

The Freiburg bookshop Am Schwarzen Kloster

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Freiburg

city centre is like any city centre these days - it offers a single shopping experience - devoid of any surprises. There are the usual branches of the big chains, the same fast food and coffee franchises as there are everywhere. No wonder - with exorbitant rents of up to 60 € per square metre, it's hard for small, owner-run shops. There are still a few. Anyone not madly hunting the next bargain along the streets and alleyways might notice a little off-licence or knife shop which has managed so far to survive the city centre re-development - through ever so effective marketing. But it will only be a matter of time before the owner gives up and another mobile phone shop fills the gap.

Given this situation, one must admire Mathias Meier's courage in opening the bookshop Am Schwarzen Kloster - in a side-street, it's true, but still in Freiburg's city centre. This bookshop replaced another, failed project called UFO, in the same location. From 1993 until 2006 the shop UFO made a name for itself with fantasy games and literature, science-fiction, action figures, pokemon cards, comics and such like. After a good start and a move to the city centre UFO slid ever further into the red. After it was forced to close, Mathias Meier decided to continue the business but with a new name and a clearer direction. And so the genre/cult-general store UFO evolved into the "Buchhandlung am schwarzen Kloster" - purely a bookshop with a distinctive image. It did remain true to its genre-roots - the selection is concentrated in 3 areas - fantasy (including science-fiction), manga and crime. The crime department is the responsibility of Robert Scheukulin, who already ran it from 1996 at UFO.

For a real crime lover this department is a wet dream. If you allow your gaze to wander over the tables and shelves, you soon notice that Robert Scheukulin is an expert in his field. There are no piles of Dan Brown, Donna Leon or Henning Mankell. Instead Frankie Machine by Don Wilmslow, only recently available in German - and for those who prefer to read the novel in the original, there are also a few copies of the US

edition.

"We don't stock the usual best sellers" Robert explains to me. He reaches for the thick hardcover edition of a novel by Charlotte Link and tells me a little story about it. Trusting to his experience he hadn't ordered the latest doorstopper by this prolific writer. Then very shortly afterwards a customer asked for the title. Robert discovered that it was near the top of a bestseller list, so stocked it reluctantly and is now left with the great tome - this one enquiry was also the last. "Customers who might only buy a crime novel every couple of months, don't come to us, they go to the larger bookstores like Weltbild or Thalia." As if to prove him a liar, a customer comes in not long after and asks for the new Dan Brown. And when he sees Robert's look, he hastens to add that it's for a present.

The new Dan Brown is available, of course, but no, Robert would never recommend this to a customer. This is not a snobbish rejection of best sellers. He would also thrust on said customer the new book by Andreas Eschbach - who could now definitely count as a best-selling author. It is not snobbery that causes him to turn up his nose, rather his demand for quality. Anyone asking for advice in Am schwarzen Kloster can be sure that they won't be fobbed off with rubbish.

This approach creates regular customers. The only problem is that a crime bookshop cannot survive on these alone - there aren't enough regular customers. Also, crime fans in Freiburg are mostly students - they hardly get to know the shop before they leave the city because their courses have finished. And so the resulting loss made by the crime section has to be made up by other sections, especially manga.

In the big book chains where books are just treated as another product - like a pair of tennis socks or an umbrella - this would not happen. The range would be reduced or the whole section closed down. But at the Buchhandlung zum schwarzen Kloster there is no profit-maximisation just devotion to the cause. It is not totally divorced from the realities of the market. Compared with its predecessor, UFO, the Buchhandlung zum schwarzen Kloster has been forced to reduce its selection - but a concentration on really good books has also made the selection tighter and clearer.

The largest space is occupied by translations from English followed by a well-stocked wall of translations from other languages. This highlights a trend of recent years - welcomed by Buchhandlung zum schwarzen Kloster - the focus on interesting authors from outside the English-speaking world - most notably from France, Spain

and Italy

- but also from more exotic countries, such as Finland. In third place, then, are the German authors. In this area, goes the feeling in the shop, progress has been made. There is now a string of truly readable German authors - although they haven't quite reached the level of their foreign competitors.

Fourth place is occupied by

Anglo-American crime novels in the original - a relatively small, but also very good assortment. The fact that this shelf is so small is now largely due to the competition from the large bookstores and the internet. Unlike translations and German-language titles, they are not covered by fixed-price agreements and this means that small shops find it hard to compete. Even with fixed-price books large chains have an advantage over small shops. They can use methods bordering on extortion to push up wholesale prices from the publishers which small shops cannot begin to maintain. So even with a functioning fixed-price agreement in place small, specialist shops are economically disadvantaged compared with large bookstores. If there is no fixed price, as in the case of foreign language books, David has no chance against Goliath. "For an English-language Harry Potter we actually pay more wholesale than the large players can demand from customers."

The death of bookshops in England, for example, (the closing of Murder One in London was reported by europolar) is a direct consequence of the removal of the fixed-price agreement. It may be that this has resulted in cheaper prices for one or two bestsellers but this liberalisation is highly toxic for a country's book culture. Be glad that we still have a fixed-price agreement, as this allows the existence of an excellent crime book shop in Freiburg (in contrast to London).