

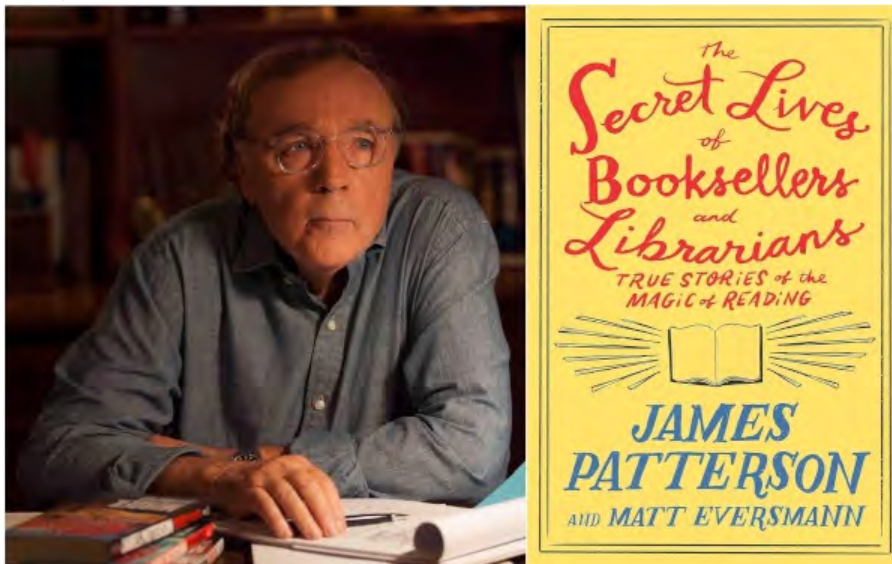


Home > Authors > Interviews

Sponsored by Little, Brown and Company

## PW Close-Up: James Patterson's 'The Secret Lives of Booksellers and Librarians'

Jan 22, 2024



James Patterson's latest nonfiction title, *The Secret Lives of Booksellers and Librarians* (Little, Brown, Apr.), takes us inside the lives, and livelihoods, of the everyday heroes surrounding us in the literary trenches: booksellers and librarians. In a collection of profiles that includes professionals of all types, from school librarians to independent booksellers to big box chain employees, Patterson and his co-author, Matt Eversmann, delve into how these reading gurus inspire young and old every day. PW talked to Patterson about what why booksellers and librarians are essential pillars of our communities, how we can better support them, and the meaning of "book joy."

In the popular imagination, librarians and booksellers are commonly seen as being mild-mannered introverts who lead quiet lives.

What made you decide to take on this stereotype?

Reading may be a solitary act, but engaging with books and with readers is social. It takes confidence to select the books people will want to read. And it takes conviction to promote them—talking them up to store customers or library patrons or online and saying, "This is what you're looking for. Trust me. I think you're going to love this."

Then readers come back and say, "Okay, what else you got?"

What's the most prevalent misunderstanding about booksellers and librarians?

Oh, you're a librarian. Oh, you're a bookseller. You guys must just sit around reading, drinking tea, and talking about Dickens all day. None of the above! Nobody cares more about books than booksellers and librarians. The knowledge these folks have is amazing. And sure, they got into the profession because they love books. But these talented people aren't just sitting around reading during work hours. They're doing so much more buying, receiving, shelving, cleaning, story time, social media. Libraries and bookstores are major parts of their neighborhoods, running all kinds of community programs and gatherings.

As you researched this book, what surprised you the most? Were any of your own ideas about the work of booksellers and librarians challenged or upended?

I've been to hundreds and hundreds of libraries and bookstores, and I can tell you this: keeping these places going takes an unbelievable amount of effort. The general public does not appreciate how hard librarians and booksellers work.

What's also amazing is how they specialize. There are libraries that lend books by subscription, to students of the Holocaust, to prison populations. Many have unique approaches that aren't widely known. Each library, each bookstore, is its own ecosystem fed by the stories they contain.

What are the key qualities that make a person decide to devote their lives to finding great books and telling others about them?

Curiosity. Enthusiasm. Commitment. Vision. These are professionals on a mission to get people of all ages excited about books and reading. They're doing work they could continue for the rest of their lives. Work that is crucial to everyday life. We all want to feel proud of our profession. Booksellers and librarians should feel very proud.

Books are magical, but they are also a business. How does the business aspect of this industry influence the way these professionals do their jobs? Does it show up differently for booksellers versus librarians?

The founder and owner of the Astoria Bookshop credits a Twitter post 'Why are all these bookstores opening in Brooklyn? Why doesn't anybody open one in Queens? We read here too' with her inspiration to start a business. The work is part market research, part networking, part business plan, with the goal of bringing people together to communicate and socialize over the common element of books. It's no different for libraries, where programming attracts readers to a place that has all the books they want for free!

Was your life ever changed by a book that a librarian or bookseller handed to you?

At 18, I made the rounds of secondhand bookstores two or three times a week. I especially loved tattered, dog-eared books. Books that had been well loved and showed it. The used books cost me a quarter, occasionally a buck, even for thick novels like *The Sot-Weed Factor*, *The Golden Notebook*, *The Tin Drum*. As I read novel after novel, my view of what was possible in life began to change.

How do they continue to help you in your work?

Library events are always book tour highlights. I recently visited New Jersey's Spring Lake Library and Maryland's Carroll County Public Library and had lively interactions with readers. New bookstores like Ohio's Banned Book Nook, (my hometown) Newburgh, New York's Golden Hour Books, and *The Ripped Bodice* in Brooklyn continue to open around the country. They are an inspiration.

You say in the book that booksellers and librarians save lives. What's your favorite example of this?

People often turn to books when they are facing a crossroads. A North Carolina bookseller tells of a widow who said: "This book club saved my life." Then there's the elementary-school-age reader who inhaled the pages of a book, asking, "Doesn't it smell great?" A Utah bookseller answered yes, all the while thinking, You've got such a great life ahead of you. A life that is filled with books.

How can we as individuals, and as a society, best support booksellers and librarians so that they can continue this vital work?

A Florida librarian tells the story of returning to her library after the devastation of Hurricane Ian to find the lobby gutted, the doors blown off, and three feet of water inside. The librarians get to work, deciding, "We're going to figure this out and serve people the best that we can." That's the level of dedication librarians bring to delivering to readers the information they need, no matter what's going on in the world.

What is "book joy" and how can we get more of it in our lives?

"Book Joy" is an expression coined by a librarian in northern Texas to describe that great feeling of matching readers with the books that will bring them the most happiness. It's the feeling that was shared by so many booksellers and librarians, who told us that their favorite part of their jobs was putting the right book into the right hands at the right time—making the kind of match that inspired readers to come back again and again and again. To get more "book joy," keep turning those pages.