# FAST TRACK

CAPITALISM VS. GENTILITY

Can the Scribners Book Store Be Saved Yet Again?

READ BETWEEN THE BATTLE lines in Barnes & Noble's ongoing "superstore" offensive currently overrunning independent booksellers, and you'll find evidence of a second, even more entrenched corporate front where victory apparently is at hand for the B&N behemoth.

Waldenbooks, Barnes & Noble's chief rival for the hearts and minds of Americans who still have hearts and minds for reading, has announced plans to close 187 "underperforming" Walden stores, including three in New York City. Real tears may be shed for America's dwindling small bookstores—but what is there to mourn in the seeming surrender of the chain-store book-business bogeyman of the eighties to the superstore bogeyman of the nineties?

Plenty. Check the addresses of those three Manhattan Waldenbooks stores slated for termination. One site announces itself
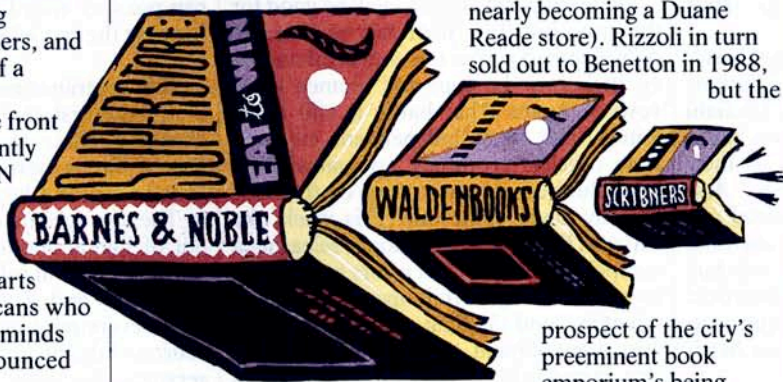
conspicuously: 597 Fifth Avenue, better known to book and architecture lovers of another generation as the Scribners Book Store.

No, not again, these aggrieved classicists now moan, recalling the Scribner store's previous brushes with threatened deaccession.

It all began with the Scribner heirs' 1984 sale of their publishing company to Macmillan, which would later be bought by Robert Maxwell. The Scribner Building itself was sold to Rizzoli (after nearly becoming a Duane Reade store). Rizzoli in turn sold out to Benetton in 1988, but the prospect of the city's preeminent book emporium's being turned into a sweater outlet was ostensibly put to rest in 1989 by (a) the belated landmarking of the Scribner store's gorgeous vaulted interior and (b) the renting of the space to Waldenbooks. The latter company attached the Brentano's name, designating 597 Fifth the flagship for that formerly independent, carriage-trade chain, now a Waldenbooks subsidiary.

Though it has, ironically, outlived both the Scribner and Macmillan publishing companies, to say nothing of Robert Maxwell himself, the former Scribner store's immediate fate is today in greater doubt than ever. Waldenbooks, saddled with long-term leases at many of its failing locations, has taken to offering sweetheart sublet deals in order to unload excess book-selling acreage. Asking price for the historic 14,467 square feet at 597 Fifth, however, is an unsweetened $1.2 million per year in rent (exorbitant, especially for a bookstore)—this for the dubious pleasure of going head-to-head with a mammoth Barnes & Noble directly across the street.

Kmart Corporation, which owns Waldenbooks, has revealed that it will take a $140-million pretax charge for closing the 187 Walden locations, while Kmart itself posted a loss of $974 million in fiscal 1993. Sympathy for tradition is, in any case, neither a Kmart nor a Waldenbooks trademark— though Waldenbooks, for its part, judiciously refuses to confirm, on the record, the inevitability of any one store's closure.

Thus far, there has been but one serious taker on the Scribner space: HMV Records. Barnes & Noble has no interest in the store, saying it's simply too expensive. One publishing insider, though, thinks he knows the real reason: "It's just too small for a superstore."

BARRY SINGER

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO IN NEW YORK

FROM "NAMATH ALL NIGHT Long," by Jimmy Breslin (April 7, 1969):

"Hel-lo," the girl beamed. "How are you?" Namath said.

"Fine," she said. "Do you remember me?"

"Of course I remember you." He repeated her name. She beamed. "You've got a good memory."

"Still got the same phone number?" She shook her head yes. "That's real good," Joe said. "I'll call you up. We'll have a drink or three."

"That'll be terrific," she said. "Like my hair the new way?"

"Hey, let me see," he said. "It's great." She beamed. "See ya," he said.

Walking down the hall, Namath was shaking his head. "Boy, that was a real memory job. You know, I only was with that girl one night? We had a few drinks and we balled and I took her phone number and that's it. Never saw her again. And I come up with the right name. A real memory job."