

Personal service is key to survival for small-town bookstores

Booksellers emphasize specialty offerings and knowledge of customer interests to compete with big-box stores

by SUSAN WEINSTEIN
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Good bookstores used to be tucked away in cities like Toronto, full of fascinating and unusual books, with atmospheres that reflected the personality of the owner. These days, as warehouse-like box and chain stores dominate in urban areas, excellent old-fashioned bookshops are surviving in rural locations like Brighton, Campbellford and Grafton.

Today's independent booksellers emphasize knowledgeable, personal service as the key to competing with the superior buying power of the mega-stores.

"I don't think there is a way to compete against the box stores on price. They buy in such volume they get better discounts than smaller stores," says Janis Attard,

owner of St. John's Books in Grafton.

How then do they survive?

Says Attard, "You'll never get rich, selling books. I've always heard that from independent bookstore owners. I think everyone who does it, does it because they love books! Or, they'd love to be able to offer the public a specialised gardening bookstore, or literature, or women's issues. That's what's happening to some of the independent bookdealers. They're becoming more specialised."

St. John's focuses on home-oriented books. "Grafton is sort of an antique-specialised area, so antique books are something we're asked for a lot. Gardening has always been probably my number one seller. And cooking, because baby-

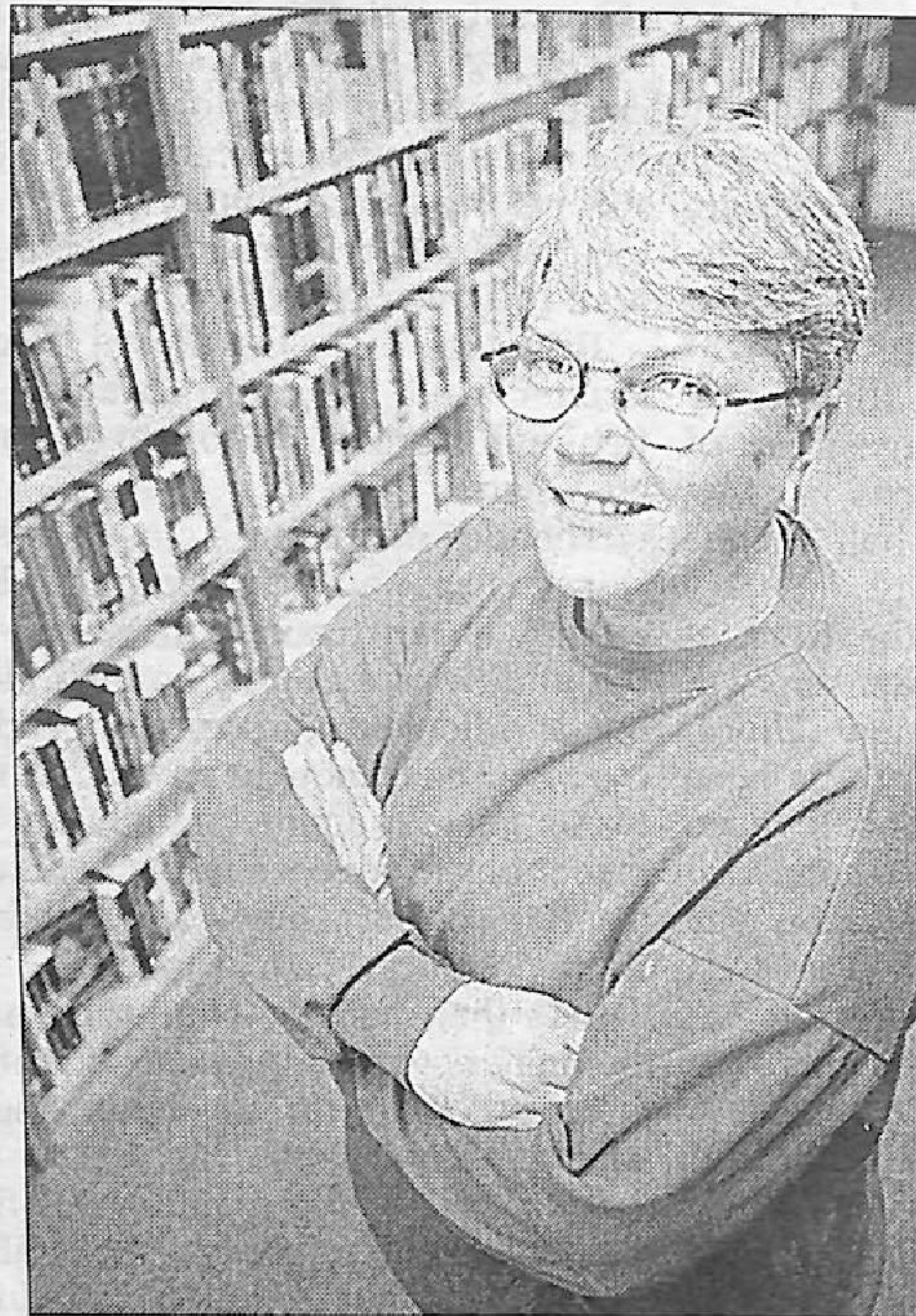
boomers are putting their money into where they're living."

Mia Woodburn of Lighthouse Books in Brighton describes her store as a general bookstore. "I have a very good, high-end children's section. I look for good non-fiction books, birding and nature books; and gardening is a big thing. I try to provide a lot of Canadian writers, both in children's and in adults' fiction. And anything that has a local hook. A lot of visitors to the area like something that's got local flavour."

She points as well to a different specialty. "What I try to do is to provide a very personalised and individualised service. I know my customers! When I'm making purchases for the store, I know so-and-so would like those books, or that's the kind of stuff that the mystery-writer group would find interesting. I can often help them pick out good books for other people too; gifts and things like that. All my regular customers I tend to know by name, and I know their interests. They don't get that in the big box stores."

Attard agrees. "A box store, not quite sure who their customer is, isn't going to be buying for Mrs. Jones down the street! But independents will be!"

Nancy Coulter of Coulter's Book Shop in Campbellford has a similar attitude. "My



Ernst Kuglin photo

partner Peter Wilson and I give personal service. I would do it no matter where I was. That's just how we are here. It's my philosophy. I have a vested interest in making sure people are comfortable and happy when they're here. You make sure you give it your best!

Coulter's too is a general bookstore with a friendly feel. "You have to fight the dog for the chair, but you're welcome to sit in it! Or sit in

the church pew and talk to me. It's that kind of store. There are always different people in just to say hello. People come in to talk!"

Being in a small town doesn't limit Coulter's selection. "I want to stock a lot of everything. I often get the comment, 'I'm surprised I found this book in a small town.' And I think, 'Why wouldn't you find it in a small town!' Just because I'm in a small town doesn't

mean I can't have a good science section, or a great biography section, or whatever section. I do something in every section!"

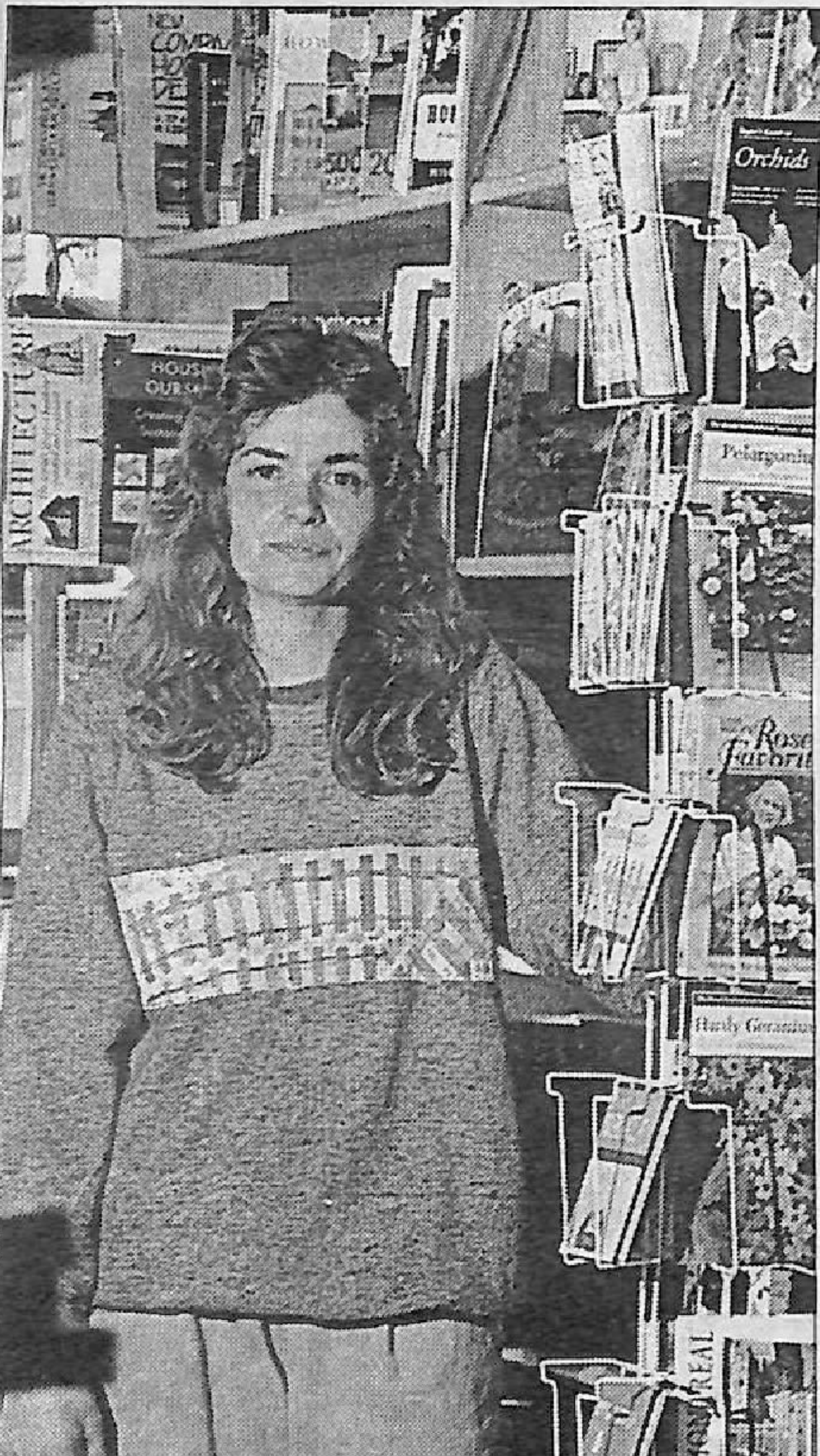
Independent booksellers are deeply motivated to promote Canadian writing. As Coulter says, "I support Canadian authors the most I can! Canadian poets, Canadian writers. If it's a first-time Canadian author being published, I will order copies of it."

"I read a lot of Canadian fiction myself," says Woodburn. "People get to know that you have similar tastes to them. If you're excited about a book, then they'll probably like it too."

"The big box stores don't get to pick what's going to be in there. It's all done centrally! I like to be able to pick a book just because it appeals to me."

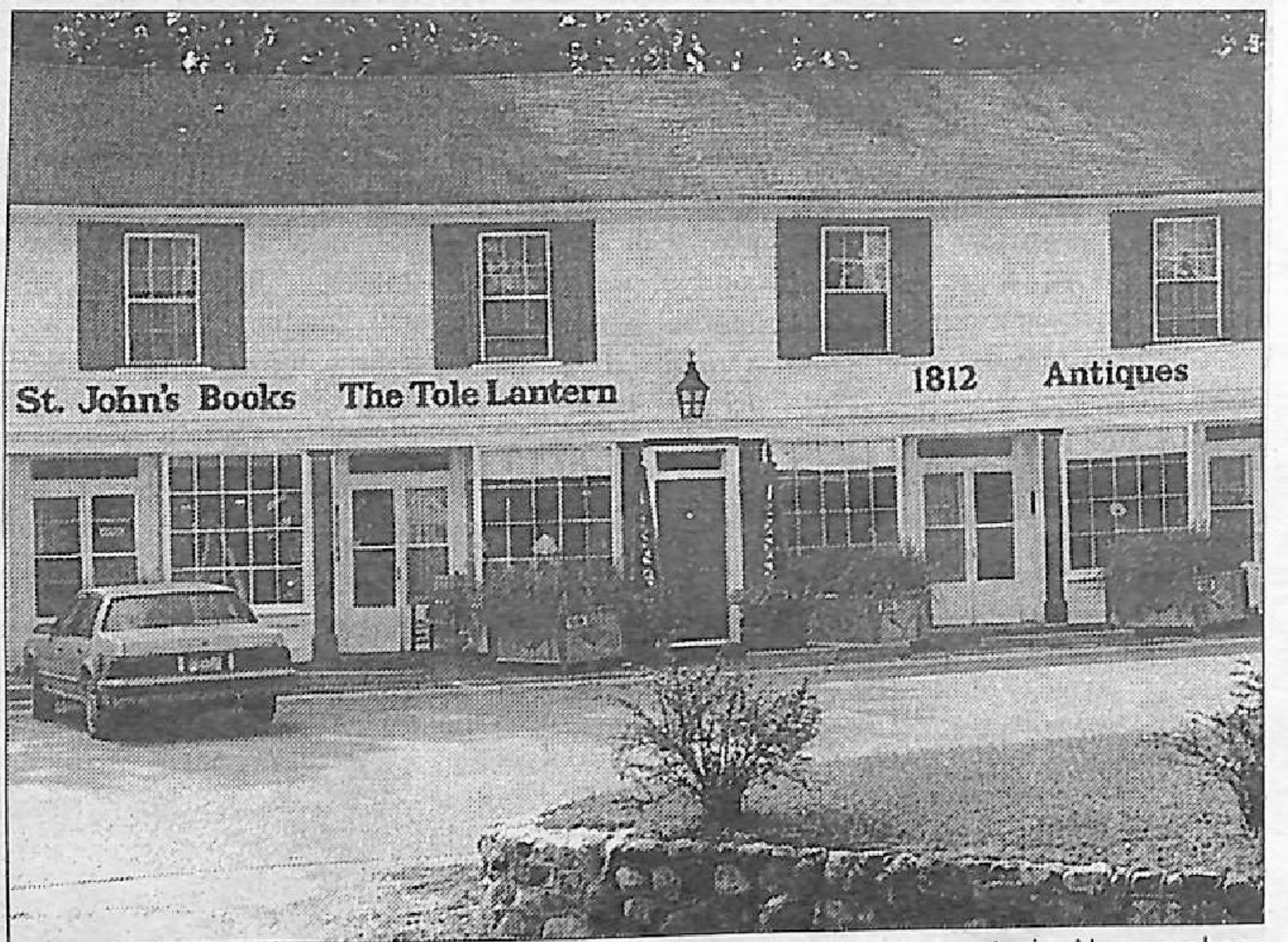
They all agree that esoteric, small-market and Canadian books don't serve the interests of profit-driven box and chain stores committed to quick turnover. On the other hand, independents see strength in promoting these same books.

Special-order is another service they all offer. Woodburn explains the advantage: "I can usually do special-ordering fairly quickly, whereas a lot of the big stores order on a set schedule, so it might be months before you get the book."



Michel Proulx photo

Catering to Readers
Top, Mia Woodburn of Lighthouse Books in Brighton. Left, Nancy Coulter of Coulter's Bookstore in Campbellford. Right, St. John's Books in Grafton.



Janice Newson photo