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HOW QUEER BOOKSHOPS CHANGED THE WORLD

A.J. WEST



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280
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2026

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Giovanni's Room

PHILADELPHIA

1973—still open

*'I often wonder what I'd do if there
weren't any books in the world.'*

JAMES BALDWIN

IN 1973, GAY ACTIVISTS TOM WILSON WEINBERG, BERN Boyle and Dan Sherbo decided to open a lesbian and gay bookstore. Unaware of the Adonis Bookstore in San Francisco, Glad Day Bookshop in Toronto or Lambda Rising in Washington, the three men were primarily inspired by the Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop in New York. It was closer to them geographically and philosophically. Like Craig Rodwell, they had all the qualifications they needed to be fearless young radicals: determination, political passion, hunger for change, no business plan, no money and no experience. Enthusiasm, pluck and optimism would have to do.

They joked about calling their store 'The Well of Loneliness', before deciding on something less bleak. Instead, they turned to James Baldwin and his 1956 groundbreaking novel, *Giovanni's Room*. They were ready to go.

Almost. Tom, Bern and Dan had a name, yes, but no actual shop, and the process of finding one would prove humiliating. 'For a while, we thought we'd just say we're opening a bookstore,' says Weinberg, 'but then we realised the landlord would know what we were doing the second we opened, and they'd be upset. So we were honest, and people thought it would be a porn store or something like that. They couldn't imagine a gay bookstore

selling anything else.' Eventually, they found premises at 232 South Street, Philadelphia, opening their doors on 1 August 1973. The entire street was tabled for demolition if the state went ahead with construction of a new highway running from the Delaware River to the Schuylkill River. The area's uncertain future made rent cheap, creating a 'jumping' bohemian enclave in South Philly. A local chant at the time went: 'South Street, South Street, that's where all the hippies meet.' With a local movie theatre running midnight screenings of *Pink Flamingos* and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, it's where the gays met too. Rent was only \$85 a month and, despite the landlord's hostility, neighbouring businesses welcomed the new bookshop with open arms, stopping by to wish them luck with their new venture.

'The gay community was mostly hidden in 1973 Philadelphia', says Tom. 'And "Gay" was the word used for what is now gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and the rest. I like "queer" better, but that's how it was then. There was a gay church, the Gay Activist Alliance, gay bars and bathhouses. We wanted to add a place that would be wide open for everyone to see it as they walked by.'

As with the Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop and Lambda Rising, they had a big plate-glass window allowing people to peer inside. And many did, though there wasn't much to look at in those early days. The trio needed help finding stock, so they reached out to Craig Rodwell at the Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop as well as the lesbian activist and editor of lesbian magazine *The Ladder*, Barbara Gittings. With book list in hand, the three men started making regular trips to New York, pushing shopping carts up and down the aisles of wholesale bookstores like Bookazine in the West Village. They paid in cash, then raced back to the store, leaving the big city for a less established lesbian and gay scene. There were days when they stared longingly at an undisturbed door. Some customers came in from day one and instantly fell in love with a new experience, but others hovered

outside, then skittered away. As Tom recalls, one man circled the block repeatedly for weeks before finally plucking up the courage to dash in when nobody was looking:

He bought a book though! He came back a few days later and became a regular customer and friend. Fifty years later, a few people still come up to me and say that Giovanni's Room was the first environment where they belonged and felt safe.

Tom, Bern and Dan ran the store for almost two years, hosting poetry readings and discussion groups, but it was hard going. They barely managed to fill the shelves with an inventory of fewer than 100 books, and in September 1974, they sold the business to their friend, Pat Hill, for \$500.

An artist, activist and Quaker, Pat escaped her job in the civil service to be a bookseller, saying it was 'like running away with the circus'. At least, financially, it was a high-wire act. There was little money to be made, every cent being ploughed back into the shop. But as a lesbian with a determination to make a change, she wasn't in it for the money. She continued to host events, adding women-only evenings, welcoming live bands for parties and kicking off a series of gatherings for her female friends and customers called 'Wine, Women and Song'.

In the mid-70s, Pat was asked to appear on a gay-themed episode of the *Edie Huggins Show*, a daytime show on WCAU, bringing the gay, lesbian and feminist bookstore to a mainstream audience. It didn't lead to more customers though. Back then, a person could be spotted through the window of Giovanni's Room and get fired the next day.

Tommi Avicolti was one customer who didn't care so much if he was seen. He would go on to become a bookseller at another queer bookstore some 2,500 miles from Philadelphia but his journey there wouldn't start for another ten years. 'Seeing those

books arranged on the shelves changed the way I saw myself and the way I saw bookstores', he says. 'I didn't know it at the time, but it was a moment that would affect the rest of my working life.' We'll return to Tommi in a decade or so but visits like his were helping to bring the previously rundown block of shops back to life. Philadelphia was also experiencing a 'restaurant renaissance' and on Valentine's Day 1975, the Knave of Hearts opened next door, attracting a new crowd to the area. Unfortunately for Pat, the restaurant was successful enough to persuade the landlord it should expand into the South Street premises, threatening to spell the end of Giovanni's Room a second time.

Pat celebrated her fortieth birthday in the store, throwing a champagne party which spilled out onto the street. Around this time, she was expressing her wish to sell Giovanni's Room to new owners so she could move on to something new. One of her guests was Arleen Olshan, who knew Pat from their days of community activism. In the summer of 1976, Arleen bought the business from Pat for \$500, taking the shop on with her friend Ed Hermance, fellow volunteer and treasurer at the Gay Community Center of Philadelphia. Now Giovanni's Room would have a prudent moneyman at the helm, as well as two passionate advocates for the community. With a name, a short customer list and what amounted to an eviction order from the landlord, Arleen and Ed became the first female-male queer bookstore owners. First things first, they managed to find new premises at 1426 Spruce Street, much closer to Philly's business district, and set to work tearing out walls and building bookcases, helped by a gang of volunteers.

Arleen ran the shop full time while Ed kept his job at the University of Pennsylvania library, working during the day then going down to the store in the evenings. Twice, they made the now established trip to the Bookazine wholesaler in New York, paying cash before they realised there was no way they could drive all that way every time they wanted a book. Ed had once

worked as manager of a natural food co-op where he got to know a young guy who happened to have opened a book wholesaler across the Ben Franklin Bridge in Camden, New Jersey. He gave the pair credit, meaning they could sell a book before they had to pay for it. After nine months of careful management, Ed was able to quit his job and join Arleen at Giovanni's Room full time.

One fall, Ed and Arleen were at the Gay Academic Union's national convention in New York City when they took a paltry few books to try and sell, thinking it would be a good chance to introduce themselves to the academic world. That same weekend *Gay American History* was released (by Jonathan Ned Katz, the young author we met in the early days of the Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop), but Ed and Arleen had no clue about it and certainly had no copies to sell. It was the only book people were interested in, and they were about to pack up and head home, feeling a little dejected, when up popped none other than Craig Rodwell carrying a healthy stack of copies. He dropped them on the Giovanni's Room table and told Ed and Arleen to sell them. 'Don't worry,' said Craig, 'pay for them later.'

Other people were less supportive. One day in 1979, Ed heard a voice coming from the hallway and realised there was a woman out there, calling through to him. After some confusion it became clear she was trying to deliver an important message without having to step inside the shop. Ed and Arleen were being evicted. Turns out their landlord hated the idea of a queer bookstore in their building, so they'd sold it to a suburban family who owned parking lots around the city and wanted office space nearby. They only had a three-month notice period and finding the right location proved difficult. For four to six weeks they scavenged about for new premises without any luck; one realtor telling Arleen that her business would attract too many homosexuals to the apartment building. Nobody seemed willing to rent them a storefront, at least not in the downtown district of Philadelphia.

Ed and Arleen had no money to buy their own place, but they were forced to consider the impossible and explore buildings in the very heart of the city. One day, they came upon a cheery-looking corner building in red brick dating back to 1820. The property at 345 South 12th St was going for \$50,000, a considerable but not insurmountable price tag for a business premises in a prime location. Ed and Arleen raised the down payment of \$12,000, with Ed's mother lending them another \$3,000 while a further \$1,000 was borrowed from nine loyal customers, each of whom would be paid back on time with interest. Over 100 volunteers helped them renovate the building, painting walls, fixing floors, installing shelves and putting in a skylight. No other queer bookstore would rely so heavily on volunteers in the decades to come, offering hundreds of helpers the chance to bring the store to life and leave their fingerprints on a small but significant patch of queer history.

Home at last, Giovanni's Room grew in popularity. In the late 1970s and early 80s, it would become an internationally significant phenomenon, its stock ballooning from hundreds of books to tens of thousands.

Around that time, the American publishing industry's first openly gay editors like Michael Denny began to push for more work by LGBT authors and for reprints of discontinued titles, such as those by James Baldwin and Christopher Isherwood. Ed and Arleen did exactly the same, harassing publishing companies to bring older titles back into print. At the American Book Association's annual conference, they'd hand publishers a list of out-of-print books they wanted to sell. Those publishers listened, realising they could make money from the gay and lesbian community and, thanks in no small part to Giovanni's Room, once-mothballed queer titles came back to life.

Soon, Giovanni's Room was being visited by every leading light in queer fiction, from Alan Hollinghurst and Alison Bechdel to

Audre Lorde and Jeanette Winterson, though its most significant visitor was probably its briefest. James Baldwin visited Giovanni's Room (named after his own novel) in 1987, but it was an awkward encounter. He was in town to see rehearsals of his play, *The Amen Corner*, at the Zellerbach Theater, and it seems he'd been cajoled into visiting by his PA. Perhaps cautious of seeming grand, he popped in for a few minutes, completely unannounced. He climbed to the second floor, greeted Ed and offered to sign some books. Having finished with the stock available (Ed would have ordered more if he'd known in advance), he attempted to light a cigarette only to be told the building was non-smoking. So he left, no fanfare. In truth, Baldwin's low-key visit left a positive impression, better than if he'd expected adulation; his humility complemented a store where everyone was treated the same, even if their most celebrated book was painted above the door.

By the 1980s, Giovanni's Room had become a lifeline for a breathtaking network of queer booksellers around the world. Their wholesale business had begun as an effort to offer their customers books published abroad, trading with Gay's the Word, Prinz Eisenherz and Les Mots à la Bouche, but soon it was clear that foreign demand for American books outstripped American demand for British and European titles. To get prices down, Ed set up wholesale accounts with the big LGBT publishers in the US and Giovanni's Room soon became the world's leading distributor of feminist and queer literature, the established wholesalers missing a trick. 'We were satisfied with a low profit margin,' says Ed, 'because it was so much fun establishing contact with booksellers in Europe and the rest of the world.' Ed's often clandestine shipments of American titles supplied clients the world over, including – believe it or not – the Vatican. 'We were the international distributor for Naiad Press, by far the largest publisher of lesbian books', explains Ed, 'and this one letter arrived, and the return address was in Latin from a religious library in the

Vatican. I told them they had to pay in advance, so they ended up sending a cheque.' The order was for *Lesbian Nuns*.

A full client list from the mid-80s, the zenith of Ed's distribution empire, offers a fascinating insight, never published before. Not all of the stores are queer, but they were all stocking queer books:

Athenaeum, Amsterdam
 Biff's, Richmond (Virginia)
 The Bookshop, Sydney
 Broadsheet, Auckland
 A Brother's Touch, Minneapolis
 Bruno Gmuender, Berlin
 Category Six, Denver
 Christopher's Kind, Atlanta
 A Different Light, Los Angeles
 A Different Light, New York
 Dulle Griet, Louvain
 Erlkoenig, Stuttgart
 Exclusive, Cape Town
 Exclusive, Johannesburg
 Exclusive, Westdene
 Feminist, Lilyfield (Sydney)
 Frauenbuchladen, Nuremberg
 Frauenzimmer, Vienna
 Friends Bookstore, Des Moines (Iowa)
 Gaia, Leiden
 Gay Christian Movement, London
 Gay's the Word, London
 Glad Day, Boston
 Glad Day, Toronto
 Gleebooks, Glebe (New South Wales)
 Grass Roots, Manchester

Homologie, Amsterdam
 In Other Words, Plymouth
 Intermale, Amsterdam
 Intervention, Sydney
 Kate Sheppard, Christchurch
 Kvinnobokhandeln, Stockholm
 Lambda Passages, Miami
 Lambda Rising, Washington
 Lammas, Washington
 Lavendelschwert, Cologne
 Lavender Menace, Edinburgh
 Lilith, Berlin
 Lillemor's, Munich
 Lioness Books, Sacramento
 Little Professor, Champaign (Illinois)
 Little Sister's, Vancouver
 Lumen Books, London
 Maennerschwarm, Hamburg
 Juul Moeller, Oslo
 Les Mots à la Bouche, Paris
 Murphy Sisters, Norwood (South Australia)
 John Neal, Greensboro (North Carolina)
 News from Nowhere, Liverpool
 Old Wives' Tales, San Francisco
 Oscar Wilde, New York
 Oslo Bokkafe, Oslo
Outrage! (magazine), Australia
 Papers and Books, Auckland
 Paths Untrodden, New York
 Raymond Port, London
 Prinz Eisenherz, Berlin
 Purple Print, Napier
 Revolt, Hamburg

Rosa Rummet, Stockholm
 Savannah Bay, Utrecht
 Scharf, Bielefeld
 Shrew Women's, Fitzroy (Melbourne)
 Siegessaeule, Berlin
 Silver Moon, London
 Sisterwrite, London
 Snapdragon, Auckland
 Sodom, Munich
 Tempo Ritrovato, Rome
 Unabridged Books, Chicago
 University Bookshop, Auckland
 Volume One, Boise (Idaho)
 Von Heute an, Hamburg
 Vrouwen ... De Feeks, Groningen
 Walt Whitman, San Francisco
 A Woman's Place, Oakland
 A Woman's Place, Portland
 Womanzone, Edinburgh
 Women's Book, Gift ..., Brisbane

A daunting list, and we'll visit those we can. Starting with one queer bookstore that would one day become the biggest LGBTQ+ chain in America. Its origin story takes us back to Jearld Moldenhauer and the heady days following the commune's eviction from the shed.