

*OUR BOOKSTORE
REGISTER:*

*A DIP INTO
CHARLOTTETOWN'S
READING WELL*

by
Joseph Sherman



This item was almost left unwritten. As recently as last May, Louise Vergnano, the proprietor of The Reading Well, Charlottetown's sole indie bookstore of consequence, spoke dolefully of closing her doors by fall. Business wasn't sustaining.

It didn't help her frame of mind that, during a late-winter trip to Italy and France, she'd noted how even the smallest bookstores teemed with customers. PEI doesn't make for such heavy traffic, even in touristed June-September, and TRW has to compete with an Indigo outlet and a small regional chain. In fact, even though downtown Charlottetown can boast two used bookstores within several storefronts of one another, Louise's emporium now also sells more used books than new.

TRW's Water Street location is the third such since 1997 when the bookstore opened in a heritage building two blocks over on Great George Street. Louise was one of four co-owners; she bought out her colleagues in 2002 (one of them, Heather Stewart, still works with her). After trying out two more mid-town locations, both on more central University Avenue, TRW moved to its present spot – as far off the beaten walking track as any store can be in lower Charlottetown. Still, it's opposite the largest hotel and just around the corner from the city's most venerable health food outlet, so you'd think, wouldn't you...?

But TRW's preferred stock in trade may be its commercial weakness. Louise, a former schoolteacher, offers the best selection of books by PEI authors anywhere, including an impressive backlist. This, plus her readiness to give a reading to any experienced or burgeoning writer who asks nicely, has endeared her to the literary community. Even writers from 'away' have

had a crack at a reading opportunity. The space is small and only a dozen bodies make an in-store event seem well attended, but that's a good thing. And she has squeezed in up to 31.

A rough count of writers hosted, from here and away, easily hits 30. Some names: Barry Dempster, Lesley Anne Bourne, Allan Briesmaster, Wayson Choy, Leo Furey, David Helwig, Ed Kavanagh, Richard Lemm, Gil McElroy, rob mclennan, Hugh MacDonald, John MacKenzie, Wendy Morton, John Smith, J.J. Steinfeld, Harry Thurston, Michael Winter.

Louise has also been a principal in Saturday Morning Chapbooks, along with David Helwig, Hugh MacDonald and myself, with SMC's poetry collections available exclusively at TRW, on the shelves and through mail-order.

I've lived on PEI for exactly 25 years, and I've always found Islanders to be hospitable to writers and disproportionately supportive of public readings. The local library has been a constant venue for UPEI's Winter's Tales readings, for example. But TRW has become the desired reading venue on PEI. Modest in set-up, reliably run, the little-bookstore-that-still-might remains, dare I say it, a beacon, one that will stay alight a while longer. Louise has announced that she'll remain open for business – inclusive of public readings – for at least another cycle of seasons.