



## NEWS

**Borders returns but in heartland**

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## RETAIL SCENE

FANS of book and music retailer Borders can rejoice as it is set for a comeback before the end of the year – in Jurong.

The bookstore will be run by Popular Holdings, which announced at a media briefing yesterday that it had acquired the brand last year.

The last Borders outlet – in Wheelock Place – closed in 2011, after 13 years here.

Its surprising return comes on the back of the impending closure of Popular's prologue bookstore at ION Orchard, whose last day of business is Aug 25. Orchard Central's prologue outlet will remain open.

Mr Chou Cheng Ngok, Popular Holdings' group chief executive and executive director, yesterday attributed the closure to high overheads, low margins and the failure to get a consumer following.

Popular previously operated three stores under the Harris brand, which shut down in 2011 and last year, due to rising rents. Other bookstores that have closed recently include Page One's VivoCity outlet last year, also due to rent issues. But Kinokuniya bucked the trend with a new outlet in June at Jem mall in Jurong East.

There is talk that the Borders store could be located in Westgate mall in Jurong East.

On why Popular chose to bring back Borders, considering that the book industry has had setbacks, Mr Chou acknowledged that "business is no good, cost is going up and margins are quite low".

"But we look at Borders differently. Borders is an international brand. It has its following, it has its niche. It is something different from Popular," he said.

Mr Victor Tan, head of English business at Popular and a former manager at Borders in Australia, will oversee the development of the Borders store.

However, Popular was tight-lipped as to whether the familiar Borders book selection and store concept can be expected.

Still, it will be soft-launching the brand with a Borders Fair at the inaugural Gadgets & Write Fest being held from Friday to Aug 11 at Suntec Singapore. The fair's selection of books will be representative of the range at the Borders store.

Dr **Lynda Wee**, an adjunct associate professor in retailing at Nanyang Technological University's Nanyang Business School, said Popular short-circuited the development phase by acquiring a known brand instead of starting from scratch.

She said: "Borders has a long history, a strong heritage and is well-known to consumers. The name itself brings back memories for people and will attract them to the store." She added that Borders' Jurong location is a good catchment area as it has a high volume of young people, like students from Nanyang Technological University.

For some Borders fans, however, the location is a damper. Civil servant Mohamed Jauhari Mohamed Arsad, 26, who lives in the east, said that travelling to Jurong will be too much of a hassle.

“But I’m still looking forward to having the same chill-out atmosphere that Borders had at Wheelock Place,” he said.

Mr Kenny Leck, owner of BooksActually, was happy with the news of Borders reopening, but said that, as with any new bookstore, he hoped that it would subscribe to high standards.

But the closure of stores like prologue at ION, and the popularity of e-books and online bookstores like Amazon, have raised questions about bookstores’ future.

Even so, some like MPH Bookstores believe there is still value in a brick-and-mortar store. Said an MPH spokesman: “Most online purchases take at least two weeks to arrive. But we give customers instant gratification. You walk into the shop, browse around and pick whatever attracts you.”

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POPULAR HOLDINGS GROUP CEO CHOU CHENG NGOK

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