

Ocracoke Bookstores: Distinctive Island Reading

by Sally Lawrence

It was a perfect day-after-Thanksgiving on Ocracoke Island: rainy, gray, damp, and chilly. We dodged puddles on our morning walk and shivered in the sharp wind as we headed to the Ocracoke Coffee Company and Java Books for two of our favorite things – a good read and a fine cup of coffee. The scent of fresh-ground coffee and cinnamon perks us up as we enter the coffee shop, which is bustling with a small crowd sharing newspapers, catching up on local gossip, admiring kids and dogs – and of course, reading. At the back of the coffee shop is Java Books, one of the two bookstores owned by Leslie Lanier and managed by Daniela Gilbert. Gilbert is at the register this morning as several customers drift in to find the day's entertainment. About as large as a big living room and as welcoming, the store feels warm and bright and airy with big windows, French doors, and large, white paper Japanese lanterns lighting up the drizzly day.

One woman heads toward the section on regional books and thumbs through a coffee table book on lighthouses, a perennial favorite with tourists. She picks up another book about the oral tales of the Outer Banks and turns to look at the nature guides in case the weather breaks and she can head out to the beaches for some shell collecting. Another customer with a little tot in tow selects a couple of picture books and a fine wooden puzzle, while the tot giggles happily over the deeply green rubber frog he's squeezing. I'm headed to the fiction section, where I find an Anita Brookner book to keep me happy. Another customer, who confesses that his taste usually runs to Clive Cussler, picks up Seamus Heaney's translation of *Beowulf* and heads to the register. After choosing a few greeting cards and picking up Ann Patchett's *Bel Canto*, I'm set; but, I pause to take note of a Jane Smiley novel and Richard Russo's *Empire Falls* just in case the rain settles in for the whole weekend. Never without an extra book or two, I'm the classic reader that Leslie Lanier had in mind when she decided to open her first bookstore, Books to be Red, on Ocracoke:

Do you know that panicky feeling of not having a book with you when you want it? After having a couple of vacations where I could only find the grocery store top ten list to read, I realized Ocracoke offered the same limited choice. I wanted to expand those choices to include contemporary fiction, poetry, and children's books.

(www.ocracokebookstores.com)

When I meet Leslie and Daniela for coffee, I ask them how they select such a fine collection of books that ranges from the must-haves on the bestseller lists to literary classics – John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* sits next to Nicolas Sparks's *The Notebook*. "I belong to the American Booksellers Association (ABA), which makes me part of Book Sense, a collection of independent bookstores; Book Sense publishes a bestseller list of what people are actually buying in their stores and

