

The Yachats Gazette

Issue 99

March 1, 2020

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INTERVIEW WITH MARI IRVIN, JEANNINE JANSON, MARY CROOK, AND YVONNE ERICKSON

The Yachats Gazette visited with the former owners of Mari's Books And..., Mari Irvin, Jeannine Janson, and Mary Wiltse (in absentia), along with the new owners (Yvonne Erickson and Mary Crook) of the bookstore, Books and More, that is opening March 1.

TYG: How did you gals come together?

Mari: Well. [big pause]

Jeannine: You mean, the four of us?

TYG: Yes.

Yvonne: When Mari and Jeannine and Mary had us over, all the business ladies, to announce their retirement, I was the second person to show up and say, "I need to buy the bookstore."

TYG-Graphic Design: Who was the first person?

Mary: I was the first person! Now, this event was on a Monday night. Tuesday morning I marched into the Presbyterian Church where Jeannine was working, and we met outside the building, and I said, "You know, I've been thinking about that bookstore. I am interested. But... I can't do it alone. So I just wanted to put it out to the universe that that was in my mind—I wanted to get that process going." And



From left to right: The Publisher, Yvonne Erickson, Mari Irvin, Jeannine Janson, Mary Wiltse [pictured], Teddy, and Mary Crook.

then the very next day, I guess, I get a call from Mari, and Mari says, "You know, I was approached by someone who's interested in the bookstore!" I said, "Oh! How great!" [laughter] And Mari asked permission to give my name to this person. And it was Yvonne! [laughter]

Yvonne: I woke up with such absolute certainty that this was something I needed to do, that I was actually kind of flabbergasted when I found out I wasn't the first person! I was like, "No! I have to do this! I have to!" [laughter] I think it's really important to the

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Yvonne Erickson - James King

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community for the continuity, and it's important that Mari and Jeannine—and Mary [Wiltse]—retire knowing that all their hard work wasn't for naught.

Mari: Mary had come out a couple of times in the summer and fall [of last year], and we talked about it being time, maybe. Mary's time was certainly over, because she left a year and a half earlier to go be with her grandson and his parents in South Dakota. My sons, and Jeannine, had been wondering, "How long do you want to do this?" And we had said, when we started this store, that we would do it one year and see how it went. And then we would do it only as long as it was fun. Well, it's still fun! But I think that if I were to do this much longer, it would begin to approximate work. So we decided that we would put it out there. And of course we didn't know if anybody would buy a used bookstore, because you don't make a lot of money here. In fact... you don't. So I had talked to our landlord before we announced it to the ladies Monday night, and I said "If we can find a buyer, would you be willing to talk to that person about renting to them for a bookstore?" And Jerry Clarke, who's the landlord, said "Absolutely. I want a bookstore here." So

that cleared that. And then things just kind of moved along.

Jeannine: If I may... Mary—sister Mary—she moved a year and a half ago. However this fits before she left, Mari and Mary alternated weeks. After Mary left, Mari has been doing it essentially on her own. I took over doing Sundays, but Mari's been doing the bookstore a year and a half on her own, with Tuesday and Wednesday off because we're closed then, and Sunday, when I would work. So she's been keeping it going.

Mari: When I worked professionally, I learned by watching other people that it's a very good idea to leave your position before people say, "When is that person going to leave?" *[laughter]* And I think I've done that. [...] This is a dream come true, that Yvonne and Mary are doing this. It's just absolutely a dream come true.

Mary: It's a dream come true for me, too, because I have wanted to own a bookstore probably all of my adult life. When I left my former job in Portland, the staff knew my dream: they gave me a sweatshirt that said "Book Woman" on it. *[laughter]* Well, it was

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only 26 years later that my dream came true! All in divine order.

Jeannine: Well, so the day after we had the shopkeepers over, and Mari announced that she would be retiring, yes, Mary Crook walked right into the church. I saw her coming! For some reason I thought, "I think she's going to talk about the bookstore!" For some reason, we hadn't told anybody else yet. So she mentioned briefly that she'd dreamed of having a bookstore. Mary [Wiltse] was still here, so I said, "Why don't you come over tonight?" So she came over, and talked to the three of us, all about what her dream was. I mean, it's quite amazing! And—I always like to say this—then Yvonne—so within 72 hours of announcing retirement, we knew we had people who would love to do it. And if you don't think it wasn't hard to not [spill the beans about who was interested]...

Yvonne: Because everybody was speculating, and asking questions, and it would be like... couldn't say anything. Because we had to make sure all our ducks were in a row before we made it public that it was us who were going to be the owners. And we managed to keep it SO secret that when we had our little get-together to do the passing of the key, it was kind of like high school. Everybody screamed and jumped



The Handing Over of the Key

Left to right: Mari Irvin, Yvonne Erickson, Mary Crook, and Jeannine Janson.

around and hugged because they had no clue. And these are people we see every day!

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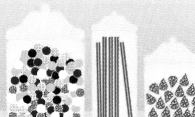
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Serious Whimsy



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Jeannine: What we did was, we said, "Could you come over to the store after you close? We have an announcement!" This was after a couple of months or something. So we had some Prosecco here, and then as many people as could come, and ...

TYG-GD: *You mean, as could fit?*

Jeannine: *[laughter]* As many shop-keepers as could make it that night! I said a few words, Mari said a few words, and then we had a count-down, which was pre-arranged. And we said, "We will reveal the names of the new owners in 5, 4, 3, 2, 1." And when we said their names, we had the pleasure of watching absolute joy and excitement. It was such a pleasure to see it. Folks—as you said—jumping up and down.

Yvonne: Yes!

TYG-GD: *That's cool! [to Yvonne:] Did you have a dream of being a bookstore owner? Or what do you think precipitated your feeling that it just had to be?*

Yvonne: I would say the very biggest percentage of it was *[thinking that]* we can't not have a bookstore. And I want to make sure that Mari, and Mary, and Jeannine can move on. That was the big thing. There was a little itty bit part of me that said, "And I do not want a gift store right next to me, so it had better stay a bookstore." *[laughter]* But that literally was just an

afterthought. I thought, "No, I need to do this." *[to us:]* I'm going to cry.) They have been so supportive and so inclusive of me when I came to the community that it was like, "I have to do this." And the fact that I read all the time doesn't hurt. You know? I can have all the books I could possibly read and not have to dust them every day.

Mary: I'll get that pleasure. *[laughter]*

Mari: I came over a few times to say, "You're sure? You're sure you want to do this?" *[laughter]*

Yvonne: Absolutely positive.

TYG-GD: *Well, what's the plan for the future? In small increments—will you stay open? Or will you revamp? Or will there be painting? What's going to happen for the community?*

Mary: Well, these ladies, Mari and Jeannine, and Mary Wiltse when she was in town, have done a wonderful job of completing the inventory.

Mari: First time in 14 years!

TYG: *Wow!*

Mary: So we know what's here. We want to keep it pretty much the way they're leaving it, because they have a little gold mine here. They have 14 years of successful business, and a nice, loyal local following.

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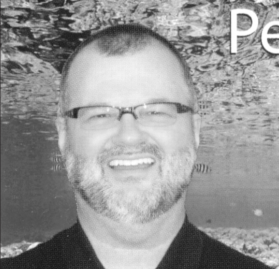
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Yvonne: I'm going to continue to manage Just Local *[the business next door to the bookstore]* and be the bookkeeper/that person...

TYG-GD: *The responsible person?*

TYG: *Inventory artist?* *[laughter]*

Yvonne: Well... Yeah, there you go. That's my thing. I'm just a numbers person. I just love that. So I'm really happy to take all those kinds of responsibilities on. Though I do love people and visiting. But Mary's going to hold down the fort. And we'll work with each other for vacation times, or if something comes up we'll make sure that there's coverage in both locations. And no, we are not putting a hole in the wall. *[laughter]* Just FYI.

Mari: That's the second question people ask.

Mary: Incidentally, the bookstore is going to be named "Books and More," and the sub-title is "Something Old, Something New, Something Local."

Mari: That's great.

Jeannine: First time I've heard that! I knew "Books and More;" I didn't know the sub-line.

Mary: "Something old, something new" came to me automatically because of my wedding services. "Something local" [is because] we're going to have

local authors on display in here, and Yvonne may display something from her shop too.

Yvonne: Bigger art pieces on the wall type stuff. Just to make sure the walls are full.

Mari: One of the joys of having a store for the three of us—and I'm sure that you can appreciate it too—is that we have local people who stop in, almost every day, just to say, "Hi, how's it going?" and they buy books, too! But we have a lot of people who are traveling from basically all over the world to come here. But we have regulars from Washington, Idaho, California. And the last year or so, every time they come up they say, "You're still here!" and we say, "Yes, we are!" But lately I've been saying, "We're not going to be here, but it's going to be a bookstore, and you're going to love it."

Yvonne: And those that know it's Mary and I pop into the shop, and ask the questions: "Are you going to have the same stuff? Are we still going to be able to come in and get our books when we come on vacation?" and we say, "Yep."

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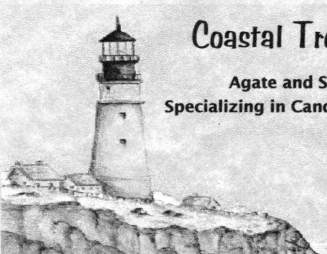


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TYG-GD: So when is the transition happening officially? Do you know yet?

Mari: We're going to close President's Day weekend. Our insurance ends February 29, so we thought that was a good closing date, and we can clean the place up for them. And then after the 29th of February, whatever...

Yvonne: March 1st!

TYG: Wow! [to Mari and Jeannine:] Are you guys moving?

Mari: No, no—we're staying here. Jeannine's continuing to work at the church, and we'll stay here as long as it's good to stay here.

TYG: Awesome! I wanted to ask you guys: What have you learned, having a bookstore in this community?

Mari: Well first of all, I'd say it's an extremely literate community. I've learned more... In fact, I've got a notebook here, which I might pass on to you two [Yvonne and Mary]. When we opened the store, we had a notebook here and we asked people to write down authors that they liked. And they did! And now when I look at that notebook I think, "I don't think I knew any of these authors when we started." And it's not that they're that unusual, it's that I was not that well connected with current literature. And so I've learned a lot about books, and I've learned a lot

about how to encourage people to buy books. Not just to buy a book, but to buy one that fits for them. The worst question I get is when somebody comes in and says, "Oh, I need a book—what do you recommend?" [laughter] And I go absolutely blank. But we'll wander around, and I'll get an idea of what they're looking for.


Jeannine: One of the things we learned early on: We thought seriously that we would only be in business as long as it took us to sell the supply of books that we opened with. We never dreamed we would have to buy more books. [laughter]

Mari: Unbelievable.

TYG-GD: So, how many books do you think you've bought?

Mari: Oh, thousands. When we left San Francisco, everybody we knew had a closet full of books. So we had several trips of the car being filled with books. So our cost factor the first year was quite low. Some people come in quite regularly to order certain kinds of books; some of them are books we probably wouldn't keep in the store. But my logic has been as long as it's on Amazon—and I use that sort of as my cultural guide—then it's something that I can order for you. Even if I don't order it from Amazon.

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TYG: I was going to ask if you were going to keep the ordering service going.

Mary: Yes, definitely.

Yvonne: There isn't enough space to realistically keep everything that everybody would ever want.

TYG-GD: Even Powell's doesn't do that! [laughter]

Yvonne: Oh gosh... When I lived in Portland, that was my Saturday afternoon, treat myself like a queen thing, was to go to Powell's. I love that store.

Mary: Special orders are very important. Shortly after Mari's Books And... opened, I had been regularly watching or listening to "Book TV" on C-SPAN2. It's 48 hours of non-fiction book talk. I would see an author who particularly impressed me, and I'd write down the author's name and the title, and by Sunday night I kind of knew what I was interested in. Well, Monday morning, I would come into Mari's Books And... and order a book from "Book TV"!

Jeannine: I believe Mary Crook was the first person to order a book. You called, you gave the author, and the title, and the ISBN number! [laughter]

Mari: Our garage at the house has a dedicated room for the reserve and online books we sell.

TYG-GD: Wait, you guys sell online?

Mari: Yes, we have a little online store that we're going to keep, through Amazon. It's a handy way to do it; it's not the most profitable way. And we still have boxes of books in the garage that we've not opened yet! [to Mary and Yvonne:] So I might be down here selling books to you! [laughter]

Yvonne: I went through my collections, and I decided I'd better be organized, because you can't come down here willy-nilly with a bunch of stuff. I started boxing by author, because some, I have entire collections. And when I got down to the miscellany, it was by alphabet. And I have 19 boxes of books that are gone through. And I still keep finding books, "Oh! I forgot about those!" [claps hands] [laughter]... and those and those and those!

Mari: Just a little observation: I think you'll have to take a lot of the books off the shelf to get yours on there!

Yvonne: Well, that's just back-up stuff!

Mari: Well, I think a change in genre would be very nice!

Yvonne: Okay... And I see—I've been looking—you have some Mary Higgins Clark. I have a huge box

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of them, and with her just passing, I'm wondering if there's going to be a huge interest, or a resurgence.

Mari: Yes. There are certain authors that just sell, and Mary Higgins Clark is one of them. There are certain authors that we always have, because the book might have been written 20 years ago, but people still want it.

TYG: I'm surprised Neal Stephenson isn't one of them.

Mari: Yes! The problem with Stephenson's books is that they're so thick, and so costly, and it's usually in hardback. We tend not to buy too many hardback books, except as used books, because hardback books have begun to be quite expensive. \$30-\$40 is very, very common. But we special order them.

Jeannine: I'm not certain when we started doing this, because we opened next door, in the small space. We were there first, in March 2006, and moved over here in 2010, after the video store.

Mari: And then there was a collectible shop, and they had trouble. And then it was vacant for a while; Jerry Clarke came over and said, "You've got to move. You've got to get out of that small space." And I think I said to Jerry, "We can't afford to move, Jerry. Your rent will be too high." He said, "I have every

confidence that you will do far better if you move." So we did, in March of 2010. And our sales went up 40 per cent that year—which was a good reason to move.

Jeannine: I don't know whether it was after we moved here that we started best-sellers. Because [the store] is primarily used [books], but we do carry fiction and non-fiction best-sellers, the *New York Times* best-sellers. And I don't think we had local authors in the tiny shop.

Mari: We didn't have many, if we did.

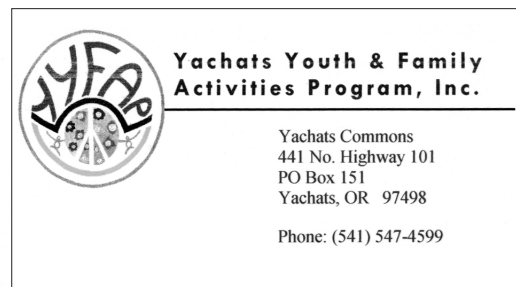
Jeannine: We were approached by quite a few people. And they're all featured over there [by the front door].

Mary: The small space of their former location was very special to me, and I'll tell you why: I used to work there part-time, on an occasional basis. And I love working in a bookstore. Well, as you know, I'm also a wedding minister. Some young couple came in to see me in the small space, and they said they were going to have a big, formal wedding, but they really needed to get the documents done immediately, and [asked if] I could marry them. And I said, "Well, I'll be working here at ten tomorrow morning! You could come in at ten minutes before ten. But I'll need two witnesses." "We'll bring our parents." So we actually

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had a wedding in that tiny space, with a couple and two sets of parents. It was cramped. *[laughter]*

TYG-GD: So, as new owners, what are you most looking forward to?

Mary: I am just looking forward to being in this space and talking to the happy people who come in. That's what I enjoy the most, is talking to people and talking books.

Yvonne: This sounds so strange, but it's not really changing my day-to-day a lot. But I just feel so blessed to be connected with such wonderful people, and this is the vehicle that it happens with.

TYG: Is there anything else you guys wanted to say?

Mari: I was going to say that I think I can speak for all three of us, but certainly Jeannine can speak for herself, although Mary will have to be quiet. *[laughter]* It's been just a joy—and I mean that seriously—just a joy to have this store. It's brought vitality to me, kind of an eager sense of getting up in the morning and going down to the store. And at night I sometimes just go home and have dinner and go to bed, so it's just been an absolute, joyous pleasure to have this store. It's something I had wanted to have for probably 40 years. But I knew I couldn't afford it until I retired.

Jeannine: As I already said, I only started working in the bookstore on Sundays when Mary moved. Prior to that I was the behind-the-scenes paper partner and compliance officer. While I did not work here regularly, in the sense only that Mari and Mary did, I still connected to the store. And had we not been connected to the store, we would not know the shop-keepers. Knowing them, and interacting with everybody over this 14 year period of time, that is why it was important to us to tell the shop-keepers first, before anybody else, that Mari would retire and the store was closing. These relationships, for me, have been wonderful. And they would not have occurred, I don't think—we wouldn't have had the same relationship with these folks, and Valeria *[of Toad Hall]* and Valerie *[of Antique Virgin]* if we had not had this business.

Mari: And we don't see each other all that much—there might be months before I see Valerie. We see Judith *[of Judith's Kitchen Tools]* every day, and we see you two *[Yvonne and Mary]* usually every day, but it's not like we all get together and have coffee first thing in the morning. We just kind of come in, and check on each other. If somebody's late to work, we'll follow up and call. But it's brought energy to my life that I have needed and have highly valued. And when I'm done cleaning the garage, I'll probably come down and visit the store.

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Yvonne: Realistically-speaking, for me—and I don't mean to sound like I'm patting myself on the back—it's strictly altruistic. I just have to keep the community—as much for the community, as for me. And the fact that I get to share it with Mary is really exciting.

TYG: Well, thank you so much for everything.

The Yachats Gazette was able to contact Mary Wiltse via e-mail, and this is what she had to add:

When Mari and Jeannine first started thinking that this was a venture they wanted to start in late 2005, I was in Iowa City, maintaining vigil, so to speak, with a dear friend who was spending her last days in the hospital. So when Mari asked me to be a part of the bookstore, I just couldn't even think about it. A while later, after Lavonne had passed, I called Mari and said that I would like to be a co-owner and I traveled to Oregon from my home in St. Paul MN, to help us get ready. We dragged together our personal collection of books, started putting prices on them, organizing into categories and placing them on the shelves... the books we opened the store with were primarily from our own personal libraries. I had a good friend in Minnesota ask me, "What are you going to do when you have sold all of your own books?" The three of us (Mari, Jeannine and I looked at each other, shrugged and smiled...we really had no clue!!) Well, we discovered garage sales, estate sales, library sales, St. Vincent de Paul, etc. Because I was living in a large metropolitan area...St. Paul MN...I was constantly buying, pricing and shipping books to the store...I was the mid-west partner and the primary book buyer.

In 2008, I bought my Yachats house and started living part-time in Yachats. How I love the Oregon coast... that powerful, beautiful ocean. My involvement with the staffing of the store increased. In 2010, I became a full-time resident. At that point Mari and I shared the staffing of the store while Jeannine handled the financial responsibilities. Mari and I, being 8 years difference in ages, never spent much time together. And, we lived most of our lives half way 'cross the country. Gradually, we found that we could work together well, each finding our 'niche' in sharing responsibilities. At the same time, we truly became sisters and our affection and respect for each other deepened immensely. And, Jeannine, oh what a blessing to get to know Jeannine better and the love we have for each other is wonderful...she truly is a real sister to me.

What a gift to have a shop in the center of the village. Locals coming in, sitting on a stool by the desk to visit. Meeting people from all over Oregon and around the world...so many visiting the store over and over...not just buyers or acquaintances...but becoming friends. I loved being a part of the Yachats business community...discovering how many of the successful business owners are women...many 'older' women...and as women shop-keepers we have a strong bond and friendships that remain strong over time and geographic space.

And now...for the store to be owned by two great friends, Mary Crook and Yvonne Erickson. Never, did I imagine something as wonderful as this would transpire. The heart of the store will be even stronger!

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After my hemorrhagic stroke a few years ago, my children asked if I could move back to the Midwest so that we could be closer. Why SD (where my son lives) and not MN (where my daughter lives)? I have a wonderful grandson...my only grandchild in SD. It is such a delight to be a very present part of his life and share his interests and talents. I love being close to both daughter Kari (Minneapolis) and son David (here in Brookings).

When people asked 'why, in heaven's name did you choose to move to SD', or even more bluntly saying, 'you are moving to SD on purpose???' I just smile. Brookings is a wonderful community with SDSU, where my son and daughter-in-law are professors. It does not have an ocean...but I have developed great friendships. And...I am playing Mah Jongg again!

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