

# TRADE

SUCCESS STORIES

## Changing the World, One Book at a Time

For 37 years, downtown's Reed Books has been home to thousands of books.

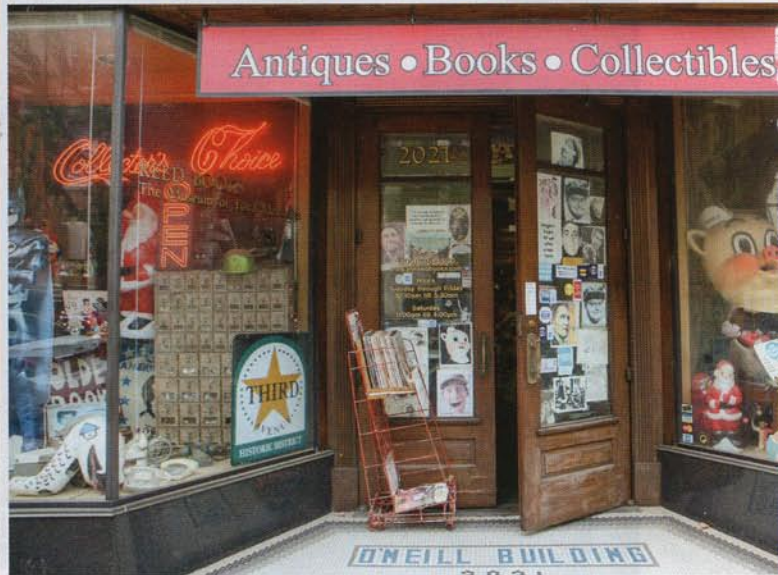
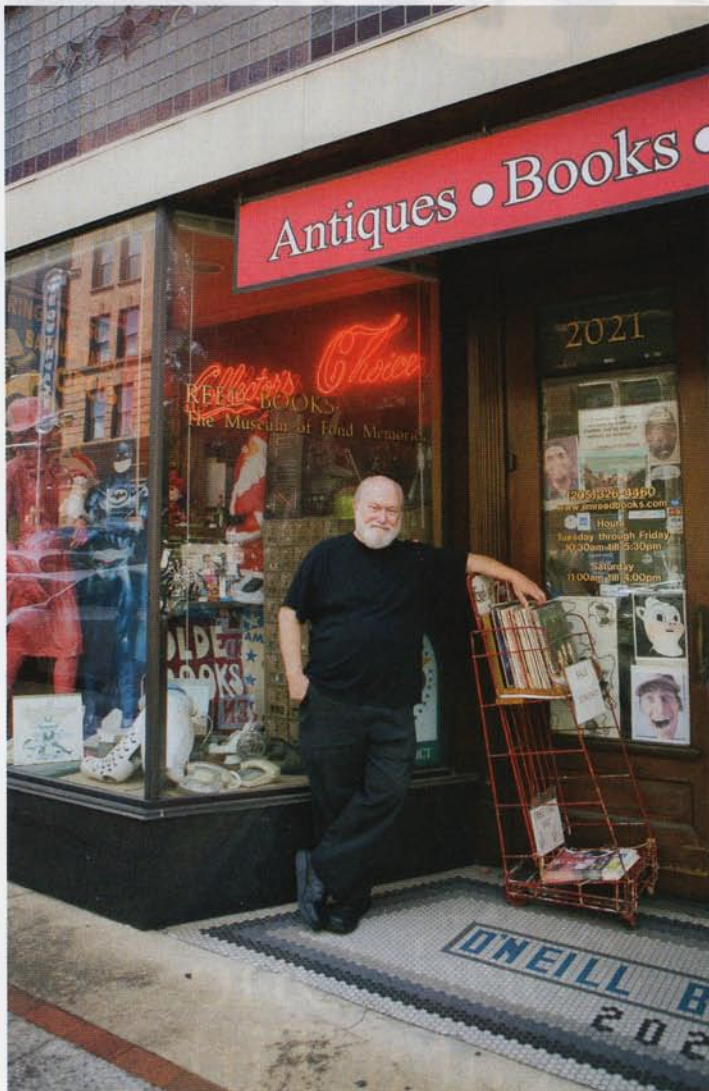
BY HALEY HERFURTH  
PHOTOS BY KELSEY FREEMAN

**T**HE WAY JIM REED sees it, his bookstore is the busiest shop on Third Avenue North, crowded with hundreds of thousands of people, each with their own story to tell. He doesn't necessarily mean customers—although his small, eclectic store is consistently frequented by visitors from small towns and big cities across the globe. Instead, Reed says each of the thousands of books that line the walls and stack on top of and under tables are full of people, from the characters themselves, to the authors, papermakers, print designers, and press runners who worked to bring the book to life.

Jim Reed in his store, Reed Books

**THIS PAGE:** Clockwise from left: Reed's storefront easily catches the attention of passersby. Reed Books sells more than just books. The store is currently on 3rd Ave. North, but has had several downtown locations.

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** The walls and shelves inside Reed Books are filled with books of all kinds.



"I've had that feeling all my life," Reed says. "When you throw away a book, you're throwing away people, in more ways than one. A book that hasn't been read, whose pages have never been opened, is like an orphan who's never been cared for."

That philosophy is the reason Reed opened Reed Books 37 years ago, originally in the First Avenue building where the Wooster Lofts are now located. Since then, the shop has always lived downtown within a five-block radius of its first location. Keeping his store downtown was important to Reed because he is committed to being a positive force in Birmingham's revitalization, specifically when it comes to how visitors perceive the city, whether they're stopping by

on a trip down Interstate 65 or on a long airport layover.

"Birmingham, like other urban cities, gets an unfair share of publicity that isn't always positive," he says. "We think Birmingham is wonderful—you could spend days and days finding adventures in downtown Birmingham. The last thing I say to new visitors is, 'Are you having a good time in Birmingham?' Most of them really are, finding treasures that even Birmingham citizens don't know about."

Reed grew up just an hour southwest of Birmingham in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, where he studied at the University of Alabama. He has worked as a performer and actor, a writer and poet, a radio and television broadcaster, a public relations practitioner, and a teacher

and a lecturer, to name a few of his many occupations. He is the author of hundreds of stories and a dozen published books about his life in Alabama, most recently "Dad's Tweed Coat: Small Wisdoms Hidden Comforts Unexpected Joys."

But some of his most important work, he says, is rescuing the books he sells in his store. He finds them at estates or in junk stores and thrift shops, hoping that by relocating them to the shop, he can give them a new purpose.

"I'm always looking for something that I can bring out of perdition," Reed says. "I find a lot of things that are left to be thrown away. I rescue them, and this is my orphanage."

Reed Books is the kind of place where you can buy a book on Marxism, a physics



textbook by Richard Feynman, or a copy of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s classic, “Walden Pond.” Books, from classic novels and crime dramas to philosophy and pulp science fiction, are the main event at Reed’s shop, but not the only thing for purchase.

Nestled among the thousands of books are vinyl records, cassette tapes, prints, posters, photographs, magazines, diaries, postcards, and letters, as well as vintage signage and other collectibles. Including the items stored in the shop’s off-site warehouse, Reed estimates that he owns a quarter of a million items.

“To me, they all have stories to tell,” he says. “If you look at an old snapshot of a family, you may not know who the family is, but suddenly you look at them and you

realize they’re your family. You think, ‘This is my family in disguise.’”

In the end, Reed says he wants his shop to be a place where he can help people find a book that can change their life. Many of his customers are bookworms, he says, but he also meets people who have only read one or two books in their life, or who have never read anything voluntarily. It’s those people he wants to help “find their bliss.”

He says: “If I had a chance to have five minutes with anybody, I would show them a book they couldn’t resist, try to give them that memory to take with them. One way to do that is to get a 400-year-old book and put it in their hands, and they can feel it’s different from other books they’ve touched. They’ll say, ‘How did this get here? What

wars did it go through? What pestilences? How many times was it stored in an attic and thrown away and someone picked it up from a pile and saved it? If I can get just one person who’s never thought about that before to think on it for a few minutes, it can change people.” ■

## Details

**Reed Books** | 2021 3rd Ave N. | 205.326.4460 | jimreedbooks.com | Open Tues.-Fri. 10:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m.; Sat. 11 a.m.-4 p.m.; Closed Sun. & Mon.