

The Air/Light Podcast Episode 5: The Art of Bookselling #2: Mary Williams of Skylight Books

Originally published December 2, 2020

David Ulin: Greetings. I'm David L. Ulin, the editor of Air/Light. Welcome to our series of interviews with local independent booksellers. The pandemic has been hard on brick-and-mortar bookstores, with many outlets forced to make direct appeals to their customers, and others launching GoFundMes or additional crowdsourced initiatives. Air/Light wants to help. Our hope is that after you listen to these interviews you'll go out and support these bookstores, in person, socially-distanced and masked, of course, or online. Independent booksellers are in many ways the soul of the publishing industry, places where literature intersects with community. They champion idiosyncratic authors, introduce readers to new books, and with their readings and events, serves as cultural centers in their neighborhoods. That work has continued during the pandemic, in new and innovative ways. Please join us in supporting these literary heroes by shopping at local independents. If literature is an ecosystem, and I believe it is, then independent bookstores are its foundation. Thanks for listening, and happy reading, for the holidays.

Claire Robertson: Hi, I'm Claire Robertson. I'm an editorial intern for Air/Light magazine, and today I'm talking to Mary Williams, who is the general manager of Skylight Books, one of L.A.'s best independent bookstores. Enjoy!

[Bouncy, upbeat theme music]

Claire Robertson: Mary, thank you so much for your time. I so appreciate having you here.

Mary Williams: Thank you for having me.

CR: So my first question for you is, I want to know in the craziness of the world that is 2020, and I'm sure you've been reading a lot because I know that's a recourse for a lot of people right now, what has been one of the most striking books or pieces you've come across this year?

MW: Woah, that's a really good question. Yeah, I have been trying to read more since there's nothing else I can do. But honestly, it's I think maybe "The Vanishing Half" by Brit Bennett has been the book that stuck with me the most, and which is a little bit of a cliché because everyone loves "The Vanishing Half" and I wish I was being more original, but yeah, I was just really struck by the story, by the character examination and how good she is at depicting realistic human reactions to unusual situations. I thought it was just remarkable.

CR: That's absolutely fitting in a variety of ways. Thank you. So I wanted to ask if you could tell me a little bit about how Skylight is approaching all of the restrictions that have been happening with the pandemic. I know that Skylight is so vital to the community. It has such a community around it. So how do people continue to be involved in the community that surrounds Skylight at this time?

MW: That's definitely the question we've been asking ourselves all year. One of our goals is to try to create, recreate as much of the in-store bookstore experience online and virtually as we can. There's a limit to how far that can go because there's nothing quite like stopping in a bookstore, chatting, discovering something that you never thought, you know, that you didn't know about before. So we've been doing recommendations on social media, on our website. We've been soliciting recommendation lists from authors, of books they like, to go on our website as well. We just launched our holiday catalog and made sure that was all virtual, too, so people could read that online. And then, of course, virtual events, virtual book clubs and other ways for people to get that experience of seeing an author, even if they can't really see them in person and meet them, but still getting that author talk part of our programming as well.

CR: I noticed on some of your socials there was something about a virtual bookshelf. Could you explain that a little bit for me?

MW: Sure. Absolutely. So we had some authors who we would have done in-person events with, which were unfortunately canceled, contribute lists of books that inspired them and that they read as they created their own work. And so they would create these virtual bookshelves, which we posted on our website this past weekend for Small Business Saturday, which is usually a very author-centric day for us, we were

encouraging people to go back and check those out because there's some really great picks on there.

CR: I'm curious, too, have there been any silver linings to having exclusively virtual events going on?

MW: Well, [laughs] I will say one nice thing is that we've been able to have people attend our events from all over the country, in some cases from international locations as well. So it has been nice to expand our little community beyond just Los Angeles. But I still miss in-person events and I can't wait to go back when it's safe. I feel like when you're in a room full of people and you can feel each other react, and the author feeds off that as well, that there's nothing quite like it. But it has been nice to get authors who otherwise wouldn't tour to Los Angeles to do events with us, and similarly, customers who would never be able to come to one of our events attend online.

CR: Do you feel that the community has expanded?

MW: That's definitely possible. It's a little hard to measure because we don't know exactly who's always coming to our store in person, but yeah I think it's definitely possible. We've certainly had to upgrade our Internet, our website presence, and to really get our online order system in shape. So there's certainly many, many times more people visiting our website now than in the past and ordering from us online. So and I hope that continues. People will be able to find us, even if they can't find parking in Los Feliz, that they'll still be able to come to our store virtually and look at our recommendations and pick up a book.

CR: In thinking about the pandemic and literature in a larger context, how would you say as somebody who's working with books and someone who just loves books themselves, how would you say that the existence and continuation of this pandemic has impacted your understanding of literature as a necessity?

MW: Well, I will say that right before the shutdown happened, when everyone knew it was imminent, we got a huge surge of orders and people coming in the store to stock up because they knew that they were going to be quiet and alone with their thoughts for a minute and not have all the social engagements, and they really wanted to have

books there for that experience. And I think that's amazing. Books are windows into other people's lives, and you can't get out into the world to be able to imagine the world and see, exercise your empathy a little bit and read a novel about somebody who's completely different from you, or yourself, if somebody is very similar to you and get a little feedback that way. So I think it's an important part of the emotional inner lives of people. Maybe I'm just a book person and that's why it feels that way. But so, yeah, I think it's even more crucial when so many other parts of our lives have been taken away from us.

CR: And the emotional component, but also the social component of books. I think there's, like you mentioned, that empathy, that opportunity to get to see someone else's life, to get to understand someone else. It's so important to be coming through literature because we don't really get to see much of each other nowadays, especially people we wouldn't have otherwise met.

MW: Yeah, absolutely.

CR: Yeah. In running a business during the time of COVID, what has been one of the largest struggles for Skylight?

MW: Oh, it's absolutely the hit in sales that we took. Our customers have been absolutely extraordinary during this entire experience. But just being closed for two months entirely led to a major hit to our sales. So just stretching the dollars has definitely been our challenge, especially because the way we do sales now with more online orders, they take a lot, they're much more labor intensive. So we actually have more staff than ever before and fewer sales than we've had for years. So that's been the financial challenge for us. But heading into the holidays, I'm optimistic. We're seeing already a huge surge in orders. So I think that there's a real movement out there, particularly in our neighborhood, to shop local and keep this local business district going. And that kind of action and sentiment is going to keep us here. So we're just counting on that right now.

CR: What can fans of Skylight be doing to support the store?

MW: Getting a book from us would be great, especially as opposed to a chain or an Internet bookseller, because, you know, we don't, some stores have put out this call that they need hundreds of thousands of dollars in donations. What we really need is sales, we're a functioning bookstore that can survive, but we just need those orders to come in. And given how weird this year is and how weird shipping is and the post office has been a little unreliable, ordering early also gives us a chance to make sure that we're getting those books to you in time. So that would be another thing we'd suggest.

CR: And my last question for you is, I just love Skylight. I've been able to go in person a couple of times and I miss the fantastic tree. But I realized I don't know anything about the tree. Is there a story behind it? For those of us who haven't been to Skylight in person, there is this gorgeous tree just smack dab in the middle of the store, which for me just speaks to the irony of having a tree in a place filled with paper. But I just want to hear about it. Where did it come from? Why is it still there? I love it.

MW: Yeah, the tree actually predates me. The tree has been here since the store opened in '96 and I joined in 2008, so it was already full grown and brushing up against the ceiling by the time I got to it. But yes, when the bookstore opened, it opened on the site of another bookstore called Chatterton's, which had been here before and had gone out of business, and some renovations were made and that was one of them. And I just love it. It's one of the things that made me fall in love with the store, too, and want to work here and ultimately want to commit to it for my whole life. Yeah, it's our mascot. That and our cat.

CR: Wait, tell me about the cat.

MW: We have a cat. Her name is Franny. I've been told that right now she's sitting on our holiday card display, so she comes downstairs sometimes. She also hides in the office a lot. But yeah, she's a tortoiseshell and we love her.