

A pro football player and his wife find fulfillment in Wisconsin bookstore

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— For someone who savors plot twists, pro football player James Daniels couldn't have predicted the big change books would have in store for him.

But Daniels, a former star center for the Iowa Hawkeyes from 2015 to 2017, says he's found fulfillment as co-owner of a bookstore with his wife, Erin. They opened Prairie Pages in downtown Sun Prairie in November.

Growing up in Ohio, James Daniels envisioned a promising future as an athlete. In college at the University of Iowa, he admits, he read only a handful of books, though he enjoyed Kurt Vonnegut's "Slaughterhouse Five" and Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale."

Now the 6-foot-4 300-pound offensive lineman reads several books a month: mysteries, thrillers and science fiction.

"Books opened up a whole other world," says Daniels, who played eight seasons for the Chicago Bears, Pittsburgh Steelers and the Miami Dolphins. He was recently released, so his status for next season is uncertain.

He often writes down plot twist predictions a few chapters in. He's especially fond of stories that have made the jump from page to screen.

"If there's a book-turned-movie or TV show, such as 'Handmaid's Tale,' he's probably already watched it and would be happy to discuss it," says Erin, who grew up outside Des Moines in a family of bibliophiles.

She describes herself as a “mood reader who enjoys a bit of everything,” though she says her heart belongs to “romantasy, thrillers, and sappy romances.”

But she also mixes things up with a good gothic or horror novel, especially if it’s a little “eerie and atmospheric.”

She also allows that she gets emotionally attached to fictional characters and lives for a “well-written slow burn.”

James’ current Top Three picks are on the front counter, while Erin’s recommendations are scattered throughout the store. And they say they are both happy to talk about their favorite reads.

His choices are “Love, Mom” by Iliana Xander; the newest book in the “Dungeon Crawler Carl Series” by Matt Dinniman; and “Why Women Have Better Sex Under Socialism” by Kristen Ghodsee.

Erin’s picks are “None Left to Tell” by Noelle W. Ihli; “Nocticadia” by Keri Lake; and “Remarkably Bright Creatures” by Shelby Van Pelt.

The couple met as juniors at Iowa when a friend on the football team introduced them. It wasn’t long before they were sitting by each other in a health class.

The relationship almost withered, though, when she told him she planned to spend a semester in the Czech Republic. At the same time, he’d decided to forego his senior year to play in the NFL.

“But we ended up speaking almost every day that I was in Prague,” Erin says. “We always made time to talk about school, football practice or whatever was going on in our lives.”

But not books. That came later.

James was drafted by the Bears at the end of his junior year, while Erin went on to graduate school at Washington University in St. Louis, where she earned her doctorate in occupational therapy. After graduation, she got a job at a hospital in Madison.

They married in 2023 and built a house in Sun Prairie. It was around that time when Erin rediscovered her love of books after being too busy to read in grad school.

"I'd ask her to describe her books for me and then try to guess the plot twist," James says.

"After a while, we were doing a book exchange every month. We know what each other likes, so it was actually pretty easy."

Several years ago, while playing for the Steelers, James tore his Achilles tendon and spent the season recovering at home.

"I had a lot of time on my hands and we began the bookstore discussion because Sun Prairie didn't have one," he recalls.

"So I started researching and crunching the numbers. Now here we are."

In February, James was released by the Dolphins, though he says he hopes he'll be picked up by another team, perhaps even the Packers.

If not, he's had a good run.

And Erin left her occupational therapy job last year to focus on the bookstore.

"It's hard work and a lot of hours," Erin says. "But we're really enjoying it."

James says he's thriving as a bookseller, too, even helping set up a book club for athletes at a nearby high school.

"I loved playing football and I'm still competitive," he says. "But some of my best moments as an adult have been here at Prairie Pages."