

Is Indigo a Threat?

by Erin FAGAN

A cautious form of welcome is being expressed among some local writers and independent bookstores in Charlottetown with the arrival of the Indigo chain this past week. There are some concerns, however, about the store's potential business policies and its impact upon the local book market.

"We don't have any idea what the effects will be," says The Reading Well co-owner, Carol Martin, adding that since the store has just arrived it will be hard to predict its impact.

The Reading Well, co-owned by four people in Charlottetown, is now for sale. Along with the larger sign for sale sign detailing the store's square footage, there is a smaller one that reads, "This delightful bookstore is for sale. Inquire within."

"The decision to sell came before we knew that Indigo was definitely coming," Martin explained, "A couple of us want to go back to school. . . (there are) just different things that we want to do." Martin added that she has found herself telling many concerned clients that, "No, we aren't closing."

"We have a wonderful, wonderful clientele. . . they've been so supportive. It's played (the store) a nice role in supporting other writers in the community."

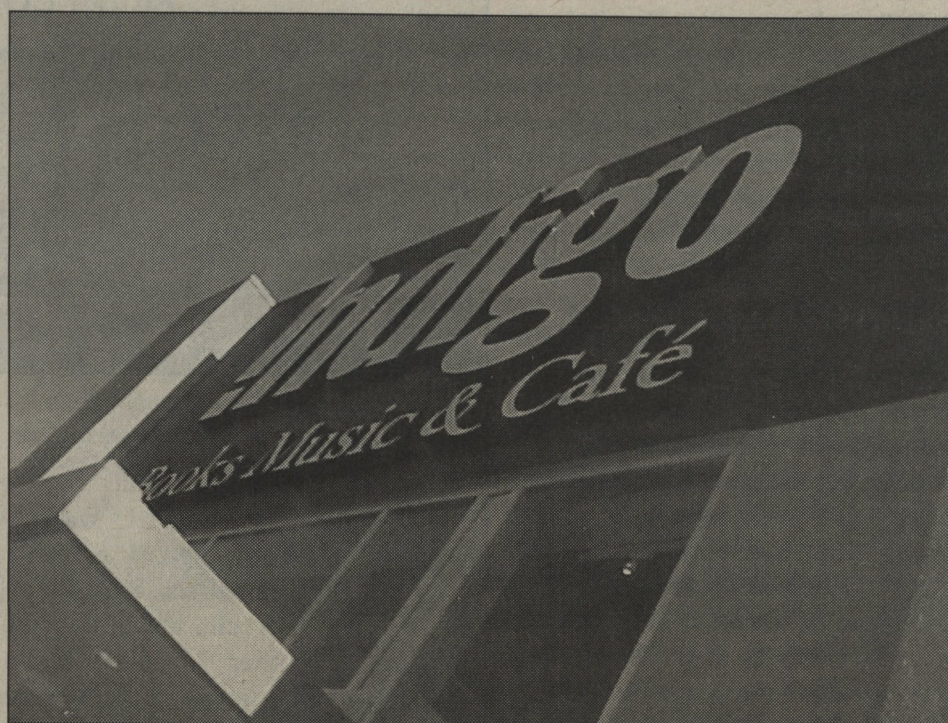
Dr. Brent MacLaine, an English department professor and published poet, confirmed the immense support that he has received with the well-known book store.

"The Reading Well has been very good to me," he says, citing their bulk carriage of his work and the book launches they have assisted with.

"I doubt I could get that support from a chain store," adds MacLaine, citing a relative lack of interest in the past on the part of the Coles bookstore.

"An independent bookstore is always the more pleasant to go into."

Dr. Richard Lemm, a creative writing professor and published poet,



Indigo no.

also spoke along the same lines as MacLaine.

"The concern has been and will be whether a large chain – which has little competition – will continue to support Canadian publishers and authors. Of course, Indigo will stock the best-sellers, the prize-winners," Lemm says. "But will there be a strong selection of other writers, including the future Margaret Atwoods and Farley Mowatts – all those authors who need more promotion than Stephen King or Harry Potter?"

Lemm also added that, as a reader, he would support Indigo, "if it carries an excellent selection of Island authors, regional authors, and Canadian authors, as well as a reasonably good selection of authors from abroad who are not just the best-sellers." He added, however, that he would continue to support such places as The Bookmark "because we need competition in the industry, and we need smaller stores that are locally owned."

"My sense and hope is that the Bookmark will survive," he affirmed.

Lemm also hinted at the large

er ramifications involved with giant chain stores.

"Many Canadian writers have mourned the demise of smaller bookstores. . . with the advent of the giant chain stores. Some of the smaller stores had strong selections of Canadian authors, and supported literary events and readings and competitions."

"Certainly, the smaller stores had a good reputation. . . for carrying books that aren't big money-makers, such as poetry and plays. The smaller stores often supported national and regional literary presses, for instance, by stocking titles and helping with promotion."

Upon a perusal of Indigo's interior, an eight-shelf section was found under the heading of "Local Interest," carrying local history and cultural texts such as Dr. David Weale's works and L.M. Montgomery titles. The computer databases also listed the presence of at least one title for a variety of Island fiction writers including Lemm and MacLaine. On the counters and the entrance posts, an itinerary for this month listed a reading and book-signing by local author J.J. Steinfeld this past

Saturday, as well as this Saturday's launch of *Landmarks: An Anthology of New Atlantic Canadian Poetry of the Land*, whose compilation was contributed to by MacLaine. These events are also being coupled with special visits by the likes of the Cat in the Hat, Bubbles the Clown, and Clifford the Big Red Dog.

Inquiries as to the continued support of local authors beyond this month could not be forwarded in time to the Area Marketing Manager, Angie Murphy, who is based in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia.

Lemm also pointed to the "serious well-documented problems with Chapters – problems which have seriously affected the cashflow of Canadian publishers, and hurt the sales of many Canadian authors."

Chapters, the chain which was originally to come to Charlottetown, was taken over this past year by Trilogy Retail Enterprises, the owner of Indigo.

"We all hope that Indigo will resolve these (the problems) and avoid them in the future. And I hope Indigo doesn't "cherry-pick" – that is, try to undercut the competition by deep-discounting the best-sellers," Lemm concluded.

The industry standard is a 40 percent markup on most books. However, Chapters-Indigo sells all best-sellers at 30 percent off the cover price, not to mention an additional 10 percent savings to "Indigo Circle" card holders, making it difficult for some independent bookstores to compete.

MacLaine noted that, no matter what other concerns are raised, increased selection and size are naturally attractive to consumers.

"If the big chains offer selection, it's hard to say it's a bad thing. If there are more books on the shelves, it's hard to resist."

"If they can support the local community of writers, rather than just the big discount sellers. . . that will be the big test."