In an era when the joy of leisurely book shopping has often been reduced to online clicking or trudging through huge, cookie-cutter chain stores, Calamus Bookstore occupies a special niche among Boston’s bibliophiles.

Not only does the South Station shop offer an independent alternative to the more recent homogenized book browsing experience, but it has done so as Boston’s only remaining bookstore catering to the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community.

Thus, it seems appropriate that the man who kept gay and lesbian bookselling in the city alive is someone whose life has been defined by the written word, though the extraordinary length and breadth of his cultural contributions gives John Mitze more than just a status as a literary savior. In fact, it’s no stretch to call him an institution in Boston’s arts community.

Long before he opened Calamus six years ago, Mitze’s literary and political activities had earned him an acidic yet witty reputation as one of Boston’s longest-running gay social commentators. From political activist to founder of a radical gay magazine to biographer to historian to columnist to social critic to publisher, Mitze is as close to a one-person historical, political and literary resource for all things gay in Boston.

In 1965, the 17-year-old Mitze moved to Boston from his hometown of Cincinnati, “looking for a better city. Boston, despite its many failings, looked to be a good place to be at that time.”

His subsequent enrollment at Boston University proved to be pivotal. Mitze studied with Howard Zinn, “a professor who knew his craft.”

Zinn, best known for “A People’s History of the United States,” among 20 books, is now a professor emeritus in BU’s political science department. A historian and social critic, Zinn’s philosophy includes a Marxist and anarchist perspective.

Then, “Gay Liberation came along and I did join the BU gay group – part of the Student Homophile League,” said Mitze. The SHL, a now-legendary Boston-wide consortium of gay and lesbian student organizations, flourished in the 1960s and laid the groundwork and training for the burgeoning gay movement that followed.

Mitze also gained experience in the still-nascent arena of gay activism when he sat in on the organizational meeting of the Mattachine Society during one summer break, though he doubted that the group ever got off the ground.

“Times change but the work for improvement for our community have continued forward. I find this encouraging”

In the four decades since he arrived as a teenager from the Midwest, Mitze has been witness to many of the most important events in Boston’s gay and lesbian history, often chronicling them in local newspapers or his many self-published books. Cultural and social analysis has been an important part of his funny yet often-barbed commentary that comprises his wildly eclectic literature.

And for more than 20 years, another side of Mitze’s dedication to the written word has been evidenced by his role as a bookseller, managing a now-defunct bookstore for over 15 years before founding Calamus. All the while, he has published, both his own and other authors’ works, earning accolades from the field of self-publishing.

Given the extent of his life’s work, when Mitze said, “I’ve always liked to read and write,” it seems like a modest understatement. But his passion for writing was born out of an era that, like so many gay and lesbians of his generation, began with a personal politicization in the 1960s.

The 1970s were a time of great activity and progress in the gay and lesbian movement, when new ground was rapidly being broken both culturally and politically, and Boston was at the forefront of the progress. It also was a period when Mitze’s writing began to flourish.

“The 1970s were years when everything seemed to be possible, despite all the attacks and the reactions,” says Mitze. “It was a heady time, particularly for folks of my persuasion. Boston was different then, and also different from the rest of the country – excepting other beachhead cities, New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Ann Arbor and others.”

A turning point came in 1971 when as part of a collective he helped found FAG RAG, described as a political and literary outlet for “gay male liberationists.” Mitze and other well-known gay male activists such as Charley Shively contributed to FAG RAG, which lasted more than a decade. Mitze also helped start Gay Community News, a now-defunct weekly newspaper that for a decade was the only source of news for the gay and lesbian
community. Mitzel also was a regular contributor to GCN until the early 1990s.

During the latter part of the decade, men were arrested for allegedly having sex with under age boys in a suburban town, though the few who were found and pled guilty received only probation. The wildly colorful scene surrounding the 1978 case and the gay rights movement in general, which included the country’s first openly gay elected official, Elaine Noble, making public statements condemning the men before any trials were held, and the arrival of gay-bashing Anita Bryant in Boston, who was booed out of town by a huge crowd protesting in Copley Square, was covered just as vividly by Mitzel in his book “The Boston Sex Scandal.”

Throughout the decade, Mitzel wrote and published several other books, some having nothing to do with politics but everything with social and cultural morays and observation. One of his earliest, “Sports and the Macho Male,” from 1973, hilariously skewed the straight male obsession with sports.

“The younger people have become engaged. This augurs well. So much has changed in the last 40 years, I have to have hope, which I do. I hope things get better, for all of us.”

The eclectic nature of his writing continued with “Myra & Gore: A new view of Myra Breckenridge and a candid interview with Gore Vidal: A Book for Vidalophiles.” Mitzel analyzed the Gore Vidal character through the filters of feminism, sexual politics and gay theory, and included a long interview (which he conducted with Steven Abbott) with Vidal in 1973.

Mitzel also wrote a well-received biography of the vastly overlooked John Horne Burns, a Harvard graduate who wrote only four novels before dying at the age of 36 in 1953, collaborated with two others on “Gay Roots: Twenty Years of Gay Sunshine: An Anthology of Gay History, Sex, Politics, and Culture.” And his reach extended into erotic literature when he collaborated with Boyd McDonald on “Flesh: True Homosexual Experiences S.T.H.” in 1997.

The majority of Mitzels’s books were published by his own press under the imprint Manifest Destiny Press, which he founded in 1972. Under the Calamus Books press, which he founded in 2001, Mitzel printed a novel by Dwight Cathcart called “Ceremonies,” based on the anti-gay murder of Charlie Howard in Maine in 1984. He also ran the Stonewall Distributors for gay books – all of which earned Mitzel a place in the Self-Publishing Hall of Fame.

Through it all, Mitzel has continued to write for the gay press; his column in The Guide, published in Boston, has
been running since 1986, marking 32 consecutive years of serving as a columnist for the gay press.

Beginning in 1984, Mitzel managed Glad Day Bookshop in downtown Boston and after its subsequent move to Copley Square. When Glad Day lost its lease in 2000, Mitzel was determined to fill the gay and lesbian literary gap by opening a new store. Three months later, Calamus opened in Boston’s Leather District. (The bookstore bears the name was taken from Walt Whitman’s paean to gay male love).

“I thought it important to continue a bookstore for the community, as this is not a resource available in most cities in this country,” said Mitzel.

Calamus carries the usual offerings of a bookstore, from publications to DVDs to calendars gifts, and, like Glad Day, it also functions as a quasi-community center in a city that hasn’t had one for close to two decades. But the books are the main merchandise, even though in an odd twist, the owner/manager/author can’t always keep up with the latest offerings.

“The funny thing is that, as a bookseller, I actually don’t read as much as I once did,” said Mitzel. “It’s a bit overwhelming dealing with so many book titles, so many authors, I dip in on occasion. And keep up to date.”

He also stays current with a perspective gained by 40 years as one of Boston’s preeminent and prolific gay writers and social critics. Mitzel owns a unique perspective of what has been accomplished in the gay and lesbian movement — and what remains to be done.

“Times change but the work for improvement for our community have continued forward. I find this encouraging,” he said.

“Younger people have become engaged. This augurs well. So much has changed in the last 40 years, I have to have hope, which I do. I hope things get better, for all of us.”

Calamus Bookstore’s website address is www.calamus.com