

The unadorned allure of The Word

Before we get to The Word, in the beginning is the bon mot:

Frank Swartz, a college pal, used to talk about a bookstore staffed by stewardesses. They would go up and down the aisles, he explained, cheerfully asking: "Kafka, Keats or Rilke?"

If you get that joke, you're literate enough to hang out at The Word. If not ... well, there are some neat Michael Jackson coffee table tomes and Christmas novelties available at mass-market chain bookstores.

It wasn't beginning to look a lot like Dec. 25 at The Word when I stopped by. The used bookstore, in the heart of the McGill ghetto on Milton St., looked like it does every day: warm, welcoming and defiantly unadorned.

The two-storey brick building had been a Chinese laundry for 70 years when Adrian and Luci King-Edwards took it over and opened The Word in 1975. The couple were honoured with the Quebec Writers' Federation's Community Award last night.

The QWF's citation describes The Word as "a literary haven and nerve-centre for students, bibliophiles, and readers of all stripes."

The Word is the unChapters, the anti-Indigo. The store sells books, period. If you want coffee and WiFi, Second Cup and Presse-Café are two blocks away, kitty-corner at Park Ave.

There are no computers at The Word. There is no cash register.

Adrian King-Edwards, who's 60, does his transac-



MIKE BOONE
on The Word bookstore

"There is no Interac. Credit cards are not accepted."

tions in a small alcove under a staircase at the back of the 450-square-foot store. He uses a rotary-dial telephone.

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King-Edwards makes change out of a wood drawer used when the place was a laundry. An iron ring, attached to the wall beside him, is a holdover from when the building was a stable.

(Insert your own starchy prose and Joyce Carol Oates witticism here.)

The Word sells literature, philosophy, scholarly books. In a bleak desert of relentlessly marketed crap, it is an oasis of quality where nothing ever changes except the window display, lovingly curated on a daily basis by Scott Moodie, who's been at The Word for 17 years and, at my request, will do an A.J. Liebling window today.

"When we started, we were just kind of bumbling along and enjoying ourselves," King-Edwards recalls.

"Everything was much easier in those days."

Rent was \$175. Softcover books sold for 50 cents.

They had McGill BAs in English literature. Luci was a teaching assistant at McGill. Adrian worked as a janitor for a couple buildings around the corner from the store.

Two book-lovin' kids with a crazy dream. And although King-Edwards readily admits "we didn't look too far ahead in terms of planning," The Word has lasted 34 years – through some dramatic changes in the way people buy and read books.

The Internet and eBay have wreaked havoc on the second-hand book business. Five stores in downtown Montreal have closed within the last two years. Queen St. West, in Toronto, was once home to 17 bookstores. There's now one – in a second-floor walkup.

The Word has kept prices competitive, \$4.95 to \$10. King-Edwards, who bought the building three years ago, has the advantage of a good location and a reputation for excellence – including a mention in Fodor's guide to Montreal.

There are 20,000 books at the store and more at King-Edwards's house on nearby Aylmer St. He does a brisk trade in rarities and first editions.

"I'm getting back books I sold 20 years ago," he says.

"Really good stuff, and it goes round again.

"There are a lot of people who take pride in their libraries and are always looking for that elusive volume."

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