



OUR HISTORY

A local television reporter recently referred to Mysterious Galaxy as “one of the best independent bookstores in the country,”* and thousands of readers, authors, and publishers would enthusiastically agree.

But in the store’s 18-year history selling works of science fiction, fantasy, mystery, suspense, and horror, the team at Mysterious Galaxy has built a community of fans that extends beyond the borders of San Diego County, beyond the borders of independent business, and beyond the borders of their specialty genres.

In short, they have built a lot more than a bookstore.

A Meeting of (Like) Minds

Jeff Mariotte, now an award-winning writer, managed the La Jolla, California location of indie favorite Hunter’s Books in the early 1990s. Mariotte took his store’s wares to Comic-Con International, becoming the first established bookstore exhibiting there.

“We were really one of the first vendors who didn’t carry books with pictures in them,” he says. “We had some graphic novels at the store, but there were plenty of people selling those. Instead, I took a lot of horror, science fiction, and crime books, and did signings with a few people in the comics business who also wrote genre fiction. We did really well.”

San Diego resident Maryelizabeth Hart also managed a local bookstore, a branch of national retail giant B.Dalton. When she stopped by the Hunter’s Comic-Con booth looking for genre fiction, Mariotte sold her a copy of Sheri Tepper’s *Grass*. She liked the book, and liked Mariotte even better. The two struck up a relationship and were married during Comic-Con two years later.

Meanwhile, Hart’s position at B.Dalton had her on the floor, interacting with customers and learning what they liked and what they didn’t. She became pretty good at reading her customers and directing them toward books they would love.

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One of those customers, a small business owner and avid reader named Terry Louchheim Gilman, made B.Dalton her weekly lunchtime destination and Hart her go-to source for book recommendations.

“Every Friday afternoon,” Gilman says, “I’d go buy a frozen yogurt, then a book from Maryelizabeth. Knowing my reading tastes, one year she went to an American Booksellers Association conference and brought me back a gift of an advance copy of *Like Water for Chocolate*.”

That act of kindness helped cement Hart’s and Gilman’s friendship, and Gilman began to wonder if their respective bookselling and business backgrounds might be a perfect complement to fill a growing void in San Diego’s literary scene. Hunter’s – at the time, the city’s hub for science fiction, fantasy, horror, and hard-boiled mysteries – was closing, and a local mystery store would also soon shut its doors.

In November 1992, Gilman approached Hart and asked if she would like to own a bookstore; very soon after, Hart and Mariotte placed a business plan for a mixed-genre bookstore in Gilman’s hands.

From the very beginning, the trio knew their goal was to be an independent genre bookstore “passionate about creating and maintaining a community of readers, authors, and booksellers.” They worked furiously out of their San Diego homes – Gilman’s in Scripps Ranch, Hart’s and Mariotte’s in Clairemont – to flesh out ideas, crystallize their mission, develop business strategies, and choose a name that encompassed everything they wanted to do.

And in May 1993, Mysterious Galaxy was open for business.

San Diegans Embrace the ‘Galaxy’

San Diego’s new indie bookstore opened with a bang befitting its specialties: genre icons Ray Bradbury, David Brin, and Robert Crais were all at the grand opening at San Diego’s Clairemont Square, signing books and giving hundreds of fans a chance to enjoy face time with their favorite writers.

“We knew regular author events would be part of Mysterious Galaxy’s role in the community from day one,” says Hart, who now serves as the store’s publicity and events manager. “Not only did we know a number of fans who, like us, treasured their signed first editions of authors’ works, but we also knew making an in-person connection with someone whose work you enjoy is special.”

For their quickly-growing base of customers, Mysterious Galaxy was a breath of fresh air. Handselling – “the process of putting a book we believe in into a customer’s hand, and having the customer trust in our ability to know both the work and the customer to make the correct match,” according to Hart – was simply the way employees were trained to do business.

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Readers responded to active engagement with their booksellers, and seemed to enjoy sharing their own opinions on books and authors. They were shopping at a store where decisions about book selection were made locally, and reflected the tastes of staff members who loved so many of the same books they did.

Mysterious Galaxy's team also quickly endeared itself to publishers and authors, many of whom Mariotte had already built relationships with through his work at Hunter's, for being their early champions and tireless promoters.

The store grew throughout the 1990s, thriving even when their physical location changed within the county.

Making Connections, Building Community

Gilman, Hart, and Mariotte had a genuine passion for what they were building, and that spilled over into the relationships they developed on behalf of the store. The three also shared an increasing understanding of how vital those relationships were to Mysterious Galaxy's success.

"Our awareness of the importance of the role of community in our business, whether the community of our neighborhood, our city, our genres, or our industry, was growing," says Hart of the store's early days. "The books we read provided the common ground for the connections we were making, and those connections contributed to our health as a business."

The team has continued to foster those vital connections, creating and supporting communities of others who are passionate about books, inside and outside their specialty genres.

Mysterious Galaxy has long hosted numerous author presentations and signings every month, and created signed first edition programs that introduce readers to the staff's most highly recommended new titles. They formed book discussion groups that meet in the store and off-site, and writers' support groups to encourage and challenge budding authors. They developed a young adult program that brings published authors to schools for writing workshops, and a business-to-business program that matches authors with major corporations for employee motivation and education.

Throughout the years, Mysterious Galaxy has also enjoyed a growing presence at numerous national book festivals and conferences like Comic-Con International, where Hart has become a frequent panel moderator and assists with programming for author events. The store often works with local associations, as in 1998 when the staff joined Sisters in Crime and the San Diego Mystery Club in hosting the regional Left Coast Crime mystery conference.

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Nonprofit partnerships and philanthropic support – whether with local libraries or educational organizations like San Diego’s Monarch School for at-risk teenagers – have become an important aspect of Mysterious Galaxy’s business. When the store celebrated its 13th birthday with a “book mitzvah,” participating authors were asked to select a charity that would benefit from their appearance. This program was so well-received it lasted two years and supported five local non-profits, all of whom received checks at the store’s annual Birthday Bash in May.

Mysterious Galaxy’s influence began spreading outside its home base of San Diego when Gilman moved her family to Manhattan Beach and began developing Mysterious Galaxy-sponsored events and literacy programs in that area, and Hart and Mariotte began working from their ranch in southeastern Arizona in 2004.

The store also participates in organizations within the publishing and bookselling world, through its involvement in groups like The American Booksellers Association (ABA) and the Southern California Independent Booksellers Association (SCIBA). Hart served on the ABA’s Booksellers Advisory Council for two and a half years, and Gilman, a board member of SCIBA, has also served as its president.

Poised for Growth

Laying an early groundwork of community and cooperation has helped Mysterious Galaxy weather storms – economic, technological, or otherwise – that have driven many companies out of business.

The advent of new technologies like e-readers has meant Mysterious Galaxy’s booksellers needed to learn and market their beloved books in new media (“stories are still stories, after all,” says Hart). Online communication and social media have become more important than ever, so owners stay in close contact with friends of the store through blogs, Twitter accounts, an e-newsletter (*The Virtual Plot*), a comprehensive website, and a Facebook page with upward of 2,000 fans.

Mysterious Galaxy booksellers can also be found regularly in print, reviewing books everywhere from the store’s long-popular newsletter (*The Plot Thickens/Thins*) and website, to the *San Diego Union-Tribune* and the ABA’s *Indie Next Picks*.

In 2009, Mysterious Galaxy and other independent bookstores joined with local libraries and began actively supporting KPBS’s annual “One Book, One San Diego” program, which encourages San Diego County residents to read a book together. The group, the San Diego Coalition of Independent Bookstores, ensures that the authors are supported and promoted, and member stores can sell the book locally and host discussion groups for the community.

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Gilman's community-building work in south Los Angeles County has also proven fruitful for Mysterious Galaxy in recent years. The "Ladies, Lunch, & Literacy" program that brings debut and emerging writers to lunch with 40 to 70 readers – with proceeds benefitting local charities and venues – has proven so popular that two more branches have opened in 2011. The business-to-business arm of Mysterious Galaxy's work, based in Gilman's L.A. office, has been branded Spark Enterprise and will also expand this year.

Perhaps most exciting, though, was an announcement made in the spring of 2011 that Mysterious Galaxy would be expanding to two retail locations, keeping its flagship San Diego store and opening a location in Redondo Beach in the summer of 2011.

"Now is the right time to open an independent store," says Gilman. "With some significant independent and chain bookstore closures, I think people are beginning to realize they may lose access to one of their most precious resources. As a result, bookstores may now be valued more than any time in recent history."

The Redondo Beach location will have an even broader genre selection, and focus – like San Diego – on what Gilman calls "community programming" with new and established authors. A state-of-the-art media center will be available to record presentations. It will also serve as an event room that is available for outside, public meetings, as well as Mysterious Galaxy events.

With all of the challenges facing independent businesses, the Mysterious Galaxy team is more confident than ever about their relevance in the community, and more committed than ever to providing readers with "superlative" service.

"At the end of the day," says Hart, "even with great books written by wonderful authors we believe in and supported by the endeavors of the publishers, it's the customers who believe in our selection and make their purchases from us who keep us in business as booksellers."

**Mike Castellucci, KUSI, Feb. 23, 2011*

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