

Re: Reading – A Genesis

As it states on our bookmark – Established in Dreams 1986 Established in Reality 2009

When I moved to Toronto in 1986 at the age of 20 I was poor. I mean, new pair of socks was cause for celebration poor. I was also a voracious reader and having to choose between dinner and a new book was tough.

Then I discovered the wonderfulness of Used Bookstores. See, I grew up in a small town that did not have a used shop so this was new to me. Queen St West at that time had several Used bookstores, used record shops and a few comic shops as well. You could buy a book for a pittance and even better, when you were done with it, you could bring it back in to get more!

This allowed me to feed my habit and I always thought, “I would love to own one of these places and just work there all the time!” I filed the dream away and hoped maybe to do it once I retired.

Flashforward 20 some years and I now had a wife, house, cottage and a career. The only problem was, as happy as I was in my life, I was not happy in my job. Working for someone else had always rubbed me the wrong way and my current boss was a Champion Rub-The-Wrong-Wayer! So, I was determined to find a new job and hopefully a new, better boss.

Then the most amazing thing ever happened. My wife Joanne, a woman I have known since we were 7 years old, said: “What happens if your next boss is an Olympic Level Moron as well? What if you get the top job but your Board of Directors are a bunch of Award Winning Meddlers?” My response was, “Well, what are my options?”

This next part just goes to prove how well she knows me and exemplifies why I love her. She said, “What about the bookstore? You were planning on doing it when you retire, why not look into doing it now?” Me: “.....” Joanne: “There are 40+ bookstores in Toronto, if they can do it, I know you can too.” See why I love her?

So, in November of 2008, I set about learning how to open the bookstore and what it would take to make it a success. I had spent a great deal of time in used bookstores as a customer over the years and so I felt I had a pretty good understanding of how they worked. I talked to several owners in town who, once they learned I was not planning on opening near them, were very helpful with the details.

It took me November and December to learn enough that I felt I really had a shot at doing this. So, on January 4th, after spending a snowy, windy day on the Danforth to gauge foot traffic in bad weather months, we finalized our decision. I was opening a bookstore!

So, next step: To resign. This was a wonderful bit of joy. To walk into the Rubber's office and tell him that Feb 12, 2009 would be my last day was a giggle inducing event. The look on his face was priceless.

Having given my notice, it was time to find an empty store. There were several in the area where we wanted to be but none were absolutely perfect. Still, I had quit my job so I had to pick one and get moving. The least bad one was the right size and location but would need a lot of work on the floor and walls to make it what I wanted it to be. We had met with the owners and set a price and were only a Saturday and Sunday away from signing up.

This is the first time “Fate” intervened in our little story. My wife is often late. I tell you this because she was late that Sunday-before-the-signing-of-the-lease morning and took a cab to work instead of the subway. Because this was 6:00 am on a Sunday morning, the cabbie took her across Danforth Ave instead of the regular route. Once she got to work she called me and said: “Bunny, (she calls me bunny a lot) why are we not looking at the huge store with the hardwood floors and the great lighting right beside Moss (her favourite Danforth store & a destination shop for Eastenders)?” My reply was, “What are you talking about? That store is a Dress shop!” Well, apparently, I was wrong.

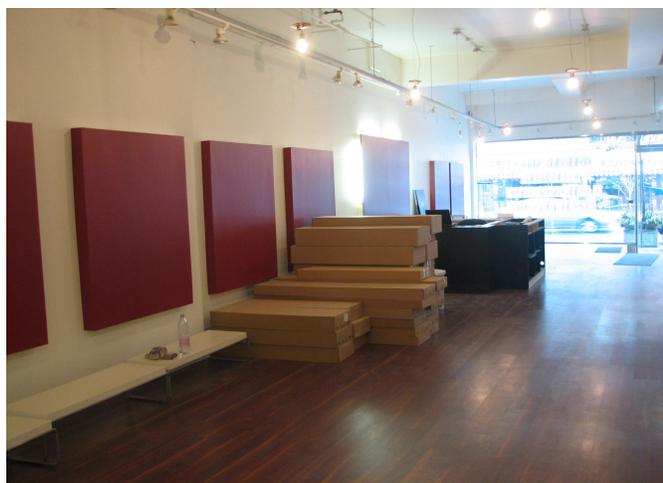


We met that afternoon down on the Danforth and peered into the coolest looking shop we had seen to date. It was huge. It was also in excellent shape. Great floors and walls. Great lighting and a MASSIVE 13 x 12 foot window. On the north side (sunshine) and right beside MOSS & IQ Living, two very high end shops which would be great for business.

There was a phone number in the window so we gave them a call to set an appointment and they said, we can be there in 5 mins. So we took a look and fell in love and braced for the price. Turns out, it was nearly the same as the almost place but with MUCH less work to do to get it ready. We were in!

It turns out that my last day at work, Feb 12, 2009, was also the day they gave us the keys. I had a Bookstore!

Well, actually, I had an empty store with huge florescent pink squares on the wall which we quickly painted Oxblood!



Now we needed a name. In all those years that the store only existed in my head, I wanted to call it ReRead, (pronounced ReReed) but my lovely wife said: “But it can also be pronounced ReRed and that is just confusing.” So, to avoid confusion and with a tip of the hat to years reading memos Re: Marketing or Re: How I am about to make your world a total mess or Re: Well you get the idea. I decided to use Re: Reading (to this day, the only person who does NOT like that name is Joanne). Note to future namers of businesses: If you put a colon in your name or use a not common usage, Google finds you faster! “Christopher's Bookshelf” (my wife's choice) would have been lost in the sea of Christ... stuff on the interwebs)

Now on the day we were given the keys, the landlord offered to give up some large paper rolls to cover the windows with. I said: “Why would want to do that?” So instead, I picked a date in my head of April 4, 2009 to open the store and put a HUGE sign in the window saying “Coming Soon! Re: Reading a Used Bookstore. Opens April 4th!”



Now it is Feb 13th and I have set an open date just 6 weeks away. Time to build the store! (Side note, since we figured that I would be working at the store alone for the first 12 months at least with no vacation, we took one of those 6 weeks and went to Cozumel!)

After a few trips to IKEA for ideas, the bookshelves started to arrive and the construction of the store began. I knew I could build it all in 5 weeks because we had started in good shape. The only real construction (or de-construction) we needed to do was change the dressing rooms from the dress shop into usable space. A few family members and a sawsall later and we were good to go. All we needed were the books.

This is the second time “Fate” reared its wonderful head! I have an Aunt who is in her late 50s. In Feb 09, she got her first ever computer. Then she signed onto Facebook and started friending all her relatives including me. In the first week of March, I get a message from her saying “Thought you would be interested: 'Used bookstore going out of business, all inventory for sale' which she had found on the Petawawa PennyPinchers website.

I called the number and next thing I know, I am buying 15,621 books. All I need to do is go get them! Can anyone say Road Trip! With a friend's help we went up and grabbed them and brought them back to the store! The really amazing thing is that they were all priced and sorted into boxes by category so all we had to do was unpack them onto our shelves! Instant store!

Remember that part when I didn't cover the window? Best idea I ever had! Not only were people

peering into the store to see what we were up to but I could see who my customers were going to be. Namely, families with strollers and a slew of dog owners out for their walk. This resulted in a sign in the window saying dogs were welcome and my designing my aisles so that even a double-wide stroller could make it to the back of the store. Know your customers!

So needless to say we opened on April 4th, 2009 and to this day it is still our best revenue day (you think six weeks of anticipation while they watched us build the store helped? Me too!)



Things were not perfect in the store that first day but they were pretty good. We had all the shelves filled and while the alphabetization was not perfect, we had the As with the As and the Zs with the Zs. How do I know the alphabet was not perfect you ask? Well, after purchasing a few books a young man said: "You know your Sci-Fi section is a bit of a mess right?" To which I replied: "Yes, we sort of ran

out of time last night.” To which he replied: “Do you mind if I fix it up for you?” “Knock yourself out.” I replied and he did. He spent an hour alphabetizing the SF section and also staying out of the way of customers. He came back a few days later and asked if he could volunteer in the store. “Ummm, yes!”

After a few weeks volunteering, we moved to a “I will work for books” model, Two paperbacks per hour. Then John (that was his name) came to me and said: “You have run out of books that I need for my collection.” By this time the store was doing better than I could have ever dreamed and instead of waiting 12 months to add staff to the mix, John started with me at the end of May 2009.

It turns out that he lived in the neighbourhood and when he saw my sign go up in February, he had gone home to his partner and said: “A used bookstore is opening on the Danforth and I am going to get a job there!” And so he did.

Many things have happened in the 3+ years we have been open, an article in the Toronto Star on the front page of their Business Section, many online reviews and winning Critic's Pick for Best Bookstore in Toronto from NOW Magazine (not best used bookstore, BEST BOOKSTORE).

We have had 6 staff in 3 years and have won two more awards as well as being rewarded with many regular customers. One of the neatest things to happen in recent months was to be included with 3 quotes in the North American version of Weird Things Customers Say in Bookstores. Thanks Jen.

My favourite author Robert A. Heinlein once wrote: “Happiness lies in being privileged to work hard for long hours in doing whatever you think is worth doing.”

He was right.

Christopher Sheedy

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