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Midwestern Booksellers See Hope for Holidays

By Claire Kirch – Publishers Weekly, 9/28/2009 7:49:00 AM

The Midwestern Booksellers Association meeting in downtown St. Paul, held Sept. 25-26, was a big show compressed into two days, jam-packed with non-stop interaction between publishers and booksellers. While the full schedule was rigorous, there was a general consensus about three much-discussed topics: while the tight schedule allowed for fewer opportunities for relaxed schmoozing at hotel bars, MBA was as productive as ever; the association is even more necessary than ever in a rapidly-changing industry; and this season's offerings are absolutely stellar. As one bookseller put it, only half-joking, "If these books don't sell, we might as well pack it up and close shop."



Not only was MBA downsized from three days to two days, but the RiverCentre trade exhibit hall was reconfigured into a more compact space, to better accommodate fewer exhibitors (61 exhibits, down from last year's 82 exhibits) and fewer booksellers (358 booksellers from 96 bookstores, down from last year's 400 booksellers from 105 stores). But the same number of authors (134) attended this year as last, with bestselling author Neil Gaiman pulling a double-shift, dazzling booksellers at Friday evening's Midwest Booksellers's Choice Awards reception with tales about *The Graveyard Book* and then again at Friday morning children's book and author breakfast with tales about *Odd and the Frost Giants*.

While acknowledging that most of the independent university presses that usually exhibit at MBA each year had pulled out, presumably because of budget cuts, MBA executive director Susan Walker attributed the decrease in the number of this year's exhibits to some of the larger houses taking up less space on the show floor. "The point is they're here," she said, "It's not us. Everyone's struggling."

Walker pointed out that small and regional presses, however, are taking up some of the slack, with Wisconsin Historical Society Press, for example, taking two booths this year, up from last's year's single booth. North Star Press returned to MBA after several years's absence, and University of Tennessee Press -- which has decided to no longer exhibit at BEA to focus on select regionals -- exhibited at MBA for the first time. "Besides," Walker insisted, "The number of tables is not the point. The point is people are talking to each other."

Booksellers certainly did talk to each other all weekend, even during Friday's educational sessions. When ABA CEO Oren Teicher asked the 45 booksellers attending the ABA presentation on its new IndieCommerce e-book initiative how many intended to sell e-books was met with a guarded response from booksellers concerned about profit margins, Lisa Baudoin, owner of Books & Co. in Oconomowoc, Wis., spontaneously stood and made an impassioned plea to her colleagues to participate with her in the IndieCommerce program. "People need to be online. People need to be online now. And we need to be together online," she declared, "Think big!"

Though there was some discussion about e-books Friday, Saturday's conversations on the crowded trade floor were all about the print books on display. This year, it was all about visuals, with booksellers interested not just in a book's content, but in the entire package -- which may have to do, either consciously or subconsciously, with the fact that booksellers now have to emphasize the benefits of print books over e-books to their customers.

Illustrated books, especially those with regional themes, most appealed to booksellers. *People of the Sturgeon: Wisconsin's Love Affair with an Ancient Fish* by Kathleen Schmitt Kline et al. (Wis. Hist. Soc. Press), *Viking Reader* (Univ. of Minn Press), *Gophers Illustrated: The Incredible Complete History of Minnesota Football* by Al Papas Jr. (University of Minnesota Press), and *An Illustrated Life*, a compendium of American modernist illustrator Charley Harper's work by Todd Oldham (AMMO Books) all created a buzz, with Chris

Livingston of The Book Shelf in Winona, Minn. explaining that last year's *Great Minnesota Fish Book* from the University of Minnesota Press was one of his topselling titles last holiday season. He anticipates that a book about sturgeon will also sell well.

Children's picture books, especially retellings of classic Christmas stories, complete with vintage-style covers and illustrations, also drew MBA booksellers, who seemed more conscious than ever of the importance of drumming up sales during the holidays. *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King* by E.T.A. Hoffman, illustrated by Gail deMarken (Scholastic/Orchard), *The Mitten* by Jim Aylesworth, illustrated by Barbara McClintock (Scholastic Press), and *The 12 Days of Christmas*, illustrated by Ilse Plume (David R. Godine) were all big hits, as were holiday picture books with original stories, like *Lucy's Christmas* by Donald Hall, illustrated by Michael McCurdy (David R. Godine) and *Snow* by Cynthia Rylant, illustrated by Lauren Stringer (Harcourt).

Otis, the picture book written and illustrated by Loren Long (Philomel), who spoke at Saturday morning's breakfast, also received raves from booksellers, who were enchanted with Long's tale of a "special tractor," and especially his evocative drawings of a stark landscape that is so reminiscent of the rural Midwest. "The illustrations alone sell that book," The Book Shelf's Livingston declared. "The poster alone hanging in our store window sells that book."

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