

'That's what books are meant to be: fun and joyful!': Q&A with Anna Cohn Orchard, Executive Director of Exeter City of Literature

Nestled in a coffee-lover's dream at Crankhouse near Exeter's Quay, I met Anna Cohn Orchard, the Executive Director of Exeter City of Literature. Kind enough to fit me into her busy schedule, she and I sat in the window, soaking up the rays on a delightful July day, to talk about her role in and the work of Exeter City of Literature in the city.▼

Exeter was awarded the UNESCO City of Literature designation in 2019 and Anna moved from New York to take the role of inaugural director in 2021. I was interested in learning more about what drew her back to Exeter and she has approached building literary communities and networks in Exeter and Devon around the UNESCO status.

Sophie Blauth: What do you think makes Exeter and the South West distinctive in terms of publishing and literary organizations interacting with the community?

Anna Cohn Orchard: Exeter has so much potential and a lot of interest. Comparing Exeter to places like Norwich, which is also a City of Literature, or to Manchester, which has a lot more industry around publishing and the creative industries in general, shows us the direction we can go in and continue to grow. I would say the North is a really good place to look to because they've done such a great job of supporting independent publishing and having that be their niche. Knowing that publishing needs to exist beyond London, the cities in the North have kind of coalesced the industry and sector around that. And I think down here, we're lucky enough to have Hachette in Bristol now, and through Exeter University and other organizations we have connections, but I think it's up to the South West what gap they want to fill. And maybe it's not independent publishing, because the North does that really well. Maybe it's some kind of independent bookstore organization or centres for storytelling, or for some kind of training or other things that the South West can offer with all of its talent and interest.

Sophie Blauth: Exeter has such a rich history and vibrant literary scene; how do you begin to characterize that through your work?

Anna Cohn Orchard: Through the UNESCO City of Literature umbrella, we're trying to bring all of that knowledge together so that we can inform the public of what's going on in Exeter through our events calendar on our website, newsletters and through social media. And we've definitely seen that

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working. We can point to so many things going on in any given week, because **actually what's** happening in the city is vibrant and exciting.

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I do think the history has a lot to do with it. Although interestingly, I think there's a bit of a disconnect between the history and the present in terms of literary output. I think you've got places like Manchester, which has always had a radical approach to writing and culture that is both in its history and in its present. Same probably with Edinburgh which has always been very constant. With Exeter, the history of Devon and Exeter was actually what we would think of now as like a thriving metropolis. It was very intellectual. It was very outward-looking because it was so connected through the ports to other countries. It was a place of so many ideas and people coming in, particularly with the paper traders here. Now it is obviously this really beautiful part of the **South West**, and has great connections for trains, although it may not be as international in outlook as it once was. It's interesting to go from that history where you had a lot of educated people, which wasn't that common in medieval times, and radical thought coming in from France and being discussed in Exeter. And then for it to move to a genteel place that people like Jane Austen, Thomas Hardy and Charles Dickens would come to for some writing time. So it became one big writers' retreat, which, of course, is inspiring in its own way. And I think we're seeing that now a lot of people want to go back to that kind of outward looking aspect of what Exeter can be: bringing the world to Exeter through the UNESCO network and through the activities they want to do. **But** at the same time, **remaining** partners and supporters of that emphasis on the natural world, and rooted in families that have been here for generations – honouring that without gentrifying them away.

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Sophie Blauth: After I found out about Exeter City of Literature as a student, I was stunned by the amount of things it has to offer, and events it has on the website and social media. How would you describe the relationship between Exeter and the City of Literature organization?

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Anna Cohn Orchard: I think it is about trying to get Exeter City of Literature out there. We actually got the designation in 2019, but then there was a pandemic. And then I came on board as Executive Director in 2021. At that point, we just kind of had to get going, set up the organization as a charity and apply for funding. So this year, we're finally getting the map out there and the vending machine: our profile is rising. But we certainly want to do more and more. And really, there are two parts to being a City of Literature. First is that every UNESCO city works together and you act as the umbrella organization for your sector. So, you bring all these great partners together and make the sector stronger and advocate for it. But the second part is what you do for your own city. And so you create programming that's unique to your place. Nottingham has focused on youth; that's a real big part for

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them. In Manchester, they focus a lot on translation. And in Exeter, I think our focus is job creation and talent development. Because we have so many creatives, but we don't yet have the industry and the buildings to support them.

Sophie Blauth: Are there any partnerships in particular that you are looking forward to developing further, especially those with the other Cities of Literature like Nottingham, Norwich or Manchester?

Anna Cohn Orchard: Yes! So all the Cities of Literature work really closely together. We're a network of forty-two Cities of Literature, and we meet once a year in one of the cities to work on collaborations and share best practice. Then the Cities of Literature are part of the larger UNESCO Creative Cities Network – so we are also part of the sub-network UK Creative Cities which for example includes Dundee, which is a City of Design, and Glasgow, which is City of Music. Then we also have a smaller network of just the English Cities of Literature: so that's Exeter, Manchester, Nottingham and Norwich. Working with those English cities through different areas, such as tourism, research or community engagement is actually part of our Arts Council work this year. This work is in its very early stages and has been led by Norwich; there is a lot of potential with the National Centre for Writing in Norwich in terms of pipeline.

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Sophie Blauth: Are there any specific collaborative projects with these UNESCO cities you are excited about at the moment?

Anna Cohn Orchard: We collaborate with all the UNESCO Cities of Literature on Slamovision, which is a spoken word poetry competition. Each year, the winning city for the year before hosts Slamovision and any City of Literature can enter. Last year Nottingham won, so they will be hosting this year. We choose our poet through a competition entitled City Slam, bringing together different spoken word organizations in the city. The winner of City Slam was voted by members of the public members at the event and we'll now send them to Nottingham to represent Exeter.

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Sophie Blauth: After reading your biography and hearing you'd lived in Sydney and New York, I was thinking how interesting it must have been to come back to Exeter, a lovely but very small city, after being in some of the most influential and large cities in the world.

Anna Cohn Orchard: I'd been out in America for fifteen years, and so I hadn't actually lived in England as an adult, and so part of me really was wanting to come back and see what it's like to live here as an adult. My mum lives here, and had always stayed in Exeter, so I was always coming back once a year to visit her.

I lived in New York for like seven or eight years. And that was from my twenties, and it was great that I did it. But it's a long time to live in New York City: it's very intense place. And, especially as I was working in publishing non-profits, you're not making a ton of money. And it just got to the point where I thought, I've done New York, and I've loved it, but I want to see what it might be like to try something else. I miss the NHS!

I didn't actually plan on staying in Exeter, again, because I didn't think I would find a job in my area. But this job came up, so I ended up staying. And now my hope is down the line we can create more jobs for graduates, and we can attract more young professional to Exeter. I think for people that don't want a big city, or they've maybe done the big city for a couple years and would prefer something smaller, Exeter does have a lot to offer. There are so many literary activities going on.

Sophie Blauth: Being classed as a UNESCO City of Literature is a very much a privilege. Do you think this makes the publications and literary events held within Exeter more exceptional as a consequence?

Anna Cohn Orchard: That is a very interesting question. I don't think we've really discussed that with the other Cities of Literature. I know that when an author from our city publishes something, we want to promote and support our local authors. And I think they then see value in the City of Literature. For example, Hannah Foley is a children's author from Devon, and we've shared her books that have come out. She's done an event at Bookbag and we put all events like this on our events calendar. Any Exeter or Devon based authors' work, we want to promote. And we can introduce them to the bookshop network in Devon. So I think it creates value in that way.

In terms of does it make a book more special because it was published in a UNESCO City of Literature? Not necessarily. I think every place in the world has something to add, has something of value without needing the designation. But I think it makes the network around publications stronger, for sure. And that benefits the authors.

Sophie Blauth: Earlier this year you unveiled the very beautiful Penguin vending machine at Exeter St David's station. How did this collaboration come about?

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Anna Cohn Orchard: It was an idea that I had when I first got the job in 2021. Having lived in Exeter, I already knew about the connection with Allen Lane and Exeter. But I think a lot of people didn't know about the connection: that Agatha Christie lived in Devon and Allen Lane was coming to see her and famously commented there was nothing to read and this inspired Penguin Books.

There had been conversations about wanting to commemorate the Penguin connection through some kind of public art. I argued for a vending machine and putting this in a place where people need books. I'd seen book vending machines in the States with airlines and literary organizations. I wrote up this proposal and I contacted Penguin saying that I want to do the vending machine at the station to honour this connection. And they really enjoyed it! They were like great – find us a vending machine company. Let's do it! Luckily, I found a company in the South West that had refurbished vending machines to have books in them for schools.

We're going to start having different books in the machine. So at the moment, it offers a broad range of titles. But what we're going to start doing, I think, is unique themes. So for example, October is Black History month in the UK, we'll have books by authors from other UNESCO cities around the world that have been published by Penguin in English. We will have books for LGBT+ History month, and Cop27; we want to make sure that the books are relevant to the people.

Sophie Blauth: Do you think that making visible the ties between Exeter and Penguin has bonded booklovers to Exeter? It has been such a big hit on social media, especially TikTok; did you think it was going to be this successful?

Anna Cohn Orchard: We've seen people that made special journeys to Exeter St Davids just to see the vending machine. I think often they're coming through, but they want to still have extra time to see the machine, and we've seen that on social media which has been fantastic. So I think that Exeter and Penguin connection has really been embraced by people. And we've had such a great relationship with Penguin. They've been so supportive and so into this funny idea.

I didn't know it would be successful worldwide, but I knew it was going to be so visual and appealing to the social media audience, because it is such an amazing thing. And it is also just such a convenient space for books to exist in. The sales have been fantastic! The level of excitement, Richard Osman, people like that, getting really close – that was really special to see beyond just the public and the visitors. There were also some really funny TikTok videos, and TikTok videos that really got into the mystery and the history behind the machine and Exeter's literary past. This is why I love this vending machine because it gets people excited about books and reading. And that's what books are meant to be: fun and joyful!

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Sophie Blauth: So in addition to the unveiling of the Penguin vending machine, you've also hosted Roxane Gay and The Book Market this year. What has been your favourite moment of 2023 so far?

Anna Cohn Orchard: I think The Book Market. The first year we hosted it at Powderham Castle and it was really popular. It has just kind of has snowballed each year since. Last year it was at Positive Light Projects on Sidwell Street. Then this year, we wanted to make it even bigger and more central. So we did it on Exeter Cathedral Green. Like our other events it's free – apart from the books! There are new and used books, and all the bookshops that have been coming for three years absolutely love it. Even though we were competing against rain, and the Wimbledon finals, this was a busiest year yet. We had things like face painting and bookbinding and wheelchair letterpress. It was a real partnership again, between all the vendors and the Cathedral supporting us. There is the book community that comes out to support us. But there are also just people in Exeter who get to come across something really fun happening. And I think it does showcase the amazing book businesses in and out of Exeter.

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Sophie Blauth: Are there any big plans for the City of Literature's future?

Anna Cohn Orchard: We are still going on with our bibliotherapy work; the next course launches in September. We are expanding that so people are getting trained as therapists or counsellors, and in the longer term the national counselling association will be able to accredit our module. The idea is people can be fully trained in bibliotherapy and can deliver bibliotherapy to communities around Devon. So that's a big thing for us. More book markets. We want to do another series with Rough Trade Books next year. That went really well this year: we had five events, one a month at the Devon and Exeter Institution, again – pay what you can afford.

I would say my long-term goals are to eventually be able to open up a space for literature, storytelling events and healing. I think Exeter doesn't have a lot of evening spaces or evening activities. Obviously, the Phoenix is great for things like music and performance. I love what Bookbag and Sacred Grounds have been doing opening up McCoys Arcade. But I think more of that would be fantastic. Having space for writers just to come and write and people learning creative skills, seeing some kind of physical presence. We've seen so many empty spaces on the High Street; they would be really amazing to fill with things that can go from day to night quite seamlessly. So that would be a big, long-term goal. And again, hiring more local people to make it happen.

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Sophie Blauth: And finally, I have just one more question. What is your favourite book or literary organization that is based in the ~~South West~~?

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Anna Cohn Orchard: Well, I can't even choose one bookshop, because what really surprised me coming back to Devon was how many independent bookshop there are. And I am just obsessed with that! Bookbag is the only independent bookshop in Exeter, which is mad, but they have swooped in and changed the literary culture in a really amazing way. Having the authors they're bringing in, and the vision they have, and how they bring a community together that has a space of its own, I think is phenomenal. There are so many amazing bookshops in Devon though.

~~We've just released a literary map of Devon and I'm trying to think what's on it! Obviously, Forget Me Not by Sophie Pavelle. That is probably my favourite because it's somebody that is so~~
passionate about the environment. And is such a good spokesperson for how climate change is happening and what's going on in nature in our world. She approaches things in a very funny, educational and positive way. Her voice is so unique. People can find all types of authors and books on our literary map of literary Devon. There are just amazing people here that I think we completely forget about. I had no idea that Jean Rhys lived just outside of Crediton and is buried there.

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You can find the Literary Map of Devon and Exeter and an Events Calendar of literature, storytelling and literary arts events happening in Devon and Exeter at
<https://www.exetercityofliterature.com>

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