

*“More than the ARCs, the swag, the parties, and the celebrities, we came for the people.”*

## The Best Party on Earth

A former bookseller and rep remembers the ABA/BookExpo conventions

BY BARBARA BLOOM

We didn't care that it fell on the week after Memorial Day weekend. We didn't care that we were paying out of pocket. We didn't care that we'd be in a jam-packed convention hall. This was BookExpo, originally the American Booksellers Association Convention and Trade Show—and what a show it was. Working at iBrowse Bookstore in West Bloomfield, Mich., in the mid-1980s, I was quickly aware of this bookselling tradition and longed to go, just once, to see what it was all about. I soon had the chance, and I was hooked.



I've been to other trade shows before and since—food shows, car shows—but absolutely nothing compares to a trade show devoted to books. I probably attended a dozen shows over the years—in Chicago; Los Angeles; Miami; New York City; and Washington, D.C.—and was always a little obsessive about trying to see and do as much as I could. That meant scouring the pages of *PW* in advance of the show and creating three spreadsheets: one organized by booth number, one alphabetical by publisher, and one organized by giveaways and author events. With those in hand, I was ready.

I remember telling my husband we'd have to drive to New York for his first BookExpo. “Why aren't we flying?” he asked. “We need the trunk space to bring home books,” I explained. He thought I was exaggerating, but a hundred pounds of books takes up a lot of space. Thank you, publishers, for all those ARCs. We read every single one and shared them generously with friends, family, and colleagues in the bookselling community.

The swag was terrific: different black-and-yellow plush toys from Cliffs Notes each year (what ever happened to my little penguin?); a bison cookie cutter from the University of Nebraska Press (still using it!); Galloping Gourmet Graham Kerr's autograph on a pastry blade I brought for the express purpose of him signing it (sadly, the autograph is fading—but not the smiley face next to it); a treasured signed page from a Barbie coffee-table book (Barbie is lounging in her Dream House, and Batty, William Wegman's photogenic Weimaraner, is sticking her head through the roof).

There were the contests and random drawings. My husband came in second one year in the *New Yorker's* caption contest. He got some mileage out of those bragging rights.

There were the photo ops—Scooby-Doo, Spider-Man, Jack Sparrow, Austin Powers; the serendipitous celebrity

sightings—Captain Kangaroo, Hugh Hefner, Billie Jean King, and Elmore Leonard, just to name a few; and there was the chance to discover new writers, new publishing houses, new illustrators, and new technologies supporting the book industry.

Then there were the legendary parties. I always maintained that if you knew the time and the dress code, it didn't matter whether you had an invitation or not. Most of the time I was a legitimate attendee... but not always. But if we hadn't crashed Robert Kiyosaki's party at the Blue

Martini in Los Angeles, we never would have been approached with what I consider to be a great pickup line, “You look like interesting people to talk to,” or had a chance to speak with a small indie publisher, whose dog book and “pawographs” were causing a stir in her booth earlier that day. Two receptions in Miami were standouts—one took place at what was reported to be one of Madonna's homes; the other was at the John Deere mansion, the Venetian-styled Villa Vizcaya. There were fireworks at that one. A party at the FAO Schwarz flagship store in N.Y.C. felt like a scene out of *Big*. To mark the launch of Berry Gordy's biography, Warner Books threw a swanky affair at the art deco Argyle Hotel in Los Angeles. Front-row seats for Motown singer Smokey Robinson, anyone? Later that night we were dancing in the streets of the Paramount lot for a book celebrating the 25th anniversary of *Saturday Night Live*.

Ingram and Publishers Group West vied for the best grand-scale get-togethers. Imagine Jimmy Buffet and 10,000 parrot-heads. And let's not forget about the Rock Bottom Reminders, the publishing industry's very own rock 'n' rollers.

More than the ARCs, the swag, the parties, and the celebrities, we came for the people. These were our kind of folks. People who worked long hours, evenings, weekends, and holidays to spread the joy of reading. It was a chance to meet people with whom we'd only had phone conversations, a chance to unexpectedly run into an agent (and remember the elevator pitch for that undiscovered narrative nonfiction manuscript that was sitting back home), and a chance to see old friends and catch up. I never went to a high school reunion, but BookExpo seemed like home-coming to me every time. ■

---

*Barbara Bloom, of Bloom Ink, was also a rep for Simon & Schuster, worked at Wayne State University Press, and managed the publishing program and bookshop at the Norton Simon Museum of Art in Pasadena, Calif.*