

# If These SHELVES Could Talk

The Bryn Mawr used bookshops in Cambridge and D.C. have generated more than \$3 million in student internships and scholarships, and decades' worth of good stories.

BY SUSAN K. FLINN '86, PRESIDENT, LANTERN BOOKSHOP BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Women's colleges have historically been underfunded compared to men's colleges — shocking, no? According to lore, many turned to creative fundraising in order to overcome this challenge, including by operating used bookshops. Of the original dozen-plus used bookshops supporting Bryn Mawr College, only two now remain: the Lantern Bookshop in Washington, D.C., and the Bryn Mawr Bookstore in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Each store has been in operation for more than 50 years and has raised significant funds to support Bryn Mawr students.

The shops' eclectic inventories include hardback and paperback books; art, cards, and prints; sheet music; CDs; DVDs; records; and robust foreign language and rare book collections — all donated by generous supporters. The shops have inherited extensive collections from Smithsonian Institution art curators and university professors.

The magic of this system is that one never knows what mysteries await our customers. At the Washington,

D.C. shop, remarkable donations have included a proof set of William Blake's *Illustrations of the Book of Job*, published in 1826, which sold at auction for more than \$80,000, and a first edition of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925). Both came to the Lantern via anonymous donors.

Some devoted customers come in weekly to see what is new on the shelves and to visit our enthusiastic and welcoming volunteers. Customers call the shops "hidden gems" with "the nicest, sweetest people ever" in online reviews and appreciate their quirky nature and the unpredictable stock.

Both shops run entirely through the efforts of a pool of dedicated volunteers. The Washington, D.C. shop, founded in 1977, has about 100 regular volunteers. The Cambridge shop, founded in 1971, has about 40 regular volunteers. Volunteers range from high school students to retirees, who bring a fascinating range of experiences and insights to the shops. Many volunteers are Bryn Mawr alumnae/i; one is a rising first-year joining the



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class of 2029. The shops are particularly thankful for their core group of regular volunteers, some of whom work once — or even twice — each week.

"The Lantern has a different atmosphere than a bookseller who has to be cutthroat and make all the money," says Caroline Willis '66, vice president of the Lantern's board. "Every book has to earn its place on our shelves based on considerations beyond mass popularity. We do have some books that we get attached to; however, we tend to keep those until they find the perfect buyer."

Volunteers who cull the book donations often find themselves

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taking volumes home to protect them. The shops also donate books they don't want to other organizations, including Georgetown Hospital's patient book-cart; organizations serving refugee children in the Washington area; More Than Words, which teaches at-risk youth entrepreneurial skills in the Boston area; and a Quincy, Massachusetts, women's prison library program.

"The community we have built in our little neck of West Cambridge is incomparable," says Melissa Vaughn '89, president of the board of the Bryn Mawr Bookstore, where she has volunteered for a decade. "We meet families with young children, longtime residents, scholars, and visitors from out of town — and people just wanting to pass the time among books. There's a special satisfaction in working with books, and we're lucky that our volunteers each have their own expertise and interests."

Over the years, the shops have made annual donations to the College. Currently, these funds support student summer

internships, although the gifts are made without restriction. The Cambridge location has donated more than \$2 million to the College. At the Lantern, revenues increased steadily since re-opening after a 14-month COVID-related closure and, in 2025, the shop crossed the \$1 million mark in donations, which will be marked by a celebration in November.

If you're local to or visiting our cities, please stop by and visit the shops. Both also accept volunteers if you want a deeper, richer experience.

**Lantern Bookshop**  
3241 P St, NW  
Washington, DC, 20007  
lanternbookshop.org

**The Bryn Mawr Bookstore**  
373 Huron Ave  
Cambridge, MA, 02138  
brnymawrbookstore.com

Rare books are also offered online at **ABE Books**  
abebooks.com



Above: Lantern Bookshop, in Washington, D.C. Left: Inside the Cambridge store.