

The Air/Light Podcast Episode 4: The Art of Bookselling #1: Josh Spencer of the Last Bookstore
Originally published November 25, 2020

David L. Ulin:

Greetings! I'm David L. Ulin, the editor of *Air/Light*. If literature is an ecosystem, then bookstores are its foundation. They're where literature intersects with community. They introduce people to new and idiosyncratic books while hosting events to support authors. Through it all, they serve as neighborhood community centers for readers and book lovers.

But the pandemic has been hard on independent bookstores. Many have had to make direct appeals to their customers through GoFundMe and other crowdsourced campaigns. Local bookstores are facing what Dorany Pineda of the *Los Angeles Times* calls an ["existential crossroads."](#)

Losing our independent bookstores would be a truly devastating blow to the literary community and would only entrench the dominance of Amazon. A world without brick-and-mortar indie bookstores is not a world we want to live in.

So *Air/Light* wants to help in our own small way. In a series of podcasts, we talk with the owners and workers at independent bookstores around Los Angeles to explore how they're moving forward during COVID, what they're looking forward to, what people are buying and reading, and more. Through this series we explore the art of bookselling.

It's also our hope that after you listen to these interviews, you'll go online or in person—masked up and socially distant, of course—and support your local indie bookstore.

Katarina Dames:

Hi! I am Katarina Dames, and I am an editorial intern at *Air/Light Magazine*. Today I am interviewing Josh Spencer, owner of The Last Bookstore. The Last Bookstore is LA's biggest indie new and used bookstore located in the heart of the city in downtown Los Angeles. Listen in as we talk about bookselling during Covid, how the store is staying afloat, and why books continue to persevere despite the takeover of technology. Enjoy!

[Bouncy, upbeat theme music]

What do you think bookselling means now? I mean, what are people buying during Covid?

Josh Spencer:

People are still generally buying the same types of things. I don't think Covid has really changed that much. I think early on people were definitely buying more mysteries and more science fiction and fantasy, because people like to have things that uh were a little [laughs] I don't know, more easy to

understand. They had like a resolution. You know, there was, it was just, people needed that, some reassurance in their minds because everything was so up in the air. I don't know if that's continued. I think people have sort of gone back to their regular reading habits for the most part, but uh, it's good. People still love books. I think bookselling is a lifeline for people in this time, especially with so many people at home, you know, just more time on their hands, people wanting to get out of their heads, people wanting distractions from what's going on in the news. You know, all those things are what books are here for.

KD:

I love the escapism that books offer, and when I get uncertain, I always go back and reread the same couple of books just because I know how it's going to end.

So, what do you think the short-term and long-term ramifications of Covid are going to be? How are you organizing events or keeping the discussion going?

JS:

I mean, we've pretty much set events aside for the moment. We've spent most of our time just trying to like redesign our website and become more virtually focused, I suppose, so that people can still engage with us and still buy books from us online. So, as far as events, you know, it's given us the time and the space, I suppose, to think about what we really enjoy doing, what our particular space, our particular bookstore can be best used for in the future once people can gather again. So, it's just given us the time and the space to, to really reevaluate what we're doing and just figure out what, what we can do best with our space. Before the pandemic, it was just so fast-paced all the time, and we just had events, events, events, events, and it was nonstop, and we didn't really have time to sit back and realize what you were doing: if it was productive, if it was worth all the hustle and bustle, if it was helping writers. You know, if there was a better way to do it. You didn't always have time to figure out all those questions.

KD:

I think a lot of people heard the podcast that you did with KCRW announcing that sales were down. Have you seen a bump in orders since then?

JS:

Yeah, definitely. That definitely helped us out a lot. I think our sales are only down about 50% now, so it's definitely helped a lot. And just the overall climate, I think a lot of people have been getting more and more tired of staying home, so they have been coming out and shopping a little bit more. Obviously, that has some negative ramifications possibly for Covid, but it's helpful for business. But we are still taking all the precautions and keeping everything clean, and people separated. It hasn't gotten too crowded in the store at all still, so we're well within the capacity, even the very limited capacity that they have gone back to this past week. We're still doing okay with that, so we're positive. You know, sales are going up. I'm hopeful that the holidays will bring some more people out, get people to shop online. Like I said, we're trying to get a new website. We're scrambling really hard to get a new website built.

KD:

Are there any Covid strategies that you plan on keeping for the future?

JS:

I mean, honestly, I kinda wish that my staff could just always wear masks forever because they haven't been sick with anything else [laughs] like all year. And before that, being in retail you are just constantly in contact with customers all day long, and so people are always getting sick, constantly, you know there's just people sick, out sick, and it was a huge headache, and there hasn't been any of that since people started wearing masks and using hand sanitizer. So, you know, so, that's been really nice to rely on my staff being there, not being sick ever. So, I mean, if it was up to me, yeah, I would continue using hand sanitizer and maybe even masks, especially, you know, if Covid is just going to be with us for the long haul.

KD:

Has there been an increase in donations? What other things are you doing to keep it going financially?

JS:

There has definitely been an increase in donations. A lot of people really feeling that, that we need the help and recognizing that they had the means to do that just by giving us a few books. You know we had to stop buying back, I don't know, gosh, a month or two ago. We had to stop buying books, for the most part, because we didn't have the cash flow for it and we didn't have the staff to be buying, because we had so many other things that we need to do with our limited staff. So people started donating a lot from that point on, and that's been really helpful. That's how we can get a lot of really good inventory that we can then hand off to the customers.

KD:

I've seen that you guys have been renting out the store, or at least in the beginning of the pandemic, renting out the store for weddings, which as a book lover sounds awesome, and these new book bundles which I've seen on your Instagram, which look really cool. Do you have any other kinda creative solutions up your sleeve?

JS:

Yeah. I mean, most of those are my wife's ideas. [laughs] She is really great with new ideas. She has brought some fresh blood in. We just got married a year ago, so she's brought in a lot of new ideas. But yeah, weddings, photoshoots, you know she's been spearheading that because that's her background. So she's getting that setup. We haven't really had, I think we've only had one small wedding so far, but most people are booking them for after the pandemic. [laughs] So, anything that gets booked now is very small, usually under like ten people, and it's all very contained. But we have those ideas, the book bundles, we are still focusing on those. We're going to be further crafting those more and more to be more curated based around themes and things like that. We're going to be launching those with the new website. Gosh, what other ideas does she have? My wife has an idea every single day, so I can't even keep track of all of them, but um [laughs] we've got lots of new things that we will be working on. You know, I think just continuing to sell, continuing to curate books, not just through our bundles but also in the store. You know, I've been working on a lot of themed displays, which we've never really had too much of, so I am trying to work on maybe like 100 different displays throughout the whole store that'll really help people find books that they didn't know—that they never really knew what the books were about, but then they'll see them on display and be like oh I didn't know that was about such and such topic. So, just trying to enlighten

people as to what great books are out there and what they may have missed. There's so much work to be done, and you know, we have so much good inventory that we just want to pass on to people.

KD:

You were talking about the displays and organization within the store. I mean, whose idea was it to come up with the book tunnel and like the little book window? I mean, those were great and such Instagram-able things.

JS:

I mean, we came up with all of that before Instagram was around, so we weren't even thinking, I wasn't thinking in terms of social media at all when I thought of those 11/12 years ago, you know, it was more like, what's cool? What can I do that's cool, that looks interesting, and would be fun for people to engage with. I didn't think about photography and people spreading the word at all. That was just a happy byproduct. I don't think I even knew what Instagram was until like 4/5 years ago [laughs] so, I am not terribly social media savvy. So it was just a happy accident, honestly, coming up with all that, and then it being visually appealing for people to take photos. I was the one that came up with all those ideas but in partnership with artists that I knew or artists that were in our building. I would say, 'hey, what about this,' and then they'd be like 'yeah, we can do that,' and so then they'd make it.

KD:

That's awesome.

JS:

It's good.

KD:

Are there any kind of secret traditions you and your staff have or like to do for fun?

JS:

No, I don't think we have any traditions, other than like everybody just buying books all the time [laughs]. Hoarding books, probably. [laughs] I think most everybody that works at the bookstore, you know their favorite thing is just being able to see books when they come in and get to have first dibs on things, or first exposure on new titles coming out, all that kinda thing.

KD:

What's the weirdest, or maybe even coolest, thing that you have found when going through the donation boxes?

JS:

Probably just really interesting letters. You know, different cards and notes written to people from other people, um inscriptions from maybe one famous person to another famous person. That's always really interesting. I think there was one, one time, it was either from Wolfgang Puck to Martha Stewart or vice versa that was really interesting. I don't really remember what they said, but when you find things like that, you kinda get a little insight into people's minds, you know, what they're thinking. It's always fun, even when their nobody that you know, it's always a little bit of a mystery. Like what are they talking about, you know, you start thinking about the whole backstory of the note. So, you know, I think words are the most interesting thing available to human beings. It's also really interesting just when people write a lot of notes in their books, you know, because then

you can see their thoughts as they're reading, and that's like a sneak peek, kinda eavesdropping on somebody's mind as they read through a book, you know.

KD:

What are some of your fondest memories over the years?

JS:

Hm. I think some events that I had where I really got to bring in people that I respected creatively: musicians, writers, just people I thought highly of. And they made time to come in because they were impressed with what we had done there, so that was really cool getting to interact with people like that over the years. Just really being a place where the melting pot of LA could come in, and everybody felt welcomed, no matter what economic status, or color, or country they were from. Like whatever it was, everybody felt, I think, equally welcome there and feels equally welcome. It's been like a refuge. I've always thought of it as a refuge from everything going on outside the world. I've always thought of The Last Bookstore as being it's own [laughs] hidden country away from everything else, you know, where it's just all the books from all around the world that people can come in and engage with and be around other people doing the same thing. That's just been, that's been amazing to watch people's faces when they come in for the first time. And to talk to customers that have been coming in the whole 10 years that we have been open, just how valuable it is for them—and being able to engage with those people one on one and know them for so long, and to just be bonding over their common love of books and music. So, yeah. There's nothing more rich and valuable to me than that.

KD:

What do you think is behind the appeal of the tangibility of a book? Do you think that appeal is enough to survive the growing pains of technology?

JS:

Um, yeah. I think human beings are physical creatures [laughs], and so, we need a physical world to engage with. Books are a physical object, you know we can smell them, we can feel them, we can feel the weight of them, we see them. They engage our senses on so many levels, that I think that anything that does that is going to always fascinate human beings because we are creatures that have senses, and we love our senses [laughs] so. I think, I don't think books are going to be going anywhere just because of technology. Unless human beings someday become [laughs] minds sitting in pods like in the Matrix or something, you know, we're going to be out and about, we're going to want to touch things and see other people. As great as it's been for a lot of introverts to stay home during this pandemic time, for the most part, human beings need contact with other human beings, and we like going out and seeing people from time to time and talking to other people. So, I think that retail stores, or stores, are always going to be around, books are always going to be around as well. And you know, I don't think you can downplay the habit of human beings to collect things either. I mean, people love to collect things [laughs]. That's never going to change as well, yeah [laughs]. I think half the customers are just buying books just because they're beautiful or they like what they symbolize, not necessarily that they're even going to have time to read them. I think very few of us have time to read all the books that we buy or that we want.