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December 2012

# SoHo Life

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## BEHIND THE BOOKS

**Sarah McNally: How She Created McNally Jackson**

# McNally Jackson and the Alchemy of Bookselling

Sarah McNally is the heart and soul of the largest independent bookstore in New York City, and is invested in her readers.

By Yukie Ohta Photos by Yvonne Brooks

**S**arah McNally is a matchmaker. But please do not go to her for dating advice. McNally matches readers with books the old-fashioned way, by placing them in your hands. She carefully and thoughtfully curates the books sold in her independent bookstore, McNally Jackson, at 52 Prince St., just east of Lafayette. Brimming with enthusiasm, the 37-year-old McNally reigns over her modest bookselling empire with an almost maternal concern for her patrons. She has made it her goal to make sure their curiosity and intellect are nourished and comforted by making available an array of hand-picked titles in a pleasant, airy environment conducive to both contemplation and interaction.

McNally grew up in Winnipeg, Canada, where her parents run the McNally Robinson chain of bookstores. Books may be in her blood, but it was certainly not a given that McNally would one day become a bookseller. In her school days, she was a restless soul. She bought a one-way ticket to Africa and traveled around the continent and also in Europe. It was not until 1999 that she came to New York City to work in publishing.

A few years later, while working at a trade show, she realized how distanced from readers she was as an editor. She decided to close the gap by opening an independent bookstore in downtown Manhattan in 2004, just when internet bookselling was on the rise and beginning to stamp out brick and mortar stores. Everyone told her it was crazy to open on the east side of Broadway, back when NoLiTa was not a destination neighborhood, but she felt that there was an independent spirit over where she is, much more so than in the heart of SoHo where chain stores have taken over.

What is the secret to McNally Jackson's success at a time when bookstores, and even books, are falling by the wayside in the electronic age? McNally cannot put her finger on it, but she credits it to alchemy—the interaction of people and place and books, something that you cannot duplicate online. “I leave the office to get a cup of tea and I talk to two strangers about



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Although she manages every detail of the store, McNally has surrounded herself with an intelligent, talented staff so that she can concentrate on the things she loves to do the most—book buying and talking to customers.

books on the way. It's so nonstop. It's the ambient background conversation of my life, a conversation about books. Without that there's no point in owning a bookstore. It's wonderful."

McNally is deeply invested in her readers. "I don't want anyone to walk into my bookstore and think they are not smart enough to be our customer," she says. She neither panders to her customers, nor does she place her store in an ivory tower. "I believe that within every great reader there are multitudes of people," she once said. As an example of this belief, she points to her sales of the blockbuster novel *Fifty Shades of*



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*Grey*. Some advised her not to sell it, but she did not listen. She placed the book in an erotica display in the European Fiction section, and not only did she sell thousands of copies of the book, but her sales in international fiction also went up.

***"I don't want anyone to walk into my bookstore and think they are not smart enough to be our customer."***

Her decision to sell the book, however, had nothing to do with how many copies she would sell. McNally believes that books fulfill diverse needs in readers and that familiar tropes, like those found in many best sellers, have a role in everyone's lives. She says of the contemporary, secular reader, such as herself, that "we don't believe in god, but we come back to the experience of ritual and symbol as a place where our souls and hearts are very comfortable and I think there is a whole kind of narrative experience which speaks to that... In a bookstore setting when you are at the cash register, you see people are buying *Fifty Shades* with Colette or Dickens," she explains.

*Continued on next page*

## 5 Books You Can Buy ABOUT SOHO

If you are stopping by the bookstore, here are five books about the history of SoHo and parts of downtown:

- ***Illegal Living: 80 Wooster Street and the Evolution of Soho***. By Roslyn Bernstein and Shael Shapiro. Vilnius, Lithuania: Jonas Mekas Foundation, 2010. Softcover, 300 pages, \$44.95.
- ***112 Greene Street: The Early Years (1970-1974)***. By Jessamyn Fiore, and Louise Sørensen. Santa Fe, New Mexico: Radius Books, 2012. Softcover, 192 pages, \$50.00.
- ***Soho: The Rise and Fall of an Artists' Colony***. By Richard Kostelanetz. New York: Routledge, 2003. Hardcover, 256 pages, \$37.95.
- ***Pioneers of the Downtown Scene, New York 1970s***. By Laurie Anderson, Trisha Brown, Gordon Matta-Clark and Lydia Yee. Prestel: New York, 2011. Hardcover, 240 pages \$49.95.
- ***The Downtown Book: The New York Art Scene, 1974-1984***. Edited by Marvin J. Taylor. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006. Softcover, 208 pages, \$37.50.

Continued from previous page

"And that's why I can be a buyer. I have my heart open to many different readers inside of myself. If something appeals to any part of myself I trust that instinct perfectly, whereas I think a lot of buyers buy cynically."

When opening her store, McNally heeded the advice she got from her father, who told her, "Open something big enough so that it is not completely dependent on your labor." Wise words from a veteran bookseller. He meant that if a store is too small to have a manager, you become a slave to your business and do not have a chance to think or even take a breath. McNally Jackson currently has 38 people on payroll, giving Sarah the breathing room to step back and look at the big picture.

McNally used to work incessantly when the store first opened, but after she had her son, she took a one-year maternity leave and has never resumed the crazy hours since she returned. "It was interesting to me that the less I worked the better the store became," she explains. "The more I delegated and found the true talents of my staff, the store just got better and better and better and continues to get better. Almost the less I do, ..."

***"If something appeals to any part of myself I trust that instinct perfectly, whereas I think a lot of buyers buy cynically."***

Although she manages every detail of the store, McNally has surrounded herself with an intelligent, talented staff so that she can concentrate on the things she loves to do the most—book buying and talking to customers. And also contemplating her ceiling. After our interview, she was to have lunch with the architects who designed her café. She is thinking of screening silhouettes of famous scenes from literature around its periphery, whose characters would interact with each other. A fluid visual dance of fictional personages would float above the café's wallpaper that is made up entirely of pages of books from her own book collection.

When asked how much the café and the bookstore's public events add to the bottom line, she says she cannot quantify such a thing. "When I look at the business section of *The New York Times* and I read about how they make business decisions at Best Buy or Barnes & Noble, it is so much about dollars per item, and I think that is so short term." She looks at the store holistically, considering its aura rather than its cash register.

During our interview, one of the bookstore's regular patrons



McNally is an avid reader. She leads the bookstore's international fiction reading group and is a member of a Proust reading group. She is also often present at the bookstore's numerous book talks and signings that have made McNally Jackson the cultural hub of the neighborhood.

walked by and jokingly asked if we were having a board meeting. McNally replied, "You know we don't have a board. The board is all the voices in my head." Indeed, there are traces of McNally's ideas throughout the store. It is very welcoming—the furniture is comfortable, inviting shoppers to linger and relax. In front of the history section, here is a long wooden table with benches, and just beside it is a reading chair and ottoman. The book displays scattered throughout the store all contain personal touches, a piece of fabric, a handwritten card, a bouquet of flowers. The children's section is roomy, with plenty of space to read, play, or just browse.

There is no WiFi at McNally Jackson, which is one way the store encourages people to read the printed word. Yet this does not mean that the store does not embrace technology. Just inside the entrance, sits an enormous contraption next to the café. It is an Espresso Book Machine that can print, bind, and trim affordable, library-quality paperbacks in minutes. The machine is connected to a network of nearly 8 million titles, including titles from the public domain, small publishers and university presses, as well as out of print and backlist titles from larger publishers. It also enables authors to self-publish their work. This innovation marries the new age of digital technology with the old world tradition of bookbinding, bringing the physical book into the future at a time when many are declaring its death. Displayed around the machine are copies of the books the machine has printed, both self-published and network titles.

Author Yukie Ohta blogs about the  
**'70s** history of SoHo since  
the '70s at The Soho  
Memory Project  
(sohomemory.com)



McNally is not only a bookseller, she is an avid reader. She leads the bookstore's international fiction reading group and is a member of a Proust reading group. She is also often present at the bookstore's numerous book talks and signings that have made McNally Jackson the cultural hub of the neighborhood. Their roster is a who's who list of writers, editors, and critics that more often than not attracts a standing-room-only crowd. These events, along with the reading groups, storytimes for children, and even puppet shows, make it so much more than just a bookstore. It verges on being what Ray Oldenburg termed a "third place," where one goes to spend time as a bridge between home and work life, a place that facilitates creative interaction among people.

***There is no WiFi at McNally Jackson. Yet this does not mean that the store does not embrace technology.***

McNally is thus truly a matchmaker. Through her bookstore, she not only unites reader and book, she brings people together to discuss literature, ideas, and fairy tales. She clearly does this all from the heart and not with an eye on some bottom line, though she is undeniably an astute businesswoman. "I always look for sincerity," she explains. "I try to do everything in this store with sincerity, and even passion!" Sincerity and business acumen—now there's a perfect match.

# Espresso's Creator

New York City publishing veteran Jason Epstein is the founder of the Espresso Book Machine at McNally Jackson.

## Print Books in Mere Minutes

The Espresso Book Machine is the brainchild of Jason Epstein, veteran of the New York publishing world. The machine allows booksellers to print books in mere minutes, thereby giving them the ability to offer an almost endless backlist without the burden of having to order and store the titles. It also enables authors to self-publish their work and to permission their book to the Espresso network so that it can be sold at any Espresso location. This new innovation marries the new age of digital technology with the old world tradition of bookbinding, thus bringing the physical book into the future at a time when many are declaring its death.

Throughout his career, Epstein has had the uncanny ability to see the future of books and has thus been on the cutting edge of the "next big thing" in publishing more than once. The Espresso Book Machine is only the latest incarnation of his vision.

As a young editor at Doubleday in the early 1950s, Epstein initiated the "paperback revolution," introducing this highly-portable, highly-profitable format to the world. During the newspaper strike in the 1960s, he became co-founder of *The New York Review of Books*, and then in the early-1980s, after many tireless years of lobbying, he launched The Library of America, which reprints classic American texts. Shortly after that, due to his concern over the decline of backlist sales, he launched the *Reader's Catalog*, a list of 40,000 backlist titles available via telephone order. The *Reader's Catalog* was the precursor to online bookselling. In 2002, he wrote *Book Business: Publishing Past, Present, and Future*, published by W.W. Norton.

Although Epstein comes from the old tradition of book publishing, he is more than cautiously optimistic about the digital age. Freed of the cumbersome tasks of warehousing and distribution, he sees that publishers, with the development of a reliable rights management system, will be free to concentrate on editorial concerns and worldwide distribution. He is excited by the fact that e-books and the internet will lift the limitations of the printed book, but still sees a future for printed bound volumes.

## How to Reach McNally Jackson Books

**Address:** 52 Prince St., (between Lafayette and Mulberry)

**Contact:** 212-274-1160; [mcnallyjackson.com](http://mcnallyjackson.com)

# Schools

## Proposed New Districts

By Yukie Ohta

The Department of Education presented changes to the public elementary school zones that span SoHo, Chinatown, Greenwich Village and Chelsea at the District 2 Community Education Council Zoning Committee meeting in early October. The changes have been proposed as a way of easing overcrowding in P.S. 3 The Charrette School on Hudson Street and P.S. 41 The Greenwich Village School on West 11th Street by redirecting students to P.S. 11 The William T. Harris School on West 21 Street and to a new school slated to open in 2014 at 590 Sixth Avenue, the former site of the Foundling Hospital. The SoHo area is currently divided into two zones, one that is served by P.S. 130 The Hernando de Soto School on Baxter Street, and one that is served by P.S. 3 and P.S. 41.



The proposed changes will address overcrowding at P.S. 3, The Charrette School on Hudson Street (pictured above).  
Nurilyn Holstein

## The Plan's Opposition

Under the plan, the current zone that is shared by P.S. 3 and P.S. 41 would be split, and residents of SoHo and Greenwich Village would no longer be able to choose the school they prefer. Residents have long had a choice between the two schools, which are markedly different in their educational philosophies though their curricula are the same, and thus this part of the plan has come up against some opposition. The plan would also reduce the size of the zone for P.S. 130 slightly, but will not change enrollment there, according to the DOE. Consequently, some SoHo residents living on Mercer Street who are currently in the zone for P.S. 130 will shift into the P.S. 3 zone.

## The Plan's Timeline

There will be plenty of time for families to prepare for these changes. The CEC will likely approve the plan by the end of this year, well in advance of the fall 2014 opening of the new school on Sixth Avenue that will allow these changes to take effect. In addition, if a student has an older sibling at one of these schools, the younger sibling will be allowed to attend the same school, even if the new plan moves them into a different zone.

Yukie Ohta is author of the SoHo Memory Project. See her blog at [sohomemory.com](http://sohomemory.com)



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