

DOLLARS & SENSE

BARUCH COLLEGE REVIEW OF BUSINESS & SOCIETY

Spanish-Language Bookstores Struggle to Survive

Dec 6th, 2009 | Category: [Boroughs and Beyond](#)

By Cynthia Via

The afternoon light was just fading over Dyckman Street in northern Manhattan one afternoon last month as César González, the owner of Librería Caliope, a Spanish-language bookstore, sat outside his store, selling books from a table on the street. His store was closed and a for-rent sign hung in the window.

Just a few weeks before, he had been evicted for failing to pay the rent. Gonzalez, who still hopes he can save Caliope, had been waiting for a shipment of merchandise, he recalls, but "instead of the merchandise, the marshal came."

"It is a shame," says Amauri Taveras, 28, a Washington Heights resident, of the shuttering of Librería Caliope, which was named for the Greek muse of heroic poetry. "It was never empty when I stopped by, so I figured they did decent business," Taveras, a native of the Dominican Republic believed Caliope was "a great place in the neighborhood to begin exploring your roots."

Librería Caliope is the latest of several Spanish-language bookstores in New York City that have been forced to close shop in recent years. Confronting both an economic downturn and competition from large booksellers, like Barnes & Noble and [Amazon.com](#), as well as e-readers, which sell e-books at steeply discounted prices, two of the city's largest Spanish bookstores – Macondo and Lectorum – closed four years ago.

Situated on West 14th Street, these stores were victims of changing demographics; as downtown became trendy, real estate prices rose and Latin American immigrants – the stores' core customers – moved out. Lectorum closed after nearly a century of doing business.

"Lectorum was not prepared for the change," says Roman Caraballo, owner of Barco de Papel, in Jackson Heights, Queens, one of the few surviving Spanish-language bookstores. There was a "lack of vision," he adds.

Earlier this year, Cemi Underground, in East Harlem, also went out of business.



Photograph by Remi Hu

Caliope, on the border of Washington Heights and Inwood in northern Manhattan, closed after 12 years.

Only a handful of bookstores specializing in Spanish-language books remain in the metropolitan area. Surviving owners, including Caraballo, say diversification is the only way for these specialty stores to stay in business.

For example, *Librería Continental*, in Washington Heights, carries Spanish-language newspapers, magazines, dictionaries and rare books, as well as some English-language books, which they sell for \$1 each. But the store concentrates on wellness-related topics. *Librería Continental* has a large selection of books on psychology, spirituality, religion and self-help, targeted at prisoners, as well as rare books. The store also sells incense and oils used for meditation and to alleviate stress. In addition, the store hosts community discussions on spirituality and metaphysics.



Photograph by Remi Hu

Librería Continental in Washington Heights tries to stand out by specializing in on wellness-related topics, and it has a loyal following.

"This is one of the most important resources in the neighborhood ... encouraging Latino youth to read in Spanish, learn more about their culture, and a meeting place for local intellectuals," says Gabriel Felix, 23.

Rent is about \$2,500 a month for most small businesses of 500 square feet in Washington Heights, according to New Heights Realty. That amount does not include other expenses, which range anywhere from \$5,000 to \$10,000 and can make it difficult for a small bookstore like *Continental* to stay open. Currently *Librería Continental* has 12 to 15 customers a day, each customer spending about \$20 to \$40.

Purchases by customers have dropped by about half during the recession, to one or two per visit, down from four or five when the economy was stronger, says Ildelfonso Lopez, the owner of *Librería Continental*.

Barco de Papel's Caraballo came to the United States from Cuba in 1990s and began selling books on the streets. Before opening his own bookstore in 2003, he worked for Lectorum.

Barco de Papel, which means paper boat in Spanish, specializes in children's books and also serves older customers looking for Spanish literature. The store hosts readings to promote books and signing events for local writers, as well as a monthly Spanish-language theater program geared to promoting Spanish and Latin American culture. The children's theater program is free; it is run by volunteers and partially funded with donations from families and local schools. For Caraballo the key is to "create loyal customers."



Photograph by Remi Hu

Ildelfonso Lopez, the owner of *Librería Continental*, believes there will always be a market for Spanish-language books.

The children's theater program is free; it is run by volunteers and partially funded with donations from families and local schools. For Caraballo the key is to "create loyal customers."

"Every neighborhood has their traditional aspect – its restaurants, churches, markets, and bookstores," he says.

Barco de Papel's greatest asset is its location. The bookstore benefits from the diversity and the number of Latin American immigrants in Jackson Heights. It is also near the train, a clinic and Elmhurst Hospital, one of the biggest in the area. And because it's just off Roosevelt Avenue, it gets a lot of foot traffic, yet the rent is not as high as it is for the stores on Roosevelt Avenue.

Still, business remains difficult, and Caraballo says profits are flat over last year. Barco de Papel sells books on the street at a discount. And it has had to cut prices dramatically. "People expect to buy them for a cheaper price nowadays," says Mr. Caraballo.

Many small bookstores have opted to open Web sites in the hope of attracting more customers. Librería Donatina, another Jackson Heights bookstore, sells rare books from its site. Although it sells many rare books that cannot be found on Amazon or Barnes & Noble, it is harder for smaller Web sites to thrive, because the popular websites come up first on search engines.

"People are buying books that they are being told to read or to look for by the publishing companies and adverting campaigns," says Ruben Ramirez, the manager of Librería Donatina.

Librería Continental is also planning to launch a site, but, for now, continues to take orders via email. As for Barco de Papel, the store plans to start a Web site but doesn't want to rush the process for fear that it will be too costly. "We don't want to copy a form of selling if we can't maintain it," says Mr. Caraballo.



Photograph by Remi Hu

Barco de Papel, in Jackson Heights, Queens, specializes in children's books.

As for the future, owners like Caraballo and Continental's Lopez believe there will always be a need for Spanish-language bookstores as a place to cultivate culture and gather the community. "Books are always going to exist, not everyone will have a computer or a digital book," says Lopez, who believes the market for books will revive when the job market picks up.

Caraballo from Barco de Papel agrees. "The cultural demand is less, but there is a section of people that appreciate books," he says. "I will stay here until the end."

Indeed, before the owner of Callope, the Dyckman Street bookstore, was evicted, writers, friends and local businesses protested and sold raffle tickets to re-open the bookstore. So far, neither the efforts of the community nor of Gonzalez, the owner, have been successful.

Gonzalez hopes, eventually, to cut a deal with his landlord, the Fireside Pentecostal Church, and reopen Callope, which specialized in books by Puerto Rican and Dominican authors and others from the Caribbean. "This is what I like to do," says Gonzalez. "But this type of business is a struggle."
