



BLACK-

OWNED

THE REVOLUTIONARY LIFE

OF THE BLACK BOOKSTORE

CHAR ADAMS

TINY REPARATIONS BOOKS

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2025



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For my father, Charles R. Wilson Jr.

No life is wasted, nor is any life without legacy.

May this book be a part of yours. Rest in peace.

CHAPTER SIX

THE GOLDEN AGE OF BOOKSELLING



Thomas Hamilton (left) and James Fugate (right) inside
Eso Won Books in Inglewood, California, in 1996.

PROTESTERS MADE THEIR WAY THROUGH SOUTH CENTRAL Los Angeles on Thursday, April 30, 1992. They burned buildings and broke into stores; they made sure the country felt their frustration and pent-up anger over rampant police violence in the city. The day before, a jury had acquitted four Los Angeles police

officers in the brutal beating of Rodney King. Gunfire rang out and smoke billowed from fires set throughout the city. This was the breaking point for Black Angelenos. Protesters marched to Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and Western Avenue, delivering their wrath on a mini-mall and torching the Aquarian Bookshop in the process.

Alfred and Bernice Ligon were at home at the time, wondering how their beloved shop would fare in the chaos. Members of a local protest group called Alfred the night before, cautioning him that destruction was on the way and warning him to protect the store however he could. But Alfred, a spiritual man, resolved to leave the store to fate. When they got the call that the Aquarian was on fire, Alfred turned to his wife with acceptance. "There's no need to go down there now. There's nothing we can do," he said. When the smoke cleared and citywide curfews were lifted, Alfred went to what was left of the Aquarian. He shuffled past debris in the street. His eyes wandered over the burned-out businesses and shattered windows of the mini-mall. Only three walls of the Aquarian were left standing. He looked over the charred façade and the remains of some five thousand volumes. He waded through the ashes, searching for anything he could salvage. From a shelf he pulled a socialist magazine, water damaged, but its words still legible. He'd never cared to read it before, but its significance as the last of thousands of books, magazines, periodicals, and more sparked Alfred's intrigue. He took the magazine away with him. A lone memento from the bookshop he'd founded half a century ago.

Just one year earlier, Black Angelenos, authors, artists, and Alfred's students had gathered at the Aquarian for a weekend of celebrations to ring in the store's fiftieth year. The shop buzzed with

loyal customers and friends reflecting on their time at the store and the ways the Lignons and the Aquarian impacted their lives. The couple had experienced more than their fair share of ups and downs as booksellers. But the anniversary was a sweet reminder of the store's longevity, and encouragement that the shop could continue through almost anything. In the weeks before the Aquarian burned, Rosa Parks was at the shop signing books and sharing life stories with wide-eyed customers. The loss of such a literary landmark was great. Alfred didn't dwell on the tragedy for long, though. He tapped into his spiritualism and his own teachings to make sense of the blaze. He was sure that the uprising and the demise of his shop served a larger purpose. The Lignons were almost poetic about the \$300,000 uninsured loss, relying on their metaphysical philosophy to cope. The burning wasn't just some careless destruction, he reasoned, but a sacrifice to a new astrological age.

Alfred saw the end of his store as part of a five-hundred-year cosmic cycle that would allow a phoenix to rise from its ashes. He published his beliefs about the blaze in a newsletter called *Aquarian Phoenix Fire*.

"I realized that these things had to be destroyed to give one an opportunity to move to a higher stage," he resolved. Bernice agreed. "This is the birthing of the Aquarian Age. And birthing ain't easy," she said then.

Those who had studied under Alfred for years and loved the shop understood his approach, but they wouldn't let go of the store so easily. The burned books prompted a response from the community, much like the global support Ed Vaughn's bookstore received during the 1967 summer rebellion. Just two days after the fire, on May 2, Earl Hutchinson, a longtime Aquarian customer

and student of Alfred's, met with other Black folks who loved the store to form the Friends of the Aquarian. They set out to raise the hundreds of thousands of dollars needed to rebuild the store, all while the Lignons continued providing books from their home. Alfred converted a room into a lecture hall so he could continue teaching courses on the metaphysical. The city and the book industry came together to reconstruct the Aquarian. Donations poured in from locals, while mainstream publishers Macmillan and Random House agreed to cancel the Aquarian's debts and donate books to the store. City council members pledged their support for the repair and the American Booksellers Association was among a string of organizations that put up thousands of dollars for the store's reconstruction. Everyone did their part.

It was enough to reopen the store in 1994, but the Aquarian never managed to regain its footing. It closed for good the same year it reopened after Bernice was diagnosed with liver cancer. It was a devastating loss for all who loved the Aquarian, and for Black people in Los Angeles in general. Times had changed since the Lignons first opened the store in the '40s, though. The Aquarian may have been the only bookstore of its kind in the city when it opened in 1941, but, in the '90s, the Los Angeles area had more Black bookstores to meet the community's literary needs. The Aquarian shuttered just as another bookstore boom was sweeping through the US, one that would rival the Black Power era and bring the rise of Eso Won Books.

The '90s marked a time of influence and popularity that Black bookstores hadn't seen since the 1960s and '70s. From 1988 to

1991, the number of books purchased by Black households rose by 26 percent, and Black people spent an estimated \$175 million on books a year. The American Booksellers Association held special sessions on Black bookselling and even started the *African-American Bookselling* newsletter. These changes didn't come out of nowhere. Cultural moments of the era coincided with political ones to make for what headlines called a "boom in books for Blacks." Black people, newly released from Ronald Reagan's clutches, were reacting to the conservative climate and embracing the culture of rebellion that the Reagan era set out to squash. Rap music with Black Power imagery dominated media and gave many young Black people their first taste of figures like Malcolm X and Huey P. Newton. And Spike Lee's 1992 movie *Malcolm X* only fueled the budding political moment. The cultural impact of rap music and Black-centered movies combined with frustrations over policing, efforts to end affirmative action, and injustices in the criminal legal system coalesced to create a decade of influence for Black bookstores. The King verdict and Latasha Harlins's death sparked an already-brewing moment of racial consciousness, and cultural spectacles like the O. J. Simpson trial only added to it all. These social and political movements influenced Black writing and drew the masses to Black bookstores as both resource and education centers and places of escape to find joy during the social and political turbulence.

Romance novels and other Black-centered fiction, like Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale*, were becoming huge hits, and publishers were again considering Black books a lucrative source of revenue. The Shrine of the Black Madonna's Atlanta location reported seeing a 30 percent increase in sales in a year's time. While

the previous surge in Black bookstores saw the shops go from a meager dozen to an estimated seventy-five, book industry veterans put the number of Black bookstores in the 1990s at two hundred at least. There's no way to know the truth of these figures. The ABA didn't track the number of Black bookstores in America. But Villarosa said that the increase in Black ABA members in the early 1990s likely meant there were more Black bookstores opening. This literary boom made space for both popular Black authors and lesser-known writers working to make a name for themselves. It was the latter group that Faye Childs had in mind when she created the BlackBoard: African American Bestsellers list in 1991. Childs surveyed more than forty bookstores to determine which Black titles were flying off the shelves. The list became a de facto buying guide, featuring expected names like Toni Morrison and Terry McMillan while also introducing readers to lesser-known authors like Tina McElroy Ansa and Bebe Moore Campbell. The list not only proved that Black books were worth celebrating but disproved long-held notions that they didn't account for many in-store sales.

In 1996, Oprah Winfrey got in on the literary action. That September, Winfrey, on her daytime talk show, invited the public in on her love of literature with her eponymous book club, featuring picks of her own that everyone could buy and then discuss. Winfrey selected at least a dozen books by Black authors in the first five years of the book club. It was a cultural and commercial success. Authors like Toni Morrison were seeing hundreds of thousands of sales for forgotten earlier works. Lesser-known writers like Breena Clarke were also receiving their due. Clarke's pub-

lisher Little, Brown initially published just twelve thousand hardcover copies of her debut novel, *River, Cross My Heart*, but after receiving Winfrey's stamp of approval, they moved to print eight hundred thousand paperback copies. Making it onto Winfrey's list was like hitting the lottery for writers. Winfrey's blessing could send a book that once saw modest sales straight to bestseller lists. It was a cultural phenomenon so impactful that it's been dubbed the "the Oprah Effect." With her book club, Winfrey not only invited countless people to join in a larger reading effort, but she influenced the literary world commercially and culturally.

The national phenomenon of Winfrey's book club meant Black booksellers could count on customers to buy her picks, boosting the store's profits. But Winfrey's book club didn't prioritize or even cater to Black communities—it was mainstream. Even with Black titles made popular through Winfrey's book club, it was Black booksellers, publishers, and readers who created and supported this era of Black literary success. Fiction by Black women and celebrity books dominated Black book sales, but scholars like Cornel West, bell hooks, and Henry Louis Gates Jr. were shifting from university presses to mainstream publishers. It was the perfect time to make such a change. While avid readers were awaiting Walter Mosley's *Gone Fishin'*, budding literary giants were beginning their ascent in the book industry. Paul Beatty published his first US novel, *White Boy Shuffle*, in 1996, and Jacqueline Woodson's *Autobiography of a Family Photo* came out in 1995. The Black book ecosystem was growing and expanding. In 1992, Max Rodriguez founded the *Quarterly Black Review* literary journal and followed it up six years later with the Harlem Book

Fair, a sprawling literary festival where Black writers spoke in libraries, churches, hospitals, and vending booths lining Harlem's streets.

There were a lot of firsts for the Black book industry in the '90s, from the bestseller list to sessions at the ABA, and 1994 saw the first ever National Black Bookstore Week, though the proposed annual event only lasted a few years. From June 14 to June 21 that year, Black bookstores held community activities and author readings, and donated books to the ABA to send to children in South Africa. Maya Angelou served as the face of the first NBBW, and the theme, "Keeping Us Connected," represented recognition of Juneteenth.

"Thoughts by African-American thinkers have helped us to survive," she said then. "Poetry by African-American poets has helped us to thrive. Bookstores owned by African-American merchants have helped us to survive and thrive with some passion, some compassion, some humor and style."



In Los Angeles, the burning of the Aquarian didn't cripple Southern California's flourishing Black literary scene. Black Angelenos found solace in other Black-owned shops like *Eso Won* in Inglewood at La Brea Avenue and Plymouth Street. *Eso Won* was a small but dense store with African décor and jazz music regularly filling the space. Its neatly stocked shelves had everything from self-help books and children's titles to fiction and Black history works. In just a few years after the store's opening in 1988, *Eso Won* had become the spot for Black literature and education. It didn't start this way, though. James Fugate and Thomas Hamilton

began by selling books out of a car, calling the project *Eso Won* on Wheels, and later sold books out of the second floor of a converted home. They regularly put in sixteen-hour days, with Hamilton often sleeping there overnight on a worn sofa. Fugate's bookselling career began with managing college bookstores, first at Florida A&M University in Tallahassee and later at Compton College in California. In Florida, the owner of the college shop lamented to Fugate that he couldn't get people to buy their general titles. A young Fugate knew exactly what the problem was: "You don't have anything these students are interested in. You need more Black books," he said. Fugate convinced the owner to stock titles from authors like James Baldwin and Malcolm X, which transformed people's perception of the bookstore. "It led to Florida A&M becoming more than a college bookstore—it became a very important Black resource in the community," Fugate recalled. With years managing college bookshops under his belt, Fugate was well prepared to run *Eso Won* after moving to Los Angeles in the '80s. Fugate and Hamilton were friends first before launching the business together. Fugate was the more vocal of the bookselling duo. He was the owner who spoke in media interviews and volunteered to be *Eso Won*'s public spokesperson, while Hamilton enjoyed a quieter life as a bookseller. *Eso Won* wasn't political in the sense that it propped up a radical organization or the owners were activists, but the store's inventory—centered on Black history and titles by Black authors—made it a haven for Black dissidents and the books they liked to read. Even in *Eso Won*'s earliest days, Fugate and Hamilton squeezed Black youth into their small store for discussion groups. They figured that if they could sell Black books and get the community talking about them, this would fill

educational gaps and promote racial pride. The store was a subversive project that grew out of a love for Black books and community education, and into one of the most popular bookstores in the country.

Eso Won remained open through the 1992 uprising. Fugate was at the store when he learned that the Aquarian had been burned. Sadness swept over him. *Maybe the vandals didn't know the bookshop was part of the mini-mall*, Fugate reasoned to make sense of what happened. Before, Eso Won had struggled to attract authors for book events. Publishers usually sent writers only to the Aquarian before whisking them away to book signings at bigger, white bookstores. But, with the Aquarian gone, Eso Won would become known for hosting readings and signings with authors from every corner of the book industry. It was in the months after the uprising that Eso Won saw one of its first big signings. Former Black Panther Elaine Brown stopped at the shop during the book tour for her memoir, *A Taste of Power*. Former gang members and Black Panthers were among the dozens who filled the store, hanging on her words. Brown's rhetoric was right at home in the political Eso Won. She called police "pigs," called poor Black neighborhoods "internment camps," and questioned Clarence Thomas's Blackness, which drew laughter from the crowd. Fugate and Hamilton couldn't believe their eyes. The store was packed wall-to-wall on a Thursday afternoon. Major publishers couldn't believe it either. They began to pay attention to the small store, sparking a decades-long tradition of notable author talks and signings. Eso Won had come a long way from its humble beginnings. Fugate and Hamilton made modest sales and salaries their first few years in business.

They paid to bring authors to their stores in events that would end up paying for themselves. In 1990, controversy pushed the store from obscurity into the limelight. Shahrazad Ali had just published *The Blackman's Guide to Understanding the Blackwoman*, and Black America debated whether it was a self-hating diatribe against Black women or an accurate critique of romantic relationships. In it, Ali condemns "disobedient" Black women and boldly blames them for the problems of Black communities. The book had been burned and banned, and an angry crowd chased Ali out of the Apollo Theater during an appearance. Fugate and Hamilton sold the book anyway.

"It's selling as fast as romance novels do," Fugate told the *Los Angeles Times* in 1990.

Like Black booksellers in general, Fugate and Hamilton weren't too concerned with national book bans. They sold Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Walker's *The Color Purple*, despite the two being among the most challenged books of the 1990s. Fugate "evaluated" the books Eso Won sold, making sure they didn't sell anything the owners deemed too extreme. They were okay with books that courted controversy but rejected titles that they believed could promote dangerous and violent ideologies. As for their decision to sell Ali's controversial book, the booksellers thought the work was foolish and even ridiculous but essentially harmless in the grand scheme of things. Perhaps Fugate underestimated the social impact of such a book. But he figured no one would take Ali's directives seriously. He saw the book simply as an interesting, hyperbolic diatribe that would sustain sales but have no real, material effect on the Black community. Though

the controversy and fanfare over the book faded, Eso Won's newfound notoriety continued thanks to Fugate and Hamilton's communal approach to bookselling.

Alongside sponsored author talks, locals constantly stuffed themselves into the store for impromptu, passionate discussions about Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr., sorting out their legacies and connecting their missions to movements of the '90s. It was through this community engagement that Eso Won gained its reputation as an educational center. Fugate and Hamilton appealed to young readers by sponsoring book signings at local high schools and colleges. Soon, Eso Won's name was routinely mentioned in local newspapers, with journalists citing it alongside the Aquarian for its impact. The *Los Angeles Times* declared in a 1993 article that the store "adds to life in this city." Eso Won's vast inventory set it apart from shops like the Aquarian and specialty bookstores that sold only certain genres. Along with works by Langston Hughes and James Baldwin, customers could find audiotapes from historian Yusef Ben-Jochannan and titles by Paula Giddings.

The booksellers were also being inundated with books from publishing houses and self-published authors, so much so that they certainly couldn't stock everything that came their way. Being overwhelmed with Black books was a good problem to have after slow periods in the late '70s through the mid-'80s. The literary boom stretched across states, to small towns where Black people had little access to books about themselves. Akbar Watson never imagined that starting a small bookstore in Boynton Beach, Florida, would turn into a community service. He and his friends had a reading group but even with the apparent "boom in books for

Blacks," there were some obscure Black titles they couldn't get their hands on.

"One time, one book was retailing at fifty dollars and this guy was selling it to us for a hundred dollars!" Watson recalled. "So, the guys, we all made a pact. They told me if I'd buy the book wholesale, they'd buy it from me at retail price. And voilà! That launched the book business!"

Watson's plan was to sell books at or below their retail price. He began selling them from his car, and even his bedroom, until community members began to ask about the store's physical location. So, Watson took his \$10,000 life savings and opened Pyramid Books in 1993 in Boynton Beach. He didn't initially view opening a bookstore as a political statement. After all, he just wanted a place for Black Floridians to read. Soon, he was facilitating lectures, holding book talks, and gathering the community to talk about Black life, culture, and social issues.

"I was housing [books] with universal issues that catered toward Black people," Watson said. "It was a vehicle for people looking for new ideas and thoughts from a Black- or African-centered perspective. It quickly became political because it was part of the business. It's what people wanted. Reading was hot."



While Black booksellers were settling into a profitable era, Black publishers were organizing themselves. W. Paul Coates brought together seven of the country's leading Black presses to serve as an official entity for promoting and supporting Black publishers. The group announced the creation of the National Association of Black Book Publishers at the 1994 ABA conference. A trade association

that prioritized the needs and concerns of Black publishers, Coates held, was necessary during a period when Black books were seeing unprecedented popularity. The association tripled in size by the end of the year, growing from the seven founding publishers to nearly twenty-five members. If anyone knew the ins and outs of publishing and what presses needed to survive, it was the founders. By then, Coates had been running Black Classic Press for sixteen years, and other founding members, like Haki Madhubuti, who had launched Third World Press nearly thirty years earlier, and Kassahun Checole, with his ten years in the business, had established themselves as sages in the industry. In 1996, Mosley offered *Gone Fishin'* to Coates's Black Classic Press. It sold more than a hundred thousand copies, becoming one of the biggest books the press ever published. Once totally absent from ABA conferences, Black publishers waltzed into the association's 1996 convention on a high. Business was booming. Meanwhile, some major, white-run publishers were absent from the convention that year thanks to the ABA's lawsuits accusing them of colluding with chain bookstores. Gone were the days of Black presses operating for just a few years before shutting down. The '90s brought sustainability for Black publishers. This, Checole believed, was thanks to both trial and error and the publishers' connections to their communities.

"We've grown, matured, and we know what we're doing," Checole told the *Chicago Defender* then. It was a common sentiment throughout the Black publishing industry.

The Hudsons, of Just Us Books, were among the most successful Black publishers by the mid-'90s. To Wade Hudson, mainstream publishers just didn't understand the Black market. He associated Black presses' success with their deep knowledge of

Black communities. Black publishers knew the culturally relevant local radio stations, organizations, and newspapers, while mainstream houses "just sort of throw the books out there," Hudson said then. More general-interest stores were increasingly stocking Just Us's titles, and Ingram had recently begun distributing its books. But despite their expansion, Just Us kept Black bookstores as the core of their customer base. Major publishing houses were getting in on the popularity of Black books, too. More Black people had editorial jobs at mainstream publishers, and although the Black authors on bestseller lists were primarily big names like Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, and Bill Cosby, publishers were finally looking into lesser-known writers like Bebe Moore Campbell and Connie Briscoe. It was these names that Cheryl Woodruff prioritized when she helped create a Random House imprint called One World in 1991, one of the first multicultural imprints at a major New York house. Authors, both renowned and obscure, like Queen Afua, Johnnie Cochran Jr., Nikki Turner, and Donald Bogle, found a haven in the imprint, which quickly became known for its focus on works by Black people.

Chris Jackson would revive the imprint years later, in 2017, with the publication of Ta-Nehisi Coates's *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy*. Coates and Jackson released the book through Présence Africaine Editions, the press of Paris's historic Black bookshop Présence Africaine—the same bookshop that inspired Charlie Cobb to open Drum and Spear fifty years earlier. While leaders of Black presses continued pouring into Black communities and supporting the Black book industry, mainstream publishing editors like Woodruff worked to carve out a space that prioritized Black people in the broader book industry. Leaders like

Coates, the Hudsons, and Woodruff mentored the young writers, editors, and publishers around them.



Eso Won was bursting at the seams. By the middle of the decade, it was a famous cultural center for customers and a profitable tour stop for Black authors. Lines stretched down the block for packed author talks from the likes of Berry Gordy and Terry McMillan. This was the case when Sapphire visited the store in 1996 to read from her new book, *Push*. Customers and journalists filled the store to hear Sapphire talk about the controversial novel shaking up the industry. This, Fugate thought, was the perfect time to break some special news.

"I announced that day that we were moving to a new location!" he recalled.

The audience cheered. The small shop that had become a third place for so many Black Angelenos was moving to a larger, busier area just a few miles away in Ladera Heights. The booksellers were happy to have snagged a slot in the new Ladera Center. That is, until Magic Johnson and a group of investment companies bought the center. The companies billed the \$20 million purchase as part of an effort to develop retail centers in poor neighborhoods. But when the previous owners handed the building over to the Johnson Development Co., Eso Won's new lease was gone. This kicked off a flurry of local news articles, a David-and-Goliath tale. Fugate and Hamilton had heard rumors that the group was looking to bring in a big chain bookstore, Barnes & Noble, instead. Ken Lombard, then president of the Johnson Development Co., denied the rumors. Still, the rejection stung. Fugate and Hamilton

thought with Johnson, a Black man, coming to town, Black businesses would be celebrated and amplified. Instead, strapped for time and with no lease, Eso Won moved to a smaller shopping center near their previous location.

Fugate and Hamilton weren't crazy about the new spot, a strip mall away from where they had built their customer base. But they were determined to make do. It was a bigger space, after all, which they'd need as Eso Won continued to gain popularity. As it turned out, it didn't matter where Eso Won was located: customers and authors continued to come from far and wide. More than a hundred people attended signings with well-known figures like Cochran, Patti LaBelle, and Muhammad Ali. There were some lesser-known faces, too. The booksellers invited an obscure civil rights lawyer from Illinois to read from and sign copies of his new book, *Dreams from My Father*. Only five people showed up to see Barack Obama. Years later, the former president would remember that Fugate and Hamilton invited him to Eso Won "back when nobody knew who [he] was or could pronounce [his] name."

As if business couldn't get better, the inaugural Los Angeles Times Festival of Books drew UCLA students, staff, and faculty to the Black-centered shop. Some thirty-five thousand people attended the first day of the festival. Attendees rushed to Eso Won's booth and gushed over the store they'd heard so much about, bolstering Eso Won's influence and customer base.

"Our events were really big," Fugate said of the period. "There was rarely an author, by the mid-nineties, that if we wanted them we didn't get them."

The success of California stores in Los Angeles and Oakland wasn't the only story defining Black bookstores of the era. Black

bookstores both flourished and faltered in the '90s, much like in the decades before. While bookshops like Eso Won, Marcus, and the Hue-Man Experience continued to see massive sales through the years, other shops, like Austin's Just for Us, closed for good—along with a handful of other Black shops in Texas.

"We wanted our life back," Juanita Stephens, who ran Just for Us, told the *Austin American-Statesman* of the store's closure. "A small business is very tough."

The idea of a shuttered Black bookstore may have seemed paradoxical at a time when Black books and Black authors were more popular than they'd been in decades. But this spoke to the consistent precariousness of bookselling. Running a Black bookstore was hard work. Many shops simply couldn't compete with chain stores like Barnes & Noble and Borders. To be successful, Black bookshops had to be exceptional. There was a precise and important recipe for staying afloat and competing with chains: a vast inventory, investment in both new and established authors, innovative advertising, communal programming like book clubs, and customer loyalty. More than the book clubs and the allure of countless titles, it was perhaps the author talks that won many booksellers popularity and reliable customers. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and B. B. King drew hundreds to Marcus Books in Oakland, and Joann and Feron Roberts became known for their innovative proposals to get celebrities, both literary and otherwise, to their small store, the Phenix Information Center, in San Bernardino, California.

In 1995, the Roberts managed to snag a coveted book-signing with Colin Powell during the twenty-city tour for his book *My American Journey*. The pair set up a speaking event for Powell, distinguishing themselves from other bookstores who had simply

settled for a signing. The next year, they held a barbecue in the town square for George Foreman's *Knock-Out-the-Fat Barbecue and Grilling Cookbook*. In 1997, it was the Robertses' own idea, rather than the publisher's promotions, that brought Coretta Scott King to the shop as part of her speaking tour. The booksellers convinced the City of San Bernardino, a local credit union, and other leadership entities in the city to help them put on the event. And it was a grand affair. Only a baseball stadium could hold the thousands of people who turned out. The mayor welcomed King and a choir sang "His Eye Is on the Sparrow" before she delivered a rousing speech. The Robertses topped off the event with a \$65-a-ticket reception where King would hand out autographed copies of her 1969 book *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.* This marketing flair, this self-reliance, was Phenix's stock-in-trade, a clever strategy to build a name for the store and endear the shop to city officials and influential community groups. A sustainable bookstore would require nothing less.

It wasn't only bookstores vying for authors; literary celebrities often recognized just how much they owed Black bookstores for their successes. Lonnie Brittenum Bonner went from peddling her book *Good Hair: For Colored Girls Who've Considered Weaves When the Chemicals Became Too Ruff* on her own to signing copies for dozens at Nkiru Books in Brooklyn. No one in the publishing industry would bite, so she sold the book from her California home. Nkiru's manager C. J. Pose heard about the book and called Bonner for twelve copies. When those sold out, Pose asked for twenty-four more. Before long, Bonner was in the shop signing books for about sixty customers. Walter Mosley and E. Lynn Harris were among top authors who supported Black bookstores even

as they reached successful heights. In a 1997 interview with *Publishers Weekly*, Glenderyn Johnson, the owner of Black Books Plus in New York City, lauded Mosley as an author “committed to going to Black-owned bookstores.” Emma Rodgers cited Harris as the perfect example of a faithful friend of Black bookstores. “E. Lynn is on the *New York Times* bestseller list, but in every city he goes to an African American store,” she told the publication. These bookstore-author relationships have long characterized Black-owned bookshops. And publishers noticed. A Simon & Schuster publicist knew Dallas’s Black Images Book Bazaar had a stellar track record of handling Iyanla Vanzant’s books (Black Images had sold “thousands of copies” of one of her earlier titles, *Acts of Faith*). So the publicist consulted the owner, Rodgers, to make sure she had no objection to Simon & Schuster sending Vanzant to Barnes & Noble after her stop at Black Images to promote her book *In the Meantime: Finding Yourself and the Love You Want*.

“S&S did its homework,” Rodgers said, praising the publisher. Rodgers was familiar with the ins and outs of the publishing industry. Black Images began as a tent at an Oak Cliff flea market, and Rodgers and co-owner Ashira Tosihwe moved the store into a neighborhood building in 1992. They courted customers with poster-size book covers of Michael Baisden, Tavis Smiley, and Bebe Moore Campbell in the store’s windows. Vanzant was among the big names Black Images either hosted or worked closely with, including Patti LaBelle, Rosa Parks, and Maya Angelou. So they knew a thing or two about building relationships with authors and publishers.

That same year, in 1997, Marcus Books celebrated its thirty-fifth anniversary at Geoffrey’s Inner Circle event hall in Oakland. Friends and customers packed the room, and even more formed a

line around the block to see the literary royalty in attendance. Founders Raye and Julian Richardson told stories of knowing Maya Angelou when she was a teenager, and Terry McMillan recalled the Richardsons’ daughter Blanche picking her up in a station wagon during one of her early book tours. Ishmael Reed, Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright August Wilson, Angelou, Walker, and *Essence* magazine’s then-editor in chief Susan L. Taylor were just a few of the literati who made a point of celebrating with the Richardsons. Novelist and critic Nelson George called it a “book groupie’s paradise.” “Outside of a Black literary conference, I can’t imagine where you would ever see this many writers in one place,” George said then. Other bookstores were marking milestone years, too. Hakim’s Bookstore in Philadelphia rang in forty years that decade, a bittersweet anniversary as its founder, Dawud Hakim, died in 1997 of cancer. Hue-Man in Denver turned ten, and Una Mulzac’s Liberation saw thirty years.



As Black booksellers enjoyed business from loyal customers and long-awaited attention from publishers, a familiar foe lurked at their back doors. The struggles that came with '80s bookstore chains like Walden and Crown followed Black bookstores into the '90s. This time, it was Barnes & Noble and Borders threatening the shops with price wars and competition. The big-box retailers adopted familiar strategies once they learned that Black books were becoming increasingly popular. They beefed up their Black book sections, discounted books, put on community events, and tapped authors they knew Black people would venture to their stores to see. This was enough to cripple any independent bookstore, let

alone a Black one. On one hand, Black booksellers were pleased to see more books by Black writers and more notoriety for the authors. On the other, Black authors' commercial clout meant that big bookstore franchises began gobbling up the Black book market. In turn, the franchises stripped Black bookstores of one of the things that made them special: the exclusivity of their inventory.

Before, a customer would have to venture to a Black bookstore to find the latest fiction from an obscure Black writer. But as time passed, chain bookstores made it so anyone could access the books easily at their conveniently placed locations, and often at a lower price than the mom-and-pop Black bookstores could offer.

In 1993, Glenderlyn Johnson watched with dread as a new Barnes & Noble superstore went up just twelve blocks away from her store, Black Books Plus, on New York's Upper West Side. She'd already been losing customers to the retailer. She knew there would be more loss to come thanks to the new store. A year later, in 1994, she lamented the decrease in both book sales and attendance at author events. Some customers would buy books from local chains for cheap and bring them in to get signed at one of her author events. Johnson held an author event for J. California Cooper that year, who was promoting her book *In Search of Satisfaction*, and the turnout was devastating. Cooper had already appeared at the nearby Barnes & Noble earlier in the day, and everyone had already had their fill of the writer. Black Books Plus didn't stand a chance.

"I'll never do that again," Johnson told *The Network Journal*, a monthly business magazine. "Everybody went to see Cooper at Barnes and Noble and only a few people came to my store. I got their crumbs."

Before 1993, Johnson had no problem booking authors like McMillan. But she soon learned the hard way that if she wanted a chance to host an author and turn a profit, she'd have to request the author visit her store before appearing at the large chain store.

Authors noticed the dangers of big-box stores, too. Shahrazad Ali declared that white-owned chains were waging "war on Black bookstores." To Ali, the chains were exploiting the industry and underselling Black books. It was about more than profit, in Ali's view; they were "invading our communities nationwide opening 'Superstore' book chains designed to abolish neighborhood competition, eliminate the need for Black bookstores, and destroy our cultural economic base," she speculated. Meanwhile, distributor Hodari Ali was accepting a harsh truth about his small chain of independent bookstores. He'd opened the first Pyramid shop in 1981 in Washington, DC, and had four more in the area, plus Dar es Salaam in Maryland, by 1995. His sales once exceeded \$1 million, he said. But even his successful, groundbreaking chain was no match for the big franchises. Pyramid's Baltimore location was struggling so much in 1993 that Ali began looking for a buyer. By 1998, competition had ground the chain down to just two stores. This was a familiar pattern in Black America: when an aspect of Black culture became popular, large companies would capitalize on the market. With few resources to fight back, Black small business owners faltered under the disadvantage. As independent bookstores shuttered under pressure from big chains, ABA membership began to decline by the thousands through the middle of the decade. But booksellers put up a fierce fight when they learned that Barnes & Noble was poised to purchase Ingram Book Group, the beloved wholesaler that had supported Black bookstores

for years. They wrote letters, made phone calls, and did all they could to let the companies know they weren't in favor of the merger. In the end, they were successful. Barnes & Noble walked away from the deal amid allegations that such a merger would give the already-powerful chain even more of an unfair advantage.

The accusations were bolstered by booksellers' beliefs that chains were involved in shady deals with publishers for illegal discounts and preferential treatment that further disadvantaged independents. The ABA responded with lawsuits. In 1994, the ABA sued Penguin USA and four other publishers for the alleged under-the-table deals. Penguin ultimately agreed to pay the ABA \$25 million, and about half went to ABA members in payouts ranging from \$1,000 to \$100,000 or more. The ABA would go on to sue Barnes & Noble and Borders before the end of the decade. Major publishers denied claims of back-door dealings with the big bookstores, but they couldn't shake the rumors completely. In 1997, Black booksellers wondered why an Iyanla Vanzant title, *The Big Book of Faith*, published by Simon & Schuster, was being sold at Barnes & Noble weeks before the booksellers even learned of its release.

The publisher was silent about the book, a repackaged combination of two of Vanzant's works, and it was listed as out of stock to independent booksellers. This led booksellers to believe Barnes & Noble and the publishing house had inked a secret deal. Simon & Schuster officials admitted then that Barnes & Noble did suggest selling the book exclusively, but the publisher decided against it. This excuse didn't hold water to booksellers like Fugate.

"It really bothered me. We created this demand," Fugate told *Publishers Weekly*. "Three or four years ago I don't think you would have found Vanzant in Barnes & Noble."

As if competition from chains weren't enough, Amazon.com launched as an online bookseller in 1995. In two months' time, Amazon.com sold books in every US state and forty-five countries. If chain stores offered the comforts of home and cheap books, Amazon took it a step further, cutting out the middleman and making books available for cheap with delivery directly to customers' homes. The ABA knew it had to act. By 1999, hundreds of its members supported its effort to create an online retailer of its own, BookSense.com, where readers could order books online from their local bookstores. It was a valiant effort, one that would last, but it was still no match for a Goliath like Amazon. Bookstores' struggle against Amazon would continue indefinitely, painting a bleak future for the brick-and-mortar shops. Through this all, Eso Won maintained a privileged position. Eso Won had a devoted customer base, nationwide notoriety, relationships with publishers, and beloved community events all working in its favor. While the owners planned a signing with Chris Rock, other Black bookstores complained that they couldn't get Black authors to speak at their shops anymore. Shops like Afrocentric Books and Café, run by Antoine Coffey in St. Louis, and Johnson's Black Books Plus warred with publishers to send writers and fought chains looking to snag the authors before the smaller, Black bookshops could. Coffey decided he'd had enough when the Library Ltd., a general bookstore in Clayton, landed McMillan during her hardcover tour of *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*, and he was subsequently told it was too late to add his shop as a tour stop. Coffey criticized Penguin, accusing the publisher of discriminating against Black bookstores; urged Black booksellers to boycott McMillan's books; and threatened to picket the Library Ltd. The

controversy made headlines and prompted a response from McMillan herself. "[Coffer has] made money off of selling my books, and now he wants to boycott and picket my book signing. I pay his mortgage!" she said then.

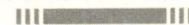
In the end, McMillan canceled her lone appearance in the city, much to the dismay of fans who were looking forward to seeing her. Coffer said he and his wife received countless calls from people cursing them out and even sending them death threats over the cancellation. McMillan demanded an apology, but Coffer held that his qualm was never with her, but with the publisher. He simply wanted to come to an agreement with Penguin.

"The only thing we were hoping to accomplish was a compromise," Coffer told the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. "We were looking for a win-win situation. As it is now, it's a loss-loss situation. No one gets to see her because of Penguin's inability to share her with any Black bookstores."

If you asked longtime book industry leaders like Fugate and Coates, they'd say the author problem didn't fall solely on publishers' shoulders. Shops like Eso Won and Phenix had invested time and energy into developing a strategy and marketing flair that cemented them as must-stops for author tours. Of course, the larger book industry didn't support Black bookshops as they should, but booksellers had to do their part too, Fugate reasoned.

"Some booksellers who don't even do \$100,000 in sales per year are complaining, 'These white people don't want to send me authors.' But there is a commitment to independent stores on the part of publishers," he told *Publishers Weekly* in 1997. That was easy for him to say. Fugate and Hamilton, with the store's popularity and reputation, had fought off big chains and managed to

maintain a lucrative business while other booksellers were constantly threatened with closure. While the booksellers supported the booksellers and bookstores around them, Fugate wasn't shy about calling out what he considered to be poor business practices on the part of some of them.



Times had surely changed between the Black bookstore booms of the '60s and '70s and the '90s. The Black Power and civil rights eras made for about seven years of influence and success for Black bookstores, which largely rested on the power of the political movements themselves. But Black booksellers in the '90s thrived for at least ten years, thanks to an amalgam of cultural, political, and even commercial forces. Although the political climate awakened interest in Black books, there was a major difference between the types of books that dominated during the Black Power era and those that dominated in the '90s. "In the past, you would almost be chastised as an Uncle Tom or an Aunt Jemima if your work wasn't relevant to the struggle of Black people," Hodari Ali said in 1991, speaking about the Black Power era. "You don't find that today. It runs the gamut from militant homosexual to books that reflect middle class values."

The protests and small movements that did exist in the '90s focused on criminalization, poverty, and sporadic incidents of injustice. Though there were still Black-led efforts to combat these inequities, time and social changes shifted the ways Black communities went about them. Radical, nationwide organizations were few and short-lived. There were no well-laid plans by the federal government to target and repress Black bookstores during the

'90s, but booksellers still endured racialized threats to their existence. Rent hikes, squabbles with local leaders and landlords, and the hardships of operating in underresourced and overpoliced neighborhoods all contributed to a challenging environment. Through the '80s and into the '90s, the New York City Department of Sanitation gave Mulzac up to fifty summonses for refusing to sweep a foot and a half in front of Liberation. She was convinced that the trash in front of her bookstore wasn't the issue, but the city simply wanted to control her. And she wouldn't have it.

"I'm not paying anybody off and I'm not becoming a street sweeper," Mulzac told the *New York Amsterdam News* in 1995. "There's nothing wrong with being a street sweeper; it's simply not the profession I have chosen."

The city was trying to punish her by freezing her bank accounts and destroying her credit, she accused. She adamantly refused to sweep or pay any of the summonses, and instead spent her time enjoying the business the new literary moment brought to Liberation. The previous literary and Black bookstore boom was, at its core, more about the political movements of the time. In the '90s, renewed conversations about systemic racism and Black pride were part of the boom, but popular fiction titles by Black authors, representation in media, and better business practices held a greater weight for Black booksellers. The scales of political influence and commerce were tipped, however slightly, toward commerce. Black bookstores were no longer connected to cultural political organizations, even though their commitments were to the Black communities they served. When asked in the late '90s about any affiliations with such groups, Emma Rodgers said she'd love to support such an effort but "there was currently a lack of ac-

tivism within the Black community." When confronted with the same question, Desiree Sanders, who ran the Afro-Centric Bookstore in Chicago, said she didn't even know linking her store to activist groups and efforts was a possibility.

But just like in the '60s and '70s, Black people, young and old, continued to see Black bookstores as safe spaces. Even without direct links to radical groups, customers simply valued walking into a store where their culture was prioritized above all else. For example, when a jury in 1995 handed down a not-guilty verdict in the O. J. Simpson trial, Black Chicagoans knew Afrocentric was the perfect place to celebrate. Sanders said that groups of people would come into the store to talk about the verdict and "just holler and do whatever." This sense of safety and community has proved consistent no matter how the Black bookselling industry changes. By the late 1990s, the time of success and profits for Black booksellers was coming to an end. Soon, there would be a new millennium, and new challenges would come with it. Some of the Black bookstores that opened in the '90s wouldn't make it through the early aughts, others would downsize, and a lucky—and determined—few would survive. The impending economic devastation of the 2000s would overshadow the subtle, but ever-present, racial disparities prevalent in the country. But much like in the '90s, Black booksellers would prove themselves resilient. The '90s was a decade of ups and downs, for sure, but it was certainly one of the most profitable eras for Black bookstores. And Black booksellers would need to remember the lessons and marketing savvy they'd learned and hold on to this period of growth for the rough decades ahead.