



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Workers Roger Mann and Louise Shimwell try get Super Crown ready for its opening today.

Booksellers square off

Crown Books goes head to head with Bookshop Santa Cruz

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Pacific Avenue
SANTA CRUZ — The line has been drawn in the battle of the bookstores, and Pacific Avenue is it.

On one side, there's Bookshop Santa Cruz, an independent, longtime bookstore so highly regarded by some for its offbeat collection that it's beyond being a local institution. It's a lifestyle.

On the other side, about 75 steps away but separated by a cultural divide as deep as the San Andreas fault, there's Super Crown Books.

The Crown store, which was scheduled to open today, is the latest in the nationwide chain of 158 stores. The grand opening is Saturday. Crown brags that it offers bestsellers at the best discounts. At Crown, money talks and they're betting that is what will buy loyal customers.

But Neal Coonerty, owner of Bookshop Santa Cruz, regards the opening as another bullet deliberately fired to kill his independent bookstore, a market strategy he contends Crown is testing in Santa Cruz.

"There's a big fight here, and Santa Cruz may have to make its choice," he warned.

Crown manager Paul Johnson responds with a shrug. He intends to ignore the bookstore battle and concentrate on selling.

"You know, any conflict can only be maintained when both parties get involved," he said.

If people boycott his bestsellers, Johnson said, "That would be their own personal decision. My own view is that we're going to provide a good service and sell lots of books whether they protest or not."

Coonerty's fight with Crown goes back a decade — when he filed an anti-trust action against Crown and Crown responded with a \$10 million lawsuit against him personally and another against his store.

When Crown decided to come to Santa Cruz, Coonerty said the corporation

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— *Neal Coonerty,*
Bookshop Santa Cruz

had deliberately targeted him.

He tried to block Crown's corporate sign from being as large or brightly lit as Crown wanted. Crown maintained the fight was about competition, not the sign.

Crown got its sign, but also told Coonerty that Crown would "crush" his business in a year's time, according to Coonerty.

He issued a warning of his own to Crown representatives.

"Remember. You were forewarned, so no whining in the future if Crown has a future," Coonerty said.

For the past several months, Coonerty has instructed customers on the shortcomings of chains, particularly in downtown.

"Their motto is the lowest bookstore prices in town, but I think there may be too high a cost for those low prices. The cost is restricting selection ... and a myriad of other issues," Coonerty said.

"It's starting to get to the point where chains are being favored" over locally owned, independent businesses, he said.

Coonerty has responded to Crown's threat by offering his own discount of

25 percent on The New York Times hardcover bestsellers and 20 percent on paperback bestsellers.

Crown can still top that with the company's standard 40 percent discount on hardcover bestsellers and 25 percent discount on paperback bestsellers.

However, if Kathleen Burnham of Felton is typical, Coonerty need not worry. Burnham, shopping at Coonerty's bookstore Wednesday, doesn't intend to abandon the old oak table displays and wingback chairs in Bookshop Santa Cruz for the long straight aisles at Crown.

"It's not just a business transaction. It's a whole way of life I respond to. I end up paying more, but I enjoy where I shop," Burnham said.

Another customer, Steve Grossman is just as adamant. The short distance to Crown is too far for him.

"I find nothing about Crown that is commendable except their bigness," Grossman said. Bigness, he maintains, is a social illness.

Service Employees International Union, AFL-CIO, is going to greet Crown with a protest scheduled to accompany Saturday's grand opening.

"Our intention is not to aid or abet Neal Coonerty," said union representative Tim McCormick. "It's to protest the continuing influx of these low-wage, no benefit jobs. Bookshop Santa Cruz is another low-pay employer."

Despite the furor, Johnson predicts that customers will respond to Crown's prices.

Some 35,000 titles — between 50,000 and 60,000 books — are stacked and ready to be sold in the 13,000-square-foot plus bookstore.

The smell of new carpet and wood lingers over the railroad-straight aisles.

"I am concerned," Johnson said, "but I think the best way to address the situation is to get open, do business, and be consistent."

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