

EMF moves out of Holland Village

Select Books is also leaving its downtown spot as bookshops battle rising rentals and other disruptions

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Two long-established book nooks are taking a break from next month. After 27 years selling and renting out books at Holland Road Shopping Centre, EMF Bookstore is downing shutters there next Thursday, citing increased rentals.

The nearly 40-year-old Select Books is moving out on March 2 from Armenian Street, where it has been since 2011, as construction on a new building for the Singapore Management University is expected to disrupt business.

Both bookstores are selling their stock at discounted prices. Customers at EMF Bookstore can buy new and used books at up to 50 per cent off, while Select Books is offering its titles at up to 70 per cent off.

Mr Tan Dan Feng, 44, one of the three owners who took over Select Books a decade ago, says he and his partners are seeking new space to re-open by the end of this year. Their related business of publishing and distributing South-east Asian scholarly and literary titles is unaffected.

Last month, the university broke ground for its new School of Law building behind the Select Books store. Construction is expected to be completed in 2017.

EMF Bookstore's sole proprietor, Mr Eddie Zhang, 63, also says his business is not closing down. "We are moving out because of high operating costs but we will focus our expansion on roadshows and the Internet," he says, declining to reveal the revised rentals that have forced this move.

An online property listing is asking for \$8,000 monthly rent for a 474 sq ft space on the floor above EMF. The bookstore occupies one of 14 units on the second floor with individually held strata titles, and the current owner could not be reached for comment by press time.

Staff such as bookstore manager Mary Ong, who has been with it since 1989, will still be selling books at islandwide roadshows. The remaining EMF Bookstore outlet at KK Women's and Children's Hospital will accept returns of most books rented from the Holland Road store.

"If we can manage a better location with easier rental and more locals willing to take up retail jobs, because manpower is also an issue, we are definitely willing to come back," says Mr Zhang, who also runs cleaning and sanitation company De Hygienique with his wife and son.



Ms Mary Ong (left), store manager at EMF Bookstore at Holland Road Shopping Centre, has been with the company since 1989 and will still be selling books at roadshows. PHOTO: ST FILE

CLOSING SALES

EMF Bookstore

Where: Holland Village Shopping Centre, 211 Holland Avenue, 02-24
Open: Till next Thursday, 10.30am to 7.30pm (Monday to Saturday), 10.30am to 6.30pm (Sunday)
Info: Call 6467-5335

Select Books

Where: 51 Armenian Street
Open: Till March 2, 9.30am to 6.30pm (Mondays to Saturdays), 10am to 4pm (Sundays)
Info: Call 6337-9319 or go to www.selectbooks.com.sg

Their 500 sq ft EMF Bookstore outlet in Holland Road Shopping Centre opened in 1987. At its height in the 1990s, the business had seven outlets around the island, offering popular romances and thrillers to thrifty readers who could rent the books and recoup most of what they spent if the titles were returned within about a month. A \$16 fantasy novel by Terry Pratchett can be returned for \$13, for example.

Regular visitors such as playwright and novelist Ovidia Yu, 52, are mourning the loss of a cherished haunt. She lives in the West and has visited the store for most of its 27 years since she was a student at the National University of Singapore. EMF Bookstore staff introduced her to some of her favourite authors including mystery writer Kerry Greenwood and fantasy novelist Kylie Chan.

"It's awful. The staff know enough of me to know what I want to read. They seem to like their books

and know their books," says Yu.

Poet Alvin Pang, 41, is more affected by the temporary closure of Select Books. He appreciates the store's selection of scholarly and literary titles pertinent to South-east Asia, plus its regular talks, book clubs and discussions, which host thinkers such as iconic Indian architect Charles Correa.

"They've always had a special role to play in our literary and cultural life, with their unique range of South-east Asian books, especially non-fiction, and their hosting of talks," he says.

"I hope they come back," adds Mr Kenny Leck, 35, co-owner of indie bookstore Books Actually. He relies on Select Books' distribution services, but also appreciates its part in fostering a literary culture and more book lovers in Singapore.

He is unsurprised by news of EMF Bookstore's move out of Holland Village, saying that rising rental

is a "killer" for his store as well. In the past, he has made appeals on social media platforms such as Facebook and held storewide sales to raise money to meet the rent. Rentals at his Yong Siak Street location in Tiong Bahru have more than doubled, from \$2.70 per sq ft (psf) in mid-2011 to \$6.20 psf last year.

He is now paying around \$8,000 monthly in rent and is trying to put aside enough money to buy retail space outright. "If I'm going to be doing this for the rest of my life, I need the space," he says.

High rentals have been pushing out bookstores around Singapore for the past three years. Casualties include PageOne, which was at Vivocity until early 2012; MPH Bookstores' outlet at Velocity Mall the same year; plus Popular Bookstore's fiction-centred Harris Bookstores in 2011 and 2012; and bookstore-cum-cafe Epilogue at Ion Orchard last August.

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