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Greg Taylor

January 14th, 2026

The best bookshops in Toronto, Canada

In this bookshop guide, [Greg Taylor](#) takes us on a tour of Toronto's most charming purveyors of books. If you know a city with great spots for book lovers, you can find information about how to contribute to our [global bookshop guide series](#) at the [end of this article](#).

A trapeze through Toronto's snowy flurries can simultaneously be a stroll in the warming footsteps of literary greats. John Irving, that verbose titan of storytelling, lives in the city, using it as a backdrop to his 1989 book [A Prayer for Owen Meany](#). Margaret Atwood, visionary dystopian, studied here and perhaps glimpsed [Gilead](#) between Downtown's sparkling high-rises. Rohinton Mistry emigrated here in the 1970s, studied at the university, and wrote the monumental [A Fine Balance](#) (1995) while looking back across the oceans at India. Then there's Michael Ondaatje, Miriam Toews, Anne Michaels. So many footsteps, so many tales.

Bakka-Phoenix Books – 84 Harbord Street

And where might those intriguing footsteps take us? Our first stop is the [Bakka-Phoenix](#) sci-fi emporium in Harbord Village, clutching the fringes of the University of Toronto's august campus. Once sharing a building with Glad Day (see below) and claiming to be the most ancient of sci-fi booksellers, Bakka-Phoenix has more spicy Frank Herberts, more [Clarkean](#) odysseys, and more cheerless [Tchaikovskys](#) than you can shake a lightsabre at. The atmosphere is rarified, the clientele cerebral, the collection significant.

A requested recommendation for a local visionary led me, via William *Neuromancer* Gibson (a Vancouver resident transplanted from America) and Margaret Atwood, to A E Van Vogt, a Canadian contemporary of Isaac Asimov. Giddy, exhilarating, troubling and obtuse, his stories feature horrifying extra-terrestrials and hair-pin twists that left me confused and amused.



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BMV Books – 471 Bloor Street West

Just two blocks north, on pullulating Bloor Street West, is the cavernous **BMV Books**. A daunting den of literature old and new, used and pristine, it's a place to dive in and embrace the seemingly chaotic collection. Academic architectural studies rub spines with ribald graphic novels and well-thumbed thrillers – this is a place to lose yourself and discover the Turkish historical fantasy romance you never knew you were looking for. Fair warning, all three Toronto BMVs are time black holes, and a whole afternoon can easily disappear, along with a fair few Canadian dollars. You won't regret it though.

The interior of BMV Books, 471 Bloor Street West, Toronto. Photo by Greg Taylor.

A Different Booklist – 779 Bathurst Street

Out we go, briefly into the snow and round the corner to the resolutely political and progressive **A Different Booklist**, which stocks “the rich literature of the African and Caribbean diaspora and Global South” as well as a multitude of talented Indigenous writers. A perusing of its groaning shelves will take in sports biographies, historical analyses, impassioned political treatise, and some eye-opening novels. There’s room for anti-establishment blockbusters like *The Hunger Games* and – inevitably – *The Handmaid’s Tale* here, but I picked up *In the Upper Country (2024)* by Kai Thomas, which reveals the harsh realities of Canada’s place at the end of the Underground Railroad, and the bravery and sacrifice that sustained growing communities there.

A display inside the bookshop, A Different Booklist, Toronto via A Different Booklist on Facebook.

Little Ghosts – 930 Dundas Street West

Back on the treacherously icy sidewalks again, we head south through the soul-warming miasma of Little Italy to the quirky horror repository of **Little Ghosts**. A resolutely independent and friendly little store, its shelves are of course haunted by (Stephen) King and (Dean) Koontz, (Shirley) Jackson and (M.R.) James. They also display a fine line in homegrown, eerie classics. Half an hour of perusing the shelves with the well-informed clerk saw me taking home novels by Nick Cutter (*The Troop*, 2014), Regan McDonnell (*Black Chuck*, 2018) and Ian Reid (*I'm Thinking of Ending Things*, 2017). An offer to take home a second copy of David Cronenberg's dense and worrying *Consumed* (2015) was deftly side-stepped.

And if you uncover a local novelist who you fall in love / fear with, there's a fair chance they'll appear at one of Little Ghosts' regular, well-attended community events, where the curious and the convinced gather to share their passion for the supernatural. For the ghosthunters in your life, there are spooky cards and gifts.

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Glad Day Bookshop – 32 Lisgar Street

Once more into the chilly air, and a bracing walk south through the idyllic Trinity Bellwoods Park, the final shop where I stomped snow off my shoes is the oldest LGBTQ+ bookstore in the world – **Glad Day Bookshop**. Once the heart of the cacophonous Church and Wellesley gay district, and now settled into its new home in artsy West Queen West, Glad Day is a chimera formed from community needs – so much more than a repository of literature. For over 50 years it has been a place for physical (and intellectual) nourishment, a political epicentre, and even a great spot to find a date and make new friends. It has survived movements physical and social, and even prosecution, and its copious collection covers a spectrum of queer experience in Canada, and far beyond.

On friendly and insightful advice, I picked up David Kingston Yeh's Ontario-set YA novel *The Boy at the Edge of the World (2017)*, a dizzying coming-of-age tale that skips and jumps joyously through Toronto's gay community. One might happily browse the curated-with-pride collection of local authors' work, or dive into one of the regular drop-ins for – and with – neighbourhood writers and join a thriving, ribald and ambitious literary scene.

Inside Glad Day bookshop via Glad Day on LinkedIn.

And now we're done for the day. This colourful meander between some of Toronto's many friendly, inspiring bookstores can fill an afternoon, though it could just as easily take up a full day, with time set aside for coffee, poutine and maybe a little bit of reading too. And the next day, those footsteps are there for you to follow all over again.

Note: *This bookshop guide gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics and Political Science.*

Main image credit: *Elena Berd on Shutterstock.*

Additional uncredited photos by Greg Taylor.

Do you know a place with great bookshops? As part of a regular feature on LSE Review of Books, we're asking academics and students to recommend their favourite bookshops in a particular city or town to share with our book-loving community of readers the world over.

Bookshops could be academic, alternative, multilingual, hobby-based, secret or underground institutions, second-hand outlets or connected to a university. We'd like to cover all world regions too and are particularly keen to feature cities outside of Europe and North America.

If something comes to mind, we're looking for a brief introduction about the city, a selection of three or four bookshops with around 150 words per bookshop, detailing why each one is a must-see. Our editorial team can then find suitable photos and links to accompany the piece, though you're welcome to supply these too.

Email us if you'd like to contribute: lseviewofbooks@lse.ac.uk

About the author

Greg Taylor

Greg Taylor is the Head of Public Affairs at LSE. He has worked in Parliament, in local government, and for two London Mayors. He has visited over 80 countries and many, many more bookshops.

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