

Bienville Books Celebrates 10th Anniversary

On September 3, 2002, Bienville Books opened its doors at 109 Dauphin Street, selling new and used books, art and furnishings. Back then, owner Russ Adams felt that the community still remembered earlier bookstores such as The Haunted Book Shop and Quality Books, and he hoped that another bookstore located downtown would 'seed' the area and draw more businesses into the many vacant buildings there. Since then, Adams has seen downtown Mobile bloom with new hotels, shops and restaurants, but he has also encountered some of the difficulties that face a small business owner.

In that decade, Bienville Books has grown and survived three hurricanes as well as the devastating blow of the BP oil spill to area tourism. "In fact," says Adams, "after the oil spill, our business actually increased because of the influx of spill-related personnel who took over downtown hotels and business properties. It wasn't until fall, when they moved out, that we realized business was headed downhill." Last year Adams applied for oil spill relief money and the store received an infusion of cash that helped it to keep going.

But that was not the first time Adams had to resort to creative methods to keep the store afloat. He has sold books on the internet site biblio.com for as much as \$39,000 and he still combs area stores, estates and yard sales for elusive treasures such as one recent sale, that of an Andy Warhol book with the artist's inscription to an actress from one of his films, accompanied by a sketch of a soup can.

Adams' background as an artist has also helped him acquire art to sell in the store. The store's walls sport dozens of prints, original paintings and posters for sale to the many locals and out-of-town guests visiting Mobile. He has reprinted a scarce copy of T. C. deLeon's 1890 booklet "Creole Carnivals," scanning the pages and eliminating the blemishes that accumulated over time. He has also made postcards of Mardi Gras and other local scenes which he sells in the store and wholesales to other businesses in town. Finally, using what he terms "lateral creativity," Adams adapted reading-related ideas he has seen, using them to make the store's "Reading Is Sexy" book bags and T-shirts that proclaim "I read dead people" on the back, with The Haunted Book Loft logo on the front.

The Haunted Book Loft is the name of the upstairs space, renovated in 2008 in time to welcome the Southeast Independent Booksellers Association conference to town. Adams named it both to honor The Haunted Book Shop, which closed in 1991 after fifty years of business, and also to distinguish the space as the home of one of the Southeast's best collections of horror and science fiction/fantasy books. "I also intended for it to be an interactive tourist attraction, with special effects like haunted mirrors, bookshelves, plants, and even an old telephone housing a theremin." Adams grinned. "But my employees got annoyed by the people coming in just to play with the special effects, so I had to disconnect most of them."

Russ Adams' father, N. Q. Adams, was half owner of the building and adjacent storefronts when Russ started the bookstore. He jokes that running the bookstore is 'community service' to repay the city for his years spent in New York City and Los Angeles, pursuing his vocation in the publishing industry and his attempts to break into screenwriting. "My father did so much for Mobile, serving on various non-profit boards and helping revive Bienville Square. I felt I owed the city for my opportunities and, since the space had been vacant for so long, I hoped a bookstore would be possible." Now Adams owns the buildings and has embarked on the last phase of renovation — creating a 1600-square-foot commercial space above the two adjacent restaurants. He wanted to make it a living space but city building code restrictions prevent that at this time.

With the buildings at 105, 107, 109 and 111 Dauphin Street housing five businesses, Adams regards the property as "... a life support system for the bookstore. It's a precarious business and I don't intend to run it forever. But I hope that someone else with a love of books might appreciate this setup and take over for me someday."