

## 'An intentional bookshop': Q&A with Charlie Richards, co-owner of Bookbag

By Aditi Kumar

This interview was conducted at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Bookselling Research Network Conferences, organized by the Centre for Book Cultures and Publishing in association with the University of Reading. Presenting at this conference stemmed from the enriching experience of working with independent Exeter-based bookshop Bookbag as part of my MA Publishing work placement. I worked as a bookseller at the shop from March to May 2023, learning the operational processes of independent bookselling, attending different events where I set up pop-up bookshops, liaising with local institutions like Exeter City of Literature, and building a marketing plan for the shop. At the University of Reading, I conversed with Charlie Richards, co-owner of Bookbag. Richards previously worked in marketing for independent arts and music venues in London, as well as having been involved with a community bookshop in Devon before setting up Bookbag with her husband Malcolm Richards. The conference brought together academics, other bookshop owners and industry professionals, and was themed around 'Bookshops: Online and on the High Street.' In the interview, we touched upon elements such as digitalization, community-building, co-existence with high street booksellers and more. The conversation focuses on Richard's ideas and goals for the shop as well as allowing space to share my own learnings from working with her as a publishing student and connecting the independent bookselling phenomenon to the wider book industry.

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**Aditi Kumar:** Hello everyone. Today, we're going to talk about Bookbag, an independent bookshop in Exeter, and I'm here with Charlie Richards. Can you please introduce yourself and Bookbag?

**Charlie Richards:** Hi, I'm Charlie. I co-own Bookbag with my partner, Malcolm, and we're very lucky to have had Aditi as a student on placement for a few months with us.

We opened Bookbag in 2020 towards the end of the pandemic lockdown. We have been called a 'radical' bookshop as a label. I'd say we're more of an 'intentional' bookshop and that goes through to our book choices – we're quite curated and intentional. It also goes through to sustainability in the bookshop in the environmental sense, reusing secondhand furniture when we opened the shop, to the lifecycle of the book and how can we make sure books are re-used. We've been working on whether we can receive books back as secondhand after we've sold them, and if we can resell them. We're

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intentional in the events we do, intentional in supporting new writers and indie presses (locally and globally), intentional in the feeling of the bookshop, that it's warm and welcoming, and intentional in where we're located in the independent part of Exeter.

**Aditi Kumar:** I would like to ask you about how you opened Bookbag in the middle of the pandemic. What was that experience like, what sort of obstacles did you face and have you seen any benefits of it?

**Charlie Richards:** When you start something like this in the pandemic, there are so many unknowns. We hadn't had a bookshop before, so we didn't have a clue about that either. Now, two years have passed and I reflect on that time and think that it was an exceptionally good time to open a bookshop. Young people especially rediscovered reading in the pandemic and this is something we really noticed – the number of young people who said that they'd stopped reading in their teens and they started again during the pandemic and continued. People, and again young people in particular, cared about where they were getting their books from.

Before we opened, having volunteered in a community-owned bookshop before, I was watching the reactions of bookshops and I could see it unfold that they had time to pause, think about their online presence, think about whether they had a website. If they didn't, they built one. Such a unique amount of time could be invested in every act – they were making deliveries, they were pushing themselves within their communities.

We opened towards the end of 2020, but we went into another lockdown soon after. During that time, there were grants available for businesses that had to close and that again was a unique thing. We were given money by the government to add to our bookshelves and I can't think of any other time that that would happen. On the Internet, Bookstagram and Booktok, book culture grew in a significant way as well.

2020 was also the year that saw a global movement for Black lives and people also became conscious during that time about what they were reading, who they wanted to read about, what they were being told and what stories were out there, even reaching areas like rural Devon, which isn't a place where people would worry about these things. The books we were selling and who we were talking about did resonate with them.

Bookshop.org had just launched, so we knew when we opened Bookbag that we didn't have to worry about the website – that we could sell online immediately. We just had to set up our own page and we did start seeing the benefit of funding money from that immediately as we went into the

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lockdown. We could just start to build a community, have a space to point to for people to buy books, which was also amazing.

Exeter had also become a UNESCO City of Literature just before the pandemic. They couldn't really do anything at that point, but again, it felt like we were in a location where well, we were a city without an independent bookshop actually, there wasn't an indie bookshop in Exeter before it felt like there was a movement around bookshops, books and literature.

**Aditi Kumar:** That directly links us to the sort of communities that Bookbag not only taps into but also forms. Bookbag is located in McCoy's Arcade which has a number of independent businesses coming together and operating in a shared space. It is located on Fore Street which is also the indie quarter of Exeter. This does impact what sort of customers come in.

As part of my placement, I went to several schools that had invited Bookbag to do pop-ups where students could peruse a very specific curation of books for a diversity conference, for example – intentionally selected for the topics of discussion. Another set of pop-ups I ran were with the indie publisher Rough Trade Books, who had collaborated with the independent library Devon and Exeter Institution to bring authors like Richard Phoenix and Zakiya McKenzie to Exeter. These events with booksellers, schools, libraries and authors also create a community of businesses, especially in a city as small as Exeter. A lot of people at this conference have highlighted that establishing an independent bookshop is not solely about creating profit or gaining financial capital but it's also about having a social impact on the communities you're working with.

**Charlie Richards:** Yes, a big thing that I didn't mention earlier when talking about the pandemic was creating communities not only how desperate people were for physical products but also to be with other people. We had students who worked in the shop and one of them used to go to poetry nights in Bangalore where she is from, where people would sit on rugs on the floor, and drink herbal tea, and they would share things that they had written with each other. So she asked if she could start something like that in Bookbag and led that initiative. This is one of the nights that I am proudest of. Now, it has turned into a space where people feel safe, especially within the non-binary and trans community in Exeter. It has become a place that they can come to and it's just a lovely evening. It is something people were craving and Bookbag managed to fill that gap. There are lots of things happening in Exeter and this turned out to be something for those marginalized communities that felt like the bookshop was their home.

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**Aditi Kumar:** I wanted to ask about the link between creating communities and the design of the space. The layout of the shop, the textures, the art pieces you've put in there, they are very warm and personalized. Did you think intentionally about the communities you wanted to draw in, or was it just a display of personal taste?

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**Charlie Richards:** I think I just wanted it to look like a front room or a record shop as well as a bookshop. Or like a space that if you were into literature, then you could come there, sit down and feel comfortable, which is why sometimes the music is a little bit too loud or there is loads of art on the walls that doesn't have to do with anything. We've also predicted a lot of things – like people would need blankets on the floor for when we run out of chairs or teacups to serve herbal tea at events and stuff like that. So I think it grows from what people want from it.

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**Aditi Kumar:** I think the same principle applies to Bookbag's social media. It is made up of Bookbag's regular customers but also people who don't necessarily come to the shop but still want to support Bookbag. We've spoken a lot about people supporting the shop on social media, whether it be those who used to live in Exeter but had to move away or people who had just heard about Bookbag and appreciated what the shop stood for.

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Bookbag's social media has a lot of personal flair and you can really see the effort and commitment put into it. There are book recommendations, there is information about events, you promote other events happening in the city and more. I think this relates to how booksellers are using digital media to communicate their ideologies as well as to sell books. Can you elaborate on the relationship between physical and online bookselling?

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**Charlie Richards:** I think the biggest factor is how much tech is available now, even since I volunteered at a community-owned bookshop before opening Bookbag, and how that's grown and expanded. It is really easy now to buy a ready e-commerce site and integrate your stock from that site with a few clicks and an Excel spreadsheet. The tech is amazing and that combined with bookshop.org has been really helpful.

I want to talk about a quick example about the use of tech that was really great, because I'm kind of obsessed with this. There is a local author called Sophie Pavelle who is a climate scientist and she wrote a book about species and the environment. She's got lots of followers on Instagram. She told all

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of them something like, 'Please support my local indie bookshop. This is where I'm doing my launch. I'll send you signed copies.' We were sending hundreds of books out all over the country which put us online. We're a local bookshop in Exeter but also an online bookshop. It was Sophie's community who supported her: they bought their books from us. I find it really interesting how an author can choose to empower us as booksellers.

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**Aditi Kumar:** When I joined, you introduced me to the digital tools you use to position Bookbag online. When I was then writing my essay for my placement module assessment, one of the things I was thinking about is how indie bookshops are not just surviving but also thriving in the marketplace today and what sort of co-existence they have with chain booksellers. A big gap that I witnessed not just in scholarly literature but also in practicality was how, because indies don't have the sort of financial capital to invest in proprietary software for their purposes, the industry has some way to go towards supporting indies in making the practical aspects of bookselling more updated and streamlined. Gardners as a distribution platform really helps out bookselling activities but there is also a need for making technologies easier to access and easier to work with, especially if you consider that indies don't have specially trained booksellers dealing with their stocks and management.

That is all we have from our end and we're happy to take questions from the audience about Bookbag and the positioning of independent bookshops in the marketplace.

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**Audience question:** What is the role of bookshops as social institutions? This is in the light of bookshops having a tendency to become like any other high street seller. So my question is what is a bookshop, what makes it unique and where do we set the boundaries of what a bookshop is?

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**Charlie Richards:** I can't think of another example of a business that is also a cultural hub – so it straddles this fine boundary. I'm part of this partnership network that the UNESCO City of Literature set up but I know I'm one of the few people round the table, which includes museums and literary organizations, that doesn't receive lottery funding. We fund all our events from how many books we've sold.

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There are also so many demands for attention today like Netflix or going out or eating out. For us to stand out, it is the added flourishes and details that make sure that when someone is walking into the shop, they're getting the full experience. I think that is what Bookbag is meant to feel like for customers – like they've had an amazing night out. From the refreshments to the lighting, everything

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has got to be really nice. Then you are more likely next time to support us in different ways and bring your friends.

**Aditi Kumar:** What strikes me as a unique factor about bookshops is that I don't necessarily have to go and purchase something. We were talking about Bookbag as a space where you can go and take a corner, sit down and read something, work on something, have conversations with Charlie or the other booksellers. It's not specifically financial profit that indies are aiming for and that isn't how other retailers would work. They work to sell; they want to make a profit. And while indies also want to make a profit to sustain their business, there is a higher purpose that they are serving. It becomes a very personal space and that is probably what makes indies stand out.

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**Audience Question:** How are the local communities supporting and representing bookstores? How is that flipside relationship working for you?

**Charlie Richards:** I think we've been really lucky in that we've had so much of our local community be really supportive. I gave you the example of the local author earlier who supported us, financially too as it turned out, and there are other authors that do make a point of coming into the store whenever they can.

There are also a lot of local arts organizations who have wanted to hold author events — it was more about writers rather than books. And when they have a writer in town, they use our accounts to order the books and we sell the books on the evening of the event. The authors sign the books and we keep the profits from the sales. So we see that it is individuals who decide how things are done.

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**Aditi Kumar:** I think it's a symbiotic relationship in the sense that if the space is there, people will come. For some of the events that are hosted in the shop, people do have to pay an amount to attend. People readily turn up and engage actively and even on social media, people who have moved away or generally support Bookbag share posts and share these events within their networks. It is a very equal relationship where Bookbag isn't doing more or less for the community than the community is offering to the shop. I think it's been quite well-balanced.

**Audience Question:** Have you ever altered or tailored your curation and how you do your business to the specific community or tastes in Exeter?

**Charlie Richards:** Probably not, actually. We've gone the opposite way in many ways. There are a lot of literary festivals, like the International Agatha Christie Festival, that can be considered establishment-festivals in Devon. They have been there for years and have brought great authors. But we're bringing lesser-known authors and working hard to try to push them. We had Sheena Patel who is a Rough Trade author and we tried really hard to fill the room for the event and just about managed it. Then she went and won so many prizes for her book, *I'm A Fan*, this year. I think we got a little bit lucky with that one. But people start to trust you and they're more likely to take a chance on you. And I think we should be pushing authors like that and trying our hardest to not just bring what people would like to see but what we want them to see.

If you want to know more about Bookbag and what is on, you can visit their website [www.bookbag.shop](http://www.bookbag.shop) or find them on social media at [bookbag.shop](https://www.instagram.com/bookbag.shop/) on Instagram.