This Jersey Shore bookstore is a refuge for readers

Hooked on Books in Wildwood is busiest on rainy Shore days.

Hooked on Books, a used bookstore on Pacific Avenue in Wildwood, where the shelves are filled with bestsellers, mysteries, and classics.
Alejandro A. Alvarez / Staff Photographer

by Jason Nark
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WILDWOOD — A light rain fell on Pacific Avenue, a fine time to be a bookseller at the Jersey Shore, and as soon as Kieran Linnane unlocked the door on this midsummer morning, customers filed in by the dozens.

They came to Hooked on Books looking for Elvis biographies, for naval history and Shakespeare and, with ribbons of blue sky visible to the west, young women came looking for the queens of beach reads, authors like Colleen Hoover and Elin Hilderbrand.

“A rainy day is a busy day,” Linnane, the store’s co-owner, says.

Kieran Linnane, co-owner of Hooked on Books, put a display stand with used books at the entrance to his used bookstore along Pacific Avenue in Wildwood.
Alejandro A. Alvarez / Staff Photographer

It's a few minutes past 10 a.m. and Linnane's hands are already full as he browses the shelves for misplaced books.

"Who puts Jackie Collins in with the classics?" he says to himself with a lovely Irish accent.

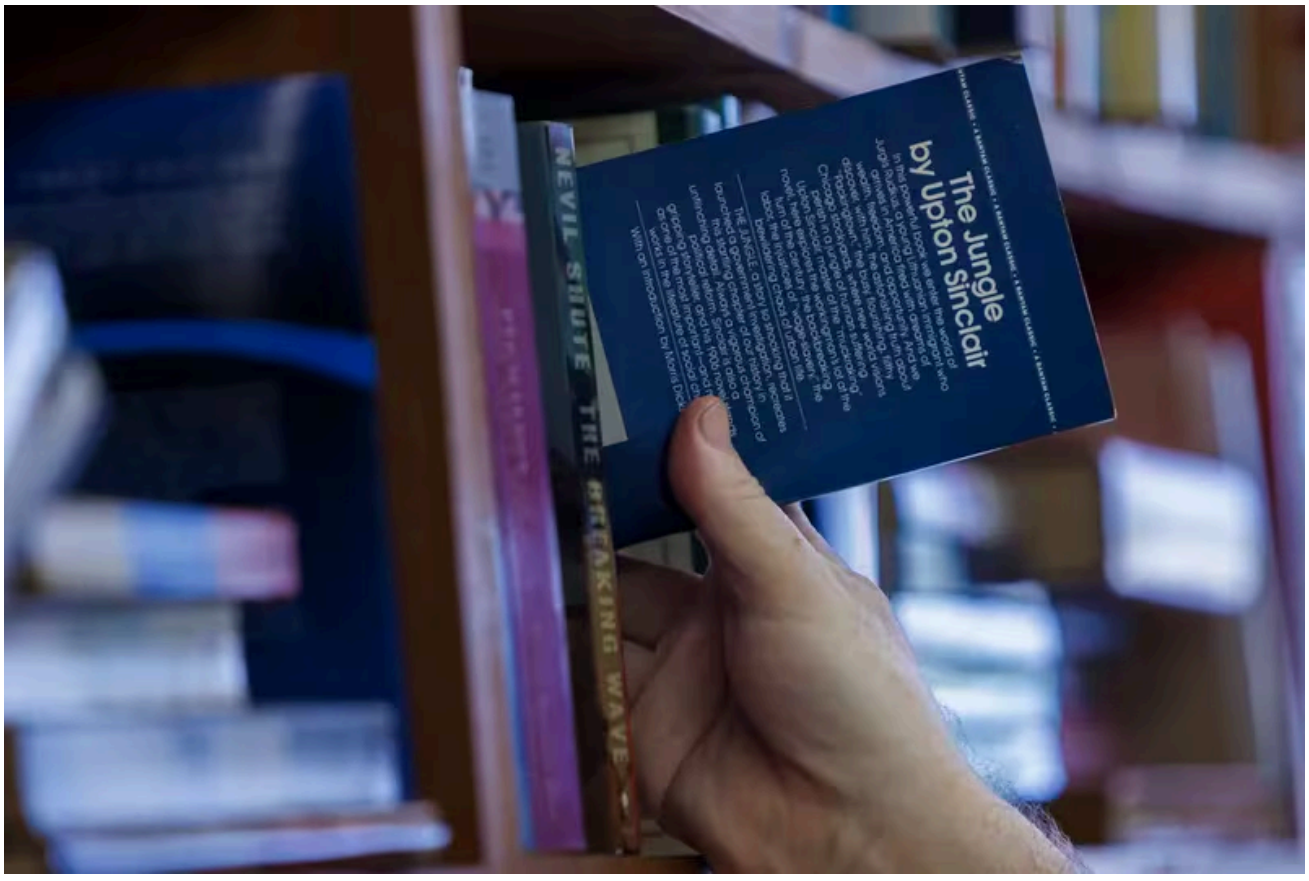
Linnane, who was born in Galway, and co-owner James Wright opened the bookstore in 1991, moving to the larger location here on Pacific Avenue in 1997. At the time, booksellers abounded at the Jersey Shore with chains like the now-defunct Atlantic Books having locations in just about every town from Cape May to Long Beach Island.

Today, there are just a handful. Linnane said 2010, in particular, was a plague for independent stores.

"It was Amazon," he says of the demise. "They choked the life out of it all. They were ruthless."

Bookstores that do remain open at the Shore have supplemented income with what they call "sidelines," everything from vinyl records to greeting cards to posters.

"They are things that have a higher margin, things like calendars and journals, things associated with reading," said Rosalyn Lifshin, co-owner of Ocean City's Sun Rose Words & Music on Asbury Avenue. "Books do not have the greatest margin."



Kieran Linnane, co-owner of Hooked on Books, organizes books misplaced by customers as they are browsing at his used bookstore along Pacific Avenue in Wildwood.
Alejandro A. Alvarez / Staff Photographer

Linnane doesn't have sidelines at Hooked on Books, or even magazines. He doesn't sell books online and while there are some paintings and figurines atop the tallest shelves, no one's ever asked to purchase them. It's mostly books, everywhere, and it's personal for Linnane.

"I have a favorite record shop in Ireland. I bought all my first records there and I'm so sad when I go in there now because they sell shirts and magnets, and the records and CDs are like in a little corner and it just feels more like a gift shop," he says.

New bestsellers and beach reads are front and center at Hooked on Books and some customers rarely venture deeper than the cash register, into the narrow aisles of towering shelves jammed with used books. Linnane prides himself on those used books. Wright often heads out after the morning rush to scour the area for them.

Linnane and Wright have five warehouses full of books off the island, and one in Florida, where Linnane lives in the winter. In the store, Linnane tries to keep one copy of a book on the shelf to save space, but the back stockrooms are a veritable catacomb of books, stacked to the ceiling, and he's got steady sellers ready to move up front to replace a copy that's sold. There were at least a dozen copies of Robert Ludlum's *The Cry of the Halidon* waiting in the wings back there.

Hooked on Books doesn't accept book donations, to keep their deeply curated sections on point.

"I love books," Linnane says, "but I can't love them all."

Hooked on Books has sections and shelves on "Race, Culture & Language," 'Westerns," "Meditation," and, of course, "Irish Authors." Customer Augustine

Coffaro, of Staten Island, was browsing the history section. He's been coming to the store, while on vacation, for decades.

"It's not just that it's affordable," he says. "They have a great selection."

Jim Wright, co-owner of Hooked on Books, works with customers shortly after opening the store. Alejandro A. Alvarez / Staff Photographer

Linnane takes pride in his vast selection of mysteries, a genre he believes is perfect when your toes are in the sand.

"I'm always proud of the classics too," he said. "To see someone walk out of here with an armful of Fitzgerald and Hemingway gives me hope. And young people buy them too and not just for summer reading but because they want to read them. That impresses me."

Lifshin, at Sun Rose, said young customers, particularly teenage girls, are some of her steadier customers. She's seen their interest in books increase in recent years.

"I have so many teenage girls that come in and out of here all week," she said. "TikTok has played a big role in that, with influencers talking about certain books."

At Hooked on Books, customer Charlene Fryberg, of Staten Island, waited outside with her daughter for 10 minutes before Linnane arrived. She wore an Elvis T-shirt and carried an Elvis handbag and already spotted an Elvis book through the window.

"You name it, I'm Elvis," she said.

By noon, the sky was cloudless and people passed the store hauling wagons and beach chairs. The tide was going out at Hooked on Books, but Linnane was still busy putting books back in their rightful place.

“People come here and they’ll spend hours here and realize they have too many books and put some back,” he said. “It’s a good problem.”

Kieran Linnane, co-owner of Hooked on Books, puts out a U.S. flag at the entrance to his used bookstore along Pacific Avenue in Wildwood.

Alejandro A. Alvarez / Staff Photographer

Jason Nark

I write stories and narratives about the outdoors and rural parts of Pennsylvania and New Jersey, the trails, towns, and people far from city life.

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