

# The end.

As it prepares for its final chapter, Capitola Book Café reflects on the golden era of books



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL

Some bargains still exist at the Capitola Book Café, but most of the shelves are now empty.

**BASC** By WALLACE BAINE [wbaine@santacruzsentinel.com](mailto:wbaine@santacruzsentinel.com)

CAPITOLA — At this time next week, Santa Cruz County's readers, writers and book lovers will be without the Capitola Book Café for the first time since the Carter administration.

After 34 years in business, the grand mid-county bookstore announced earlier this month that it was permanently closing its doors. On Monday, the Capitola Book Café will host a public wake of sorts, a "Last Bash" featuring wine, food and an open mic for memories and tributes.

And at closing time on Friday, the Book Café will go dark for good.

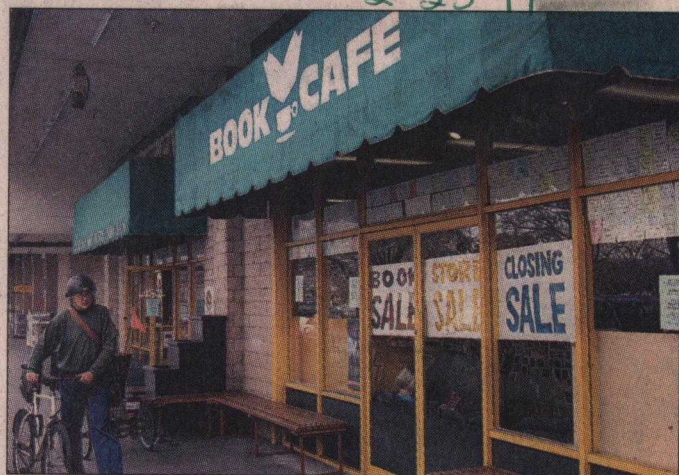
When the Capitola Book Café first opened in 1980, it was still the Mesozoic Era in the book business. No one had ever heard of an e-reader, a big-box store was where you went to buy big boxes, and Amazon was a river in South America. And a bookstore — especially an independently owned bookstore that cultivated its clientele with a shared love for the written word — was a sanctuary for the curious and a meet-

ing place for those terminally smitten with books.

"I remember on Saturday nights when the store used to be stuffed with people, particularly techies wandering around in the computer section, which used to be huge," said former co-owner Gwen Marcum on what was probably the first population to flee to the Internet.

Marcum was one of a quartet of women, known informally in the community as "the Ladies,"

SEE BOOK ON A5



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The Capitola Book Café is closing after 34 years in business.

## IF YOU GO

LAST BASH AT THE CAPITOLA BOOK CAFÉ

WHEN: 6 p.m., Monday

WHERE: Capitola Book Café, 1475 41st Ave., Capitola

COST: Free

DETAILS: [www.capitolabookcafe.com](http://www.capitolabookcafe.com)

'There's always been a great feel to the store. There's so much enthusiasm. They're book people. You can tell it right away.'

KAREN JOY FOWLER,  
Santa Cruz author



## BOOK

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who ran the café from near its beginnings to 2007 when they sold to the current ownership group. The Ladies — Marcum, Marcia Rider, Kathy Kitsuse and Judy Stenovich — presided over the bookstore in its golden era when it began to attract some of the biggest names in the literary world for readings and meet-and-greets.

Looking back, the roster of guest authors brought to the community by the café is worth savoring: Salman Rushdie, Frank McCourt, Garrison Keillor, Jane Smiley, Gary Snyder, Russell Banks, Terry Tempest Williams, Ann Rice, Jonathan Franzen, Pat Conroy, Ann Lamott, Amy Tan, and David Sedaris. It hosted filmmaker Michael Moore, football star Jerry Rice, movie icon Jane Fonda and comedian-turned-senator Al Franken.

"Marcia Rider had to fight a hard battle to get them to send the big authors here," said Marcum, "because they wanted to keep them in San Francisco and the bigger markets."

The café also worked to help local writers get a leg up in the business, including poet Michael Wolfe, mystery writer Laura Crumb and journalist Dan White. The best-selling novelist Laurie R. King did her first public talk/book signing at the café in 1993. The café congratulated her for winning the Edgar Award on its large marquee out front.

"That was long before anyone was even aware that I was writing," King said. "They taught me how to give an event. They nurtured me



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**Capitola Book Café manager Jill Rose works the counter at the store on Thursday. Rose will begin working at Bookshop Santa Cruz after the Book Café closes.**

as a 'performing artist,' shall we say."

In the two decades since, King has opened almost every one of her book tours in Capitola. The café has also been instrumental in allowing local writers such as James Houston, Geoffrey Dunn, Morton Marcus and Stephen Kessler cultivate a hometown audience.

"They've been tremendously supportive," said Santa Cruz-based novelist Karen Joy Fowler. "There's always been a great feel to the store. There's so much enthusiasm. They're book people. You can tell it right away."

When the café opened, it was still a novel idea to have a café and a bookstore in the same retail space. Santa Cruz property developer George Ow Jr. came up with the idea

of the café, opening the store with partners Larry Chew and Ron Lang. Ow remained the landlord of the building throughout the lifespan of the store and is credited by the current business owners — Wendy Mayer-Lochtefeld and Melinda Powers — for working with them to keep the store open.

"George was a terrific landlord," Marcum said. "To have a book-loving landlord was really a blessing, and George was certainly that."

"I love bookstores and libraries and can chart my life by the bookstores and libraries where I've lived," Ow said. "I loved the Book Café as an owner, a landlord and a customer. I met so many authors there and really got a sense of them, and I met so many other book lov-

ers and got to share books, ideas, life experiences."

Marcum said she remembers reading a New Republic article in the early days of the café speculating on the future of books in digitized form. "I thought that's going to be the end of us one day."

It wasn't until the late 1990s when the existential threats to the Capitola Book Café and all independently owned bookstores began to emerge — the Internet, big-box retailers such as Borders and Barnes & Noble and, especially, Amazon.com, whose aggressive strategy to gain market share by selling books at or below cost has transformed the book-selling business. The current ownership of the CBC took on these challenges in mid-stride when it came in 2007.

Then came the '08 recession. The owners, in collaboration with Ow, searched for any solution to remain open, even applying to operate as a nonprofit. Nothing worked.

On Feb. 3, Mayer-Lochtefeld and Powers sent out a letter to CBC customer

base: "We're sorry beyond words that we couldn't keep Capitola Book Café open for generations to come. We gave it our all, and then some."

George Ow, the only constant in the long life of the Book Café, urged people to support the remaining bookstores in the county — Bookshop Santa Cruz, Logos and Crossroads in Watsonville. "I want to thank the people who own and operate these businesses for fighting the good fight and staying open for people like me, for all of us."

King said that she feels bookstores are in for an upswing in coming years as readers begin to rediscover them and as they work out new models for staying in business. "I can't help feeling as a book buyer, which I was long before I was a book writer, that bookstores perform a necessary part of the ecology of the literary world. Without a bookstore, it's difficult for those who love books to find a focus. That is what the Book Café has been over the years. I can look at a book and half the time I can tell you exactly what bookstore I bought it in, and many of those have been in Capitola."