

Books of consequence: Bookseller Warren Farha

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [May 3, 2011](#) issue



Warren Farha is the founder and owner of Eighth Day Books, a theologically oriented bookstore in Wichita, Kansas, which aims to stock books that "shed light on ultimate questions in an excellent way." We talked with Farha about running his independent bookstore amid the rise of e-books and online commerce.

How did you get into running a bookstore?

The origins of the store go back to a couple of vital sources. One is the Eastern Orthodox community in Wichita in which I was born and raised. The second is a circle of friends that formed in college around books. That circle of friends really

nourished my intellectual curiosity and broadened my understanding of theology, biblical studies and literature. We used to toss around ideas about what the perfect bookstore would contain.

What led to actually creating a bookstore?

About a year and a half before the store opened, my first wife was killed in an auto accident. That experience and my grief spurred me to think about a new life and a new vocation. I tried to think of something that I would like to do every day. I could imagine going to a bookstore every day and loving it, so I decided to try that.

I wanted to open a bookstore that would contain the best of what had been thought and written—an impossible goal, but that was the guiding telos of the store. I was going to limit it to religion, literature, history and children's literature. I opened it in September 1988, and those criteria have not changed in the 23 years since.

Why did you think this would work?

I didn't know if it would work. I had to do something, and this was the thing that I had to do. I had no thought of leaving Wichita to do it.

What is the significance of the name?

The "eighth day" was deeply significant to early Christians. It represented the resurrection of Christ, but it has many layers of meaning. It is Sunday, the first day, but also the day after the seven days of creation. The eighth day represents a new creation—eternity contrasted with time, that which lasts contrasted with that which is fading away. This lends itself to the concept of classics.

Who shops at your store?

Thinking Christians, generally. We have academic communities in Wichita as well as vibrant evangelical, Catholic and Orthodox communities, and to some degree mainline ones. We also have a generous sprinkling of customers who aren't Christians and are just interested in great books.

Does your bookstore have a gathering space and a coffee shop?

We lack the ability to do that. If we took on a whole new aspect for our store, it would be to have a meeting place and a café. We serve free coffee, but that's just out of a pot on the table.

Big-box stores have had to make adjustments, and now Borders is in trouble financially. How do you survive in this environment?

I am still making it—I haven't made it. But our situation is very different from Borders. When you get to be as big as Borders, the risks are great and the mistakes are consequential. You have to cover everything. The competition is cruel. In this environment, it helps to be a specialist. But that isn't as easy as it used to be, because Internet commerce has created a whole new community of specialists.

How do you see your store needing to adjust to new commercial realities?

I don't see any major changes. Four years ago, we computerized the inventory and created a comprehensive website. I wanted it to represent every book in the store. It took two years, but we now have a fine inventory control system and an effective Internet presence.

How much of your business is online and outside the brick-and-mortar store?

A little over half of our business is outside of Wichita and a little under half is over-the-counter. Besides online customers, we are on the road twice a month for events. That has been a distinct sub-niche for us to pursue. I love the events that we go to, but it takes a tremendous amount of time and research to do those events right.

What do you think about the future of print?

The book is a discrete object that changes your life. It is not just what was in the book, but the book itself—it is the object that is woven into your memory. My first copy of *Mere Christianity* is 40 years old now. I can see the marked-up pages, the squiggly blue ink, the now-falling-apart copy, and I remember the experience of reading that book. These books are bethels—stones of revelation. They are sacramental objects. I believe that physical books offer a superior way of reading. Electronic books are a gnosticizing technology that leave out much of the physical dimension. Even the neurology of reading an e-book is different. It is missing the parts of your brain that access deep attention and long-term memory.

How would you describe the spiritual or theological hunger of people who buy books at your store?

I might be imposing my own hunger on my customers, but maybe there is a correlation. People of faith want that faith to be true, but they don't always know how their faith plays out in history or science or literature. They may be pious people, but they want their faith to embrace all knowledge.

In our store, we are aiming toward the good, the true and the beautiful. The people who come in here want to inhabit that transcendental arena. They pick up *Gilead* or *Jayber Crow* or Dostoevsky. They find these magical writers that pose, and sometimes answer, issues of faith and transcendence.

My customers come here because they can find books that confirm their faith in indirect ways. Of course, we carry apologetics, but I am also seriously on the lookout for books that describe art in a way that shows its deep connections with faith. Maybe these books never mention God, but they describe the cosmos in a way that points toward what might be. When I pick up a Wendell Berry essay, I hear echoes of the church fathers in some way. It's those kinds of books that excite me.