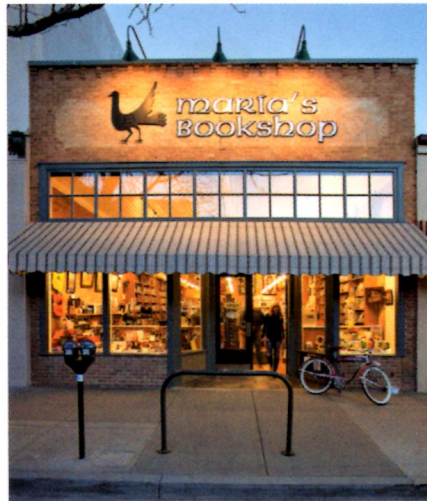


# Survival of the Fittest

## Maria's Bookshop at 30

by Jen Reeder



Smith

In the digital age of e-readers and online retail giants, Durango's beloved Main Avenue bookseller has not only survived but flourished.

"The reason a store like Maria's Bookshop can thrive for 30 years is 100 percent attributable to the community," says Peter Schertz, who co-owns Maria's with his wife, Andrea Avantaggio.

When Maria's began in 1984, there were only a handful of used bookstores in town, a situation founder Dusty Teal wanted to rectify. "He saw a need," Schertz says of Teal, a generous former resident now living with his wife, Martha, near Dolores. "Maria's Bookshop was started as a philanthropic gift to the community," he says.

Teal set up the original Maria's at 928 Main with fellow river-runner Mary Anne Griffin, the store's first manager. They filled the store with southwestern authors and regional titles, as well as Teal's collection of art and artifacts, paintings, Navajo rugs and Indian pottery. It was the pottery that led to the shop's name, when the stylized bird that appears on the work of New Mexico potter Maria Martinez became the inspiration for the bookstore's logo and, eventually, its name.

In 1989, Avantaggio, who grew up in Maine, and Schertz, an engineer from Texas, moved to Durango after hiking the Appalachian Trail. In 1992, Avantaggio, a server at Carver's, began selling books at Maria's.

In 1994, Teal relocated the shop a few doors north to 960 Main, a building he owned. "In the move, we doubled the square footage and pretty much doubled business right away," Avantaggio says. (She and Schertz purchased the 1,800-square-foot building in 2008.)

Avantaggio was managing Maria's when Teal decided to sell in 1998. He was about to open another business, Old Town Bake Shop, now Bread. For Schertz and Avantaggio, it was a challenging time to be buying a bookstore. Their son Evan was just 8 months old (he is now 17 and daughter Lydia is 13), and there was competition; the big chain Waldenbooks had two stores. Another — Barnes and Noble — was about to open in nearby Farmington. Across the



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—Andrea Avantaggio



McGregor

nation, the Internet and Amazon were forcing many indie bookstores out of business.

Maria's has grown, despite the industry's instability. It was just honored as one of five finalists for *Publishers Weekly's* Best Bookstore of the Year in 2013. And the reason, says Avantaggio, is employees who have "a passion for books and a passion for people." Employee book recommendations dot the custom wood shelves with "I love this book!" placards; she herself reads about 100 books a year, and keeps notes so she can "curate" books based on each reader's taste and interests.

"That's been our biggest thing: to create a memorable experience and a connection with the community just by coming in the store," she says.

Indeed, Maria's is known for its cozy, inviting atmosphere. Teal's vintage skis, snowshoes and Navajo rugs still adorn the walls; his Boundary Waters canoe — crafted by master canoe builder Joe Seliga of Ely, Minn. — still hangs from the ceiling. With some 40,000 books and a popular children's nook, the store's 15 friendly employees are eager to answer the question, "What should I read?"

Maria's continues to host readings with local and national authors, a tradition that began in 1988, when the place was packed to the rafters hosting Edward Abbey, and later, John Nichols and Terry Tempest Williams. The release parties held at midnight for new Harry Potter books rank among Avantaggio's favorites.

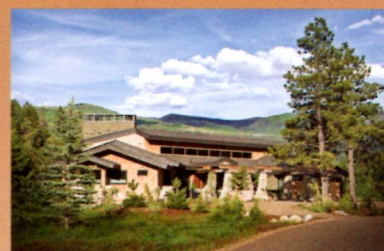
Minna Jain, community relations manager, says Maria's — named Small Business of the Year in 2003 — supports nonprofits, including the Women's Resource Center and the Family Center. They partner often with the public library and support some 100 local book clubs. Maria's participates in national events as well, such as World Book Night, when volunteers give away 500,000 books on Shakespeare's birthday.

Avantaggio and Schertz say the diversity of books sold at Maria's reflects the diversity of the community and the persistent need for an independent bookstore, which Teal identified 30 years ago.

"It's a responsibility that we have the privilege of carrying on," Schertz says. "That willingness to recognize the importance of a bookstore in a community should live forever — I hope — within Maria's Bookshop." ■

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