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## Fayetteville book shop gets a granite bench and sculpture

Myron B. Pitts



As far back as my conscious memory can take me, my parents encouraged me to read as a kid.

My mom had a rule: She would not buy me every toy that I wanted, but I could get any book I wanted.

City Center Gallery & Books, the rare independent book shop in this town, is one of my favorite places, and I have a similar rule for our kids: They can get at least one book any time we go in there.

Helen Ann, who is 6, never fails to take advantage. Sam is 8 and only sometimes makes a

selection. He is an avid and intense reader but likes what he likes. He will go a few visits and not pick anything, then he'll spot a Minecraft guide and he wants that and it's inevitably a pricier title. But I buy it.

City Center is on Hay Street downtown and has seating inside for customers who want to sit a spell and read. And at least for the next year, they'll have some visually arresting seating outside: A stone bench and sculpture that includes images of several classic books, from "To Kill A Mockingbird" by Harper Lee to "Beloved" by Toni Morrison to "The Great Gatsby" by F. Scott Fitzgerald.

The sculpture is called “A Novel Idea” and is part of a series of similar sculptures by artist Craig Gray, who lives in Key West, Florida. Gray is a father with four children aged 14 to 29, and he said two of the titles depicted were his kids’ favorites: “Charlotte Web,” which was his adored by his daughter – named Charlotte as it happens – and “Hatchet,” by Gary Paulsen, a teen survival adventure that his son could not put down.



“It was the very first book he was able to read,” Gray said. “It was a great story. When I would go to bed at night, he’d have it and be like, ‘I gotta tell you what happens next.’”

Gray says he fashioned the bench and sculpture over four weeks using Elberton granite, a type of stone from Georgia, which he says is also present in the World War II memorial in Washington, D.C. He installed the sculpture on Monday in front of the book shop, a process that took four hours, he says.

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“They are all glued and pinned together – stainless steel pins,” he said. “You’d have to hit it with a truck to move it.”

Customers have already taken to sitting on the bench. No surprise. It’s a natural for any avid reader.

“You’ve got iPads, you’ve got Amazon, all these things,” Gray says. “But still, there is something about holding a book in your hand, and that page-turning.”

“A Novel Idea” is one of 20 public art pieces that are part of Artscape 5, an exhibit sponsored by the Fayetteville-Cumberland Arts Council. If you’ve been downtown you may be familiar with Gray’s past work. He had previous exhibits of giant popsicles and giant Valentine’s heart candies. But those popular works did not give him an advantage in the selection process for Artscape.

Antonio Renteria, operations director for the Arts Council, said the pieces were picked from more than 190 submissions for the one-year exhibit, which started this month. A public art committee selected the pieces, not knowing the artists.

#### **A committee of two**

Most of the book titles chosen for “A Novel Idea” were picked by Diane and Hank Parfitt, the wife and husband who own City Center.

I asked Diane jokingly if they had a committee pick the books. It was just the two of them, she said.

But it honestly did sound like a committee process. They each drew up their list of favorite books separately.

They first picked the ones that appeared on both lists.

“Then we would look at each other’s lists and so, he would get to pick one from my list, and I’d get to pick one from his list,” she said.



She added, with a laugh: “When I gave (Gray) my final list of 10, I put ‘To Kill A Mockingbird’ as No. 1 and said, ‘That one’s non-negotiable.’”

They also considered what their customers like, she said.

“Over the years we can never have enough ‘To Kill A Mockingbird’ because we can’t keep it in stock,” she said. “And Hemingway, as much

as he’s not my favorite author, we can’t keep Hemingway in the store. So he deserved to have a book on the list.

“We try to be sensitive to what our customers like. So those books also represent ones that our customers over the years have said are their favorite books, too.”

As a regular, I can easily understand why this shop has attracted a fan following that helped it survive the pandemic. It has provided a much-needed platform and space for numerous local authors and artists over the years.

I checked to see if City Center had a copy of “Hatchet” on the shelves — they do.

Sounds tailor-made for Sam.

Maybe he can set off on his voyage with the book sitting on the granite bench.

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