fellow who published Tom Hegg's bestseller "A Cup of Christmas Tea." Ned closed down his Waldman House Press last year and sold his inventory to young Brett, who went to work and began the new Trist Press. He also married Sheila, who is a lovely attraction to their booth.

Brett has some of his father's promotional genes. That was evident when he offered Star Tribune books editor and me copies of his beautifully produced inspirational book, "The Station," by Robert Hastings, Marilyn Brown, illustrator.

"This," said Brett, "could become the next 'Jonathan Livingston Seagull.'" (That's pretty much what his father said about Tom Hegg's book. And he was right!)

Time for coffee with new friends, Nancy and Joe Dashner, who run Driftwood Books in Detroit Lakes and Sarah Thurston, a young publicist from Massachusetts. None of us had ever met before but, before we knew it we were talking as if we were lifelong friends.

That's the way the book business is. You don't make much money, but you have a lot of fun.

Dave autographed his new book at UMBA. If you'd like a copy of "Dave Wood's Christmas Book" send a check for \$10 to Dave Wood's Christmas Book, 503 Walnut St., River Falls, WI 54022