

**HONORING JOYCE MESKIS**  
**INDIE BOOKSELLER / READERS' RIGHTS ACTIVIST**  
(East Chicago, Indiana, 1942 – Denver, Colorado, 2022)



**By Maureen E. Mulvihill**

Guest Writer, Rare Book Hub (San Francisco)  
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**Joyce Meskis, Owner & Bookseller**

**Tattered Cover Book Store. Denver, Colorado**

President, American Booksellers Association, 1991

PEN American Center Award, 1995

Photo, *Publishers Weekly* (December 27, 2022; online)

Photographer, Jed Rulon-Miller

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**IT WAS JOYCE MESKIS** of Indiana who put Denver on the map for books. And anytime the history of the city of Denver is told, the Tattered Cover Book Store of Joyce Meskis must be mentioned as a principal player in the cultural life of the city.

In its original iteration -- there have been many -- Tattered Cover was a small neighborhood book store (950 square feet) on Second Avenue in Cherry Creek, Denver; it was launched in 1971 by Stephen Cogil Casari. In 1974 the store changed hands: one Joyce Meskis, longtime devotee of libraries and bookstores, saw an opportunity in Casari's modest property. An offer was made, a

deal was struck, the rest is history. From the time Meskis bought the store in 1974 until her retirement and sale of the store in 2015 -- *that's 41 years in the book business* -- Meskis developed the store into a cultural hub for writers, teachers, students, tourists, and the common reader. Down to 2023, the Tattered Cover continues the store's fabled legacy as a destination for bibliophiles. (At her back, Meskis had the example of several iconic precedents in the indie bookstore culture: Gotham Book Mart, New York; City Lights, San Francisco; *et al.*)

Under Meskis's management and business model, the Tattered Cover flourished:

- ◆ It soon became a fully operational and respected independent bookstore; a detailed timeline of the store's expansion is at <[www.tatteredcover.com](http://www.tatteredcover.com)>.
- ◆ It proudly maintained a progressive and diversified inventory: new, used, and controversial books; a Newsstand area for magazines and newspapers; books in Braille; foreign-language classics.
- ◆ It was an encouraging patron of the town's *litterati* who could rely on Meskis and her devoted staff to host readings, recitations, and book signings; celebrities and politicians passing through Denver often visited the store.
- ◆ It was a true wellness center, where locals could congregate for comfort, counsel, and chat; they could share interests and travails with kindred spirits.

By all accounts, the original store under Meskis's stewardship had a special magic, a magic created by a bonded community of management and customers. For the regulars, Tattered Cover was hallowed ground.



**The Tattered Cover Book Store, dating from its original location in 1971 to its several locations** in 2023, including its outposts in the Denver International Airport, Union Station, and the Denver suburbs, has seen considerable expansion. Predictably, there have been shouts & murmurs from some staff and customers who miss the character and business model of the old days. The store's current CEO is Kwame Silverstein, Denver's aspiring "neighborhood mayor."

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But Joyce Meskis was more than a legendary independent bookseller: she was a determined political activist. On one occasion, she defended freedom of expression and readers' rights in a case which took her to the Colorado Supreme Court. She also testified against new pornography legislation on the ground that readers were constitutionally entitled to access controversial

material. She saw herself as a seller of books (a bibliophilic businesswoman); she was not a moralist, not an ethicist, not a censor. For her outspoken advocacy, she was honored with a **PEN American Center Award** in 1995, presented by A.E. Hotchner. (For details, see Meskis obituary by Neil Genzlinger, *New York Times*, January 12, 2023, B12.)

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We close with remembrances from some of the Tattered Cover faithful:

◆ **Amanda M. Faison**

Writer & Editor. Former food editor, *5280 Magazine*. Juror, James Beard Foundation Annual Cookbook Awards. Editor, four cookbooks. Included in *Best Food Writing 2010*. Representative essay, “One Summer On The Colorado Trail” (online).

“Tattered Cover Book Store is an institution, a tradition, an invitation, a special occasion, an oasis. Its creaky floors, the sweet, papery smell of books, the silent sounds of browsing, the hushed conversations, the shhhh of pulling a book from its place and the gentle *thunk* of returning it – *that’s the bookstore I know*. It’s a whole world, a frontier of possibility: it beckons you through its doors to take shelter among the stacks.”

◆ **Christine Bayles Kortsch**

Author, Photographer, Host. PhD (University of Delaware). Book author, *Dress Culture in Late Victorian Women’s Fiction*; also *Tiny Dino Worlds*. For other writings, see <cbkortsch.com>.

“A beloved Denver mainstay, Tattered Cover Bookstore is a haven and a catalyst. It’s where we locals go for inspiration and escape. The store’s handwritten employee recommendations might be my favorite thing. Tattered Cover embodies local culture, independent thinking, small business, and the beauty of diverse community. It’s a neighborhood anchor, a safe place -- East High students hanging out at the Colfax location, tourists breathing in that iconic dust-&-paper scent in the wood-paneled downtown store, or locals meeting at one of the locations around Denver. Come on in: your next good read is waiting.”

◆ **Jessica Munns**

Professor emerita, University of Denver. Book author, *Gender, Power, and Privilege in Early Modern Europe*; also *Restoration Politics and Drama*. See Google Scholar for additional credits. Editor emerita (presently, co-editor), *Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Theatre Research*.

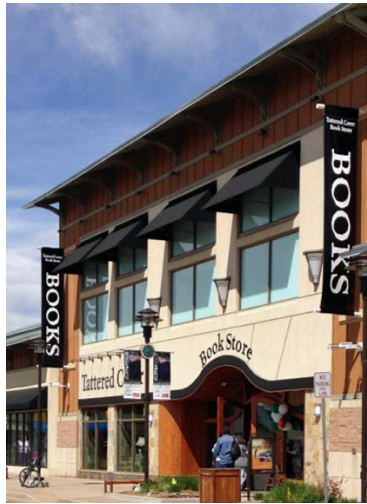
“I was, of course, an admirer of the Tattered Cover bookstores, a regular venue for meeting a friend for an hour’s happy browsing before having a coffee and gloating over a newly purchased book. I knew of the store’s owner, Joan Meskis, a local Denver “character,” but I did not know her personally. There were often readings in the evenings by writers, often Creative Writing faculty from the Denver campus; e.g., my former colleague, poet Bin Ramke.”

◆ **Bin Ramke**

Poet. University of Denver faculty; teacher of literature & writing. 14<sup>th</sup> poetry collection: *Earth on Earth* (Omnidawn Publishing, 2021). Former editor (poetry series), University of Georgia Press. Former editor, *Denver Quarterly*.

“Joyce Meskis had an office on campus, opposite mine; we saw each other often. She was director of the Publishing Institute; I was editor of the *Denver Quarterly*. We would talk: brief chats about books, the horrors of administrative tasks. We were slightly shy with one another. It seemed to me that she was often pulled in many directions, driven by large cultural forces, almost their victim. She cared deeply about books, as essential to the commerce of culture and as extensions of the mind. Hers was a macro view; mine, being a poet, a smaller, more intimate

dimension. I would walk past her door to see her busy & businesslike: conferring with colleagues, talking on the phone -- utterly connected to the world. Quietly heroic. Memorable.”



#### Sources (print & online media)

*Denver Post* obituary (online): December 24, 2022.

*Publishers Weekly* obituary (online): December 27, 2022.

*New York Times* obituary (print edition): January 12, 2023.

*Wikipedia* page on Meskis (needs content, links, photos).

*Tattered Cover Website* <tatteredcover.com>

#### Acknowledgments

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#### Author Note

Maureen E. Mulvihill (Princeton Research Forum, NJ) is a literary specialist and rare book collector. She studied at Monteith College, Detroit; Wisconsin (PhD '82); Columbia University Rare Book School; Yale Center for British Art; and, as NEH Fellow, The Johns Hopkins University. The Mulvihill Collection of early women writers is featured in *Rare Books & Collections* magazine, 2016. Her publications on early women writers, 17<sup>th</sup>-century painters, and Modernist writers are listed on Google Scholar. Her present interest is Irishwomen's political writings, pre-1800. In 1990, as visiting professor at Metropolitan State College, Denver (host, Elizabeth Holtze), she visited Tattered Cover Books and met the marvelous Meskis.

