Bigger Is Better

"Two—Make That Three—Cheers for the Chain Bookstores" by Brooke Allen, in *The Atlantic Monthly* (July/Aug. 2001), 77 N. Washington St., Boston, Mass. 02114.

The guardians of culture are up in arms about the rise of chain bookstores. Even Hollywood got into the act with Nora Ephron's 1998 film *You've Got Mail*. The chains are killing off the independent shops that preserve literary culture, the critics cry, crowding out worthy books with calendars and junky bestsellers, and dumbing down America.

"Absurd," replies Allen, a writer and book critic. These "sumptuous emporia," as she calls them, "have made a wide variety of books more easily available, in more places and to more people, than ever before." Overstocked? The typical superstore carries about 150,000 titles, while an independent rarely stocks more than 20,000. At her local Barnes & Noble in New York City, Allen counted 196 feet of shelf space devoted to philosophy and 92 feet given over to military history. She visited that store and a local independent with a shopping list of five "midlist" titles—the kinds of quality books, such as *The Music at Long Verney*, by Sylvia Townshend Warner, that the critics say are being crowded out. The score: megastore 4, independent 2.

It's true that the independent book stores have suffered, dropping in number from some 5,000 in the mid-1990s to about 3,000 today, but their numbers are now stabilizing. "Wonderful though many of the independents were (and are)," Allen writes, "the fact is that most of the good ones were clustered in the big cities, leaving a sad gap in America's smaller cities and suburbs." The chains have stepped in, measurably improving the quality of life. Books-A-Million, for example, has 202 stores concentrated in the Southeast, and Borders has shops in once underserved places such as Murray, Utah, and Hagerstown, Maryland. The stores stay open

EXCERPT

Off to the Races

When [the history of Census 2000] is written, the issues surrounding sampling and other aspects of measurement theory will be a footnote, albeit an important footnote, to the real story of this count: multiracial identity. With "Question 8: What is this person's race? Mark one or more," we turned a corner about how we think about race in this country. Census 2000 identifies five discrete racial groups: white; African American, black, or Negro; Asian; Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander; and American Indian or Alaskan Native. It also allows respondents to select an "other" category, making a total of six. There are 63 possible combinations to how the race question can be answered. And if these 63 are subdivided by Hispanic and non-Hispanic groupings (which are treated by the census as ethnic rather than racial distinctions), there are 126 categories.

There is no way to measure race. Race is not a scientific construct but a political one. During the 19th century, the census counts helped put in place a discriminatory set of social policies. In the second half of the 20th century, the census has been a tool to undo that discrimination. It is unlikely that more than a small percentage of the population will describe themselves as multiracial in Census 2000. But this expected change in self-identification has long-term and unpredictable consequences for race-conscious social policy. Laws prohibiting racial or ethnic discrimination in such areas as education, housing, and employment assume a small number of fixed racial or ethnic groups. With the proliferation of different multiracial groups in society and the general blurring of racial boundaries, the future of enforcing such laws is unclear.

—Kenneth Prewitt, former director of the Bureau of the Census, in *The Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* (Summer 2001)

late; they feature comfortable chairs where customers can curl up with a book, and cafés where they can chat over coffee. It's just like heaven—or at least Manhattan.

Allen likens the impact of the chain bookstores to that of the sturdy paperback, which made books affordable to millions of readers after its invention in 1935. "Before the appearance of the chains, a relatively highbrow, urban clientele shopped at the independents, and a relatively lowbrow, largely regional one bought mass-market titles at supermarkets, price clubs, and drugstores," writes Allen. "Now . . . the vast territory between the two extremes has been bridged. Elitists may carp, but the truth is that they are no longer quite so elite."

And therein, Allen suspects, lies the true source of the bitter reaction to the megastores: "the knee-jerk snobbery that is never far from the surface in American cultural life."

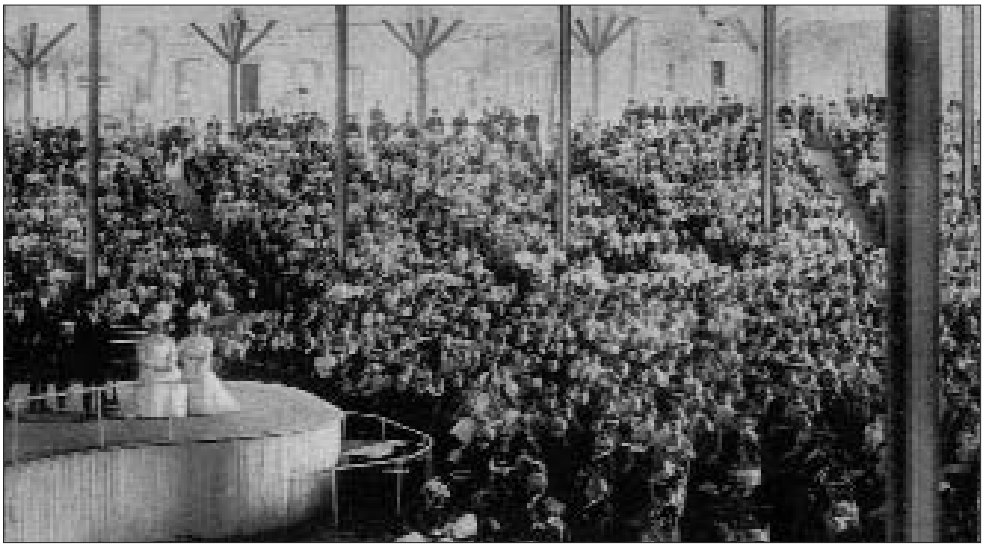
The Chautauqua Moment

"'Dancing Mothers': The Chautauqua Movement in Twentieth-Century American Popular Culture" by Russell L. Johnson, in *American Studies International* (June 2001), 2108 G St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20052.

Theodore Roosevelt called it "the most American thing in America." Born in the summer of 1874 at Lake Chautauqua in western New York, the chautauqua movement enjoyed a 50-year reign over American cultural life.

When they began a summer-training program at Lake Chautauqua for Sunday-school teachers, Protestant ministers John Heyl Vincent and Lewis Miller had no idea they would inspire "a vast national cultural movement," says Johnson, a professor of U.S. history at Bilkent University in Ankara, Turkey. But within two years, similar assemblies for mass uplift "began springing up in small towns and cities across the nation." Organized and run by local committees, and often held in a large tent near a river or lake, the chautauquas would run for about a week. Mornings were typically given over to Bible study, and afternoons and evenings to a mixture of lectures, musical acts, debates, dramatic readings, birdcallers, and bell ringers.

Early in the 20th century, "circuit chautauquas" developed, as entrepreneurs put together traveling extravaganzas and required local committees to guarantee a certain level of ticket sales. During the early 1920s, Johnson says, "chautauquas brought their unique blend of education, inspiration, and entertainment" to as many as 10,000 municipalities a year. For "tired, isolated men and women," chautauquas had much appeal, said one acid critic later in the decade. "Even the twittering of a bird imitator gave relief from the silo, the cowshed, the cooking, and the greasy dishes of the



Participants pack the amphitheater at Lake Chautauqua to hear a quartet perform, circa 1900.