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[00:00:00] **Annie B Jones:** [00:00:00] Welcome to From the Front Porch, a conversational podcast about books, small business and life in the South.

A place belongs forever to whoever claims it hardest, remembers it most obsessively, wrenches it from itself, shapes it, renders it, loves it so radically that he remakes it in his image. Joan Didion.

I'm Annie Jones, owner of the Bookshelf, an independent bookstore in beautiful downtown Thomasville, Georgia.

And this week I'm answering your questions about books, small business and life in the South. I thought it would be fun to kind of close out the year of podcast episodes and bookselling with [00:01:00] something that was a little bit like literary therapy, but different.

So this is basically mailbag where you have sent in your questions, most of them about the bookshelf and life in Thomasville, and I'm going to do my best to answer them. So this should be fun. All of these questions came from followers on Instagram. I will try to correctly pronounce and emphasize the names of Instagram handles, but thank you to all who submitted questions. I think this is going to be a good time so without further ado, let's jump right in.

@erspitz asks, what is the origin story of owning the bookshelf? I've been following for a long time, but I'm unfamiliar with the story.

Well, luckily for you, we did a whole podcast episode about this actually. This year, I recorded an episode back, I think it's episode 281, all about owning a bookstore and kind of how I came to own the Bookshelf, because as many listeners probably know I bought the Bookshelf, like it [00:02:00] already had existed before me.

Uh, I hope will exist long after me. And so I bought an existing store. So you can hear that whole kind of story. On episode 281. I will not belabor the story here, but like a lot of people with their careers and jobs, it was a long and winding road. And some of it, it felt part serendipity, part hard work, part providential and yeah, it's been a, this is the seventh year, my seventh year of running and operating the Bookshelf.

It is my Oh gosh, second full year I think of owning it outright. And boy, boy, what a ride 2020 has been. I will say, and I hope I mentioned this in episode 281, um, one in a long line of owners of the bookshelf.

And one thing that I do think is really cool about the history of the store is that it's always been owned and operated by women. And I think that's really fun, a fun part of its history. And as much as I think, 13 year old, 14 year [00:03:00] old, Annie would have really liked to start her own bookstore, I am now convinced that that would have been a really hard path.

And I have friends and people I know who have done exactly that. And I admire them. I am grateful that for me, bookstore ownership came through sweat equity. It came through hard work. It came through the, the knowledge and wisdom of other people and me being able to benefit from their graciousness.

And so I purchased the Bookshelf in its existence. It already existed in Thomasville. It already had a wonderful reputation and I just get to be a part of it. So, @erspitz, go listen to episode two 81. And I kind of give a rundown of the whole thing because this year is like the seven year itch of, of running and operating a bookstore. So you can go listen to that full episode for details.

@jennyleighholmes asks tips for someone with dreams of owning a bookstore.

I do think we've addressed this a little bit in previous episodes, but Jenny, I hope [00:04:00] this will help. Here are just some basic tips for you. The first is to visit other bookstores, which might be hard in pandemic times, but I think we do perhaps see a light at the end of that tunnel.

So visit indie bookstores and talk to owners or managers of those stores so you can kind of get an understanding of exactly what it entails. The good news is that owning a bookstore really is as fun as it looks. It is also so incredibly difficult and hard because it is entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship is hard.

And so I think to get a full grasp of what you would be doing as owner of a bookstore would be, it would be necessary to talk to an owner or a manager and get an idea if it's really something you want to pursue, because it may be something where you actually love the act of bookselling. Well, some bookstore owners, I am fortunate enough to get to do some book selling, but a lot of what I do is also bill paying.

So, [00:05:00] so I just want to make sure people go into, to it, eyes wide open. Um, and that's who I am as a person. I like to go into things, knowing as much information as possible. I think that is very much in line with my personality type. Um, so first would be to visit indie bookstores, partly. So you also get just the vibe of different bookstores and you can see what kind of vibe you might want your own sorta have.

And then as you visit stores, as you kind of befriend booksellers managers, owners, make sure you talk to an owner or manager and see what they do and what their day looks like. I also would recommend if you're planning on opening a store in your town or in your hometown, I would do a little bit of research on what your community is interested in.

Are they interested in a used bookstore? Are they interested in a new bookstore? Are they interested in store events? Are they interested in a wine bar? Like what would fit and suit your community? So that might mean just making sure you're an active member of your community. Or it might mean looking and [00:06:00] interviewing and talking to your local chamber of commerce, your local merchant's association, something like that.

So you could get a sense of what your community needs and filling that void. Because even though, especially in 2020, much of the bookshelf support has come from online and long distance customers, that's a difficult base to foster, like from scratch.

That thankfully has come through years of Instagram and podcasts and all kinds of other things, but what never fails at the Bookshelf locally as our local support and making sure that we're still a vibrant member of our local downtown economy and community. And so I would do some research into your local communities, see what they need, what they're after.

Are there other bookstores in your community? What do they look like? How can you collaborate and also innovate? So basically, do a ton of research. That would be, and look that is coming from, uh, in the words of Pantsuit Politics, that is coming from a research Sherpa. Like I love doing [00:07:00] research and to be honest, did not do a ton before, before owning and operating the Bookshelf.

But I also didn't open a bookstore from scratch. I did buy and purchase an existing store. And so if you're planning on kind of opening or owning a store from scratch, those would be my tips. The other thing along with kind of spending time in a bookstore is maybe even volunteer to shadow or see if you could, maybe they're hiring and maybe ease into it that way.

I, that is, that is what I did. Um, I really managed the Bookshelf before I ever owned the Bookshelf. And for me, that was also helpful to have that in-store in-person experience so I could know exactly what, I don't know, what the day-to-day operations of the store look like. And, and to make sure I, now that I'm owner, still have a finger on the pulse of what's happening in the store itself and also don't be afraid.

Like it is scary and it is really hard, but it is totally doable impossible. I think that's another thing I would tell a younger version of myself is the [00:08:00] things that people describe as being dreams come true, are dreams come true, but they also just require work and effort and initiative and, uh, yeah, some luck and providence and there's a lot that goes into play but it's totally doable.

It is not impossible. And, uh, sometimes I think that barrier is big. Like this idea that dreams are impossible or that accomplishments or goals are impossible. They're not impossible. They might be hard. But I do think, I do think a little bit of bravery goes a long way. So those are my tips, Jenny Lee.

And again, I don't want to keep referencing episode 281, but I do think I mentioned more about that there. Um, but I would, yeah, do as much research as possible and talk to, um, I, I don't want to say talk to as many people as possible because that is not my M.O. Sometimes too many cooks, et cetera, but talk to a handful of people you trust or that you have gotten to know who could really give you practical wisdom and advice [00:09:00] for taking next steps.

@kellie\_tucker\_caswell asks favorite podcast episode ever this year?

Um, one of my favorite parts of recording From the Front Porch this year was getting to record with a variety of co-hosts, all of whom have some connection to the bookshelf, whether they are my shop mom / literal mom, book club members, regular customers, some way or how they tie in to the Bookshelf.

And so it was really fun to get, to bring them on the show. This year, this year was also unusual because previously we always recorded in person, always, always, always. And. This year, most of the recordings happened virtually, and that means you can't see each other's faces and scheduling was weird. It required more batch recording.

It's just an interesting time to record a podcast where you're [00:10:00] typically recording in person. So that was a little unusual. That being said, I think my favorite, I think my favorite podcast episode we recorded this year was the one I did with my mom. I. Love talking to my mom, my parents live in Tallahassee. They're not far away.

They play a big role in the Bookshelf. Mom does our shop windows. Dad is shop dad and frequently does our repairs. Um, and so they play a big role in my life and in the Bookshelf's life. But it, and I, and I love talking to them under normal circumstances, but it is unusual to get the chance to kind of interview your parents and ask questions.

And it was really fun. She, my mom, Susie, is also probably one of the target demographics I feel like of the Bookshelf and From the Front Porch. And so to get, to hear her talk about the books she likes, I think was helpful for our customers and listeners. And I think gave them books that maybe I normally wouldn't read or haven't recommended, but [00:11:00] my mom loved and so I think that was really fun.

@carrie\_a\_hammer asks, what books did you sell when you first opened or which, how did you decide which books to stock when you first opened?

This goes back to the idea that the bookshelf was already in existence. So the bookshelf was already a fully stocked, fully formed store. I think what was different for me, was I was coming from the Bookshelf smaller location, which was temporarily located in Tallahassee, Florida. And that is the store that I managed before becoming co-owner of the bookshelf in Thomasville and eventually owner. Tallahassee and Thomasville while just 30, 45 minutes apart are vastly different cities. Right?

Thomasville is smaller town. Um, a really vibrant walkable downtown, very community driven, locally driven. Tallahassee is a much bigger city. It's the capital city. So it's a lot of state government, and it also is the site of major universities, FSU. FamU and a big community college TCC plus Flagler, like [00:12:00] a whole bunch of educational institutions.

So the reading vibe of Tallahassee is a little bit different from the reading vibe of Thomasville. We also have to attract both customer bases because Tallahassee is like to come to Thomasville is quaint walkable, downtown to shop. So. The Bookshelf. I did not have to reinvent the wheel, which I'm very grateful for.

Again, I think it totally depends on your personality and how you come to owning a bookstore. But for me, I am very grateful that the store was already in existence. I did not have to like come up with orders from scratch. For me, the learning curve came from learning the Thomasville community and trying to differentiate it from the Tallahassee community.

I don't know if this is any longer the case, but at least initially what I really saw to be the difference was in Tallahassee a lot of the reading was academic, high literary, very literary and less commercial, I guess. And in Thomasville, the reading tended toward the more commercial. I think the longer I own the Bookshelf, the longer Olivia manages the [00:13:00] bookshelf, we are watching hand selling really matters.

And so we watched the local Thomasville community really grasp and latch onto the staffers that they most resonate with and whose picks most resonate with them. And so I have watched the Thomasville community not necessarily change in terms of reading tastes, but change in the ways that they trust the booksellers at the Bookshelf.

So, yeah the Bookshelf previously felt pretty commercial give or take, and also certainly reflected the tastes of the previous owners. And now I think the Bookshelf probably does reflect the tastes of me, of Olivia, of Lucy, of Nancy, of Caroline and Laura. Like, because those are the people working in hand selling day in and day out.

So I think my initial thought, which was Tallahassee, perhaps more academic, more literary, thomasville more commercial, has now kind of morphed and changed and ebbs, and there have been ebbs and flows. And now it's kind of this smorgasbord of, of tastes. But I think that is what I love [00:14:00] about indie bookstores is they get to know their community and they are reflective of their community.

And they're also reflective of the people who work there. So the Bookshelf, I certainly think has changed in terms of what it sells and what people read based on what Olivia reads and what Nancy hand sells. And so that is a long winded way of saying I didn't have to pick what books, the bookshelf stocked when we first opened, but we obviously do have to pick what books we stock now.

And. I think, I think I can speak for independent bookstores in general, that when they open, they are reflective of both the personal tastes of the owner and staff, and they are reflective of the tastes of the surrounding community. And I, I think that's one of the things that makes independent bookstores really special.

@shaynelj. I hope I'm doing that right, @shaynelj asked is podcast income, positive, negative, or neutral? Is podcast, income, positive, negative, or [00:15:00] neutral?

This is a great question. And a question I have gotten asked a lot as the bow of the Bookshop podcast has grown and changed and the answer for us is positive.

For many, many, many years. And for many, many, many episodes, it was neutral. I would not ever say that our podcast income was negative because the way we do it. I mean, if you could only see me now, I am literally facing the microphone, which is propped up on a chair, surrounded by pillows. The computer needed to be charged. So it is propped up on the arm of the chair. I am sitting on a bench in front of the chair.

This is the least professional setup you have ever seen for a podcast. We are not This American Life. We are not even some other great bookish podcasts that you listen to, uh, with professional podcasters, as their hosts, we are a bookstore podcast and I record these episodes in between life at the Shelf.

[00:16:00] Uh, and so for us, I never found the podcast to be income negative because we did not pour a ton of resources, especially initially into the podcast. I started off with like the world's smallest microphone. It looked like a joke and I recorded episodes from my house for a while. There even literally from the front porch.

And it has definitely grown and changed, but still is not something we pour a ton of financial resources too, into what we do pour into is time resources. This year is the year we have an editing and, uh, producing service, so Studio D Productions, that produces our episodes now. I cannot tell you how grateful I am for them.

And so, yes, we kind of have spent a little bit more, I guess, in the last year on the podcast itself. But in the last, I would say two to three years, [00:17:00] particularly, I think I could trace it back to a partnership we did with the Popcast and Knox and Jamie from the Popcast.

And then an interview I did with Anne Bogle on her podcast, What Should I Read Next? And then Ann graciously came on the, From the Front Porch podcast. So certainly that cross-pollination of podcasts, help us grow and change and help the podcast, help From the Front Porch, move into income positive.

So I would never say that from the front porch was income negative because we did things very frugally and, and still do things very frugally. It was podcasts. It was, I don't know why this is such a tongue twister for me. It was income neutral for a really long time. Until again, maybe cross-pollinating with those two podcasts that I mentioned, at which point slowly but surely, the podcast became to be income positive.

I think I very much have the mindset of Field of Dreams, where, where if you build [00:18:00] it, they will come. And if you consistently build it, they will come. And so even in those neutral years, I like hosting a podcast. I like doing it, I think it ties into my little journalism loving heart, to my interview loving heart. And so it was something I was happy to continue doing.

And by doing it fairly consistently for the last seven years, um, it really became consistent probably six years ago. Um, we have been able to become income positive. What that means for us is, because this isn't like other podcasts, like we don't, at least at this point have ads. What this means for us is income positive for the Bookshelf.

So From the Front Porch, again is a marketing tool. It might not feel like that. I don't want it to feel like icky, you know, marketing, but it is for the Bookshelf. Like that's the whole reason we have the podcast is to promote our store, to promote the city of Thomasville, to kind of give long distance customers and inside look at to what happens in [00:19:00] store at the Bookshelf from day to day. And so when I say From the Front Porch is income positive, what I mean is it has helped generate customers for the Bookshelf.

And I will tell you that in 2020, that mattered more than ever before. In 2020, we had to be close, closed to the public for gosh, two months. I feel like maybe three before we kind of opened back up slowly but surely limiting capacity or by appointment or whatever the case may have been earlier this year, we were close to the public for a couple of months.

We were still able to operate. In fact, Olivia and I joke, like we were never really close. Like the bookshelf was open for all of this year because of long distance customers. Many of whom are instagram followers or podcasts listeners. And so that's what I mean, when I say From the Front Porch is income positive is we have loyal listeners who translated ultimately into loyal long distance [00:20:00] customers.

And I could name them for you. We could name them, um, because they have been so gracious and kind and helpful to our business this year in particular, they are our, we call them our regulars. They're they're much like our in-store customers. We just don't know their faces, but we very much know your names.

And so for me, and for the Bookshelf, a huge banks too. All of the listeners, even if you never make a purchase through the Bookshelf, if you post about from the front porch, or if you share about it, that is helpful to us in introducing the Bookshelf to the world and broadening our customer base. Jordan and I always knew that the Bookshelf would have to extend beyond the boundaries of Thomasville if we wanted it to grow.

Now, if we didn't want it to grow, then that was a different thing. But. Because we were interested in seeing the Bookshelf grow, we knew we'd have to grow beyond Thomasville because Thomasville's population has been pretty much the same for the last several decades. So this is a way to extend the Bookshelf beyond the boundaries of Thomasville. And this year, [00:21:00] we have certainly seen that play out in terms of helping the bookshelf remain an economically viable business. So that was a long-winded answer, Shane, but I hope that helped.

@happyinthebooks asks, what is your favorite thing you get to do for the store on a daily basis?

This was a great question because I had to think, what do I do daily at the Bookshelf? Because truthfully, I think it's not just an entrepreneur thing, I think it's a retail thing, every day is different. Which is great. I, for a long time worked jobs that felt very similar day after day. And the Bookshelf is never boring because it is always something new.

So I had to think really hard about what do I do on a daily basis that I love doing. And I think it is certainly every opportunity I get to hand sell. I am a super introverted person, highly introverted person, but I love talking about books. And so not, I don't know that I get to do this every day, [00:22:00] but most days, I spend at least a little bit of time on the floor.

It's not the whole day. It may not even be the half. It may not even be half the day, but I do want to spend some time on the floor. Um, and so my very favorite thing to do still first and foremost is hand sell books. I love hand selling books.

The other favorite thing I get to do for the store on a daily basis, and again, I don't know. It's so hard to know what happens at the store on a daily basis. But my favorite thing is opening boxes. I love opening boxes. It's like Christmas morning, every day. I love seeing what Olivia has ordered. I love seeing the books that I ordered for a spring catalog six months ago, and finally getting to see the books in real life.

I love unboxing books so much, uh, and I love straightening shelves. So I like hand selling. I like opening boxes and I like straightening our shelves. I really do still genuinely love all three of those things.

@jgc108 asks, have you found any [00:23:00] surprising ways to make money that you wouldn't have thought of if you didn't have to pivot this year?

Yes. Um, this year, boy, we joke like, and everybody jokes. We've pivoted so much that we're dizzy. I bought at the end of 2019. I think that's right. Time is weird. At the end of 2019, I bought a sweatshirt or maybe my mom bought it for me. And it's a friend's sweatshirt that says pivot on the front and I bought it or was given it to where at my line, dancing class, rip line dancing classes.

Rip any physical activity aside from walking, because one of the things we did a lot in line dancing class was pivot. And so I thought that was hilarious and very fun. Also I do like the show Friends, but now I wear that sweatshirt because that is all I do. It's all we do all day, every day.

I will say, um, at the very beginning of the pandemic, we had to pivot hard because mid-March was when we had our first reader retreat planned [00:24:00] and reader retreat as we learned in 2019 was a great creative way to grow the Bookshelf and to make money for the Bookshelf. It was a great, it was a very profitable event for us. That profitable event was canceled as were the three subsequent events that were planned, that were canceled and they were planned and had to be canceled.

So we had four reader retreats we essentially had to make up for this year. So I think for us, some of the surprising ways were adult and children's book boxes. We sold these as we did children's boxes first, children boredom, children's boredom boxes was which was what we sold them as and marketed them as at the beginning of the pandemic.

Right. Because people were all of a sudden home with their kids. We didn't know how long this was going to last, remember when that was happening. So we thought, well, Olivia is excellent at curating and handpicking books and products for kids. She really is. And so we were like, well, let's make children's board and boxes because kids are home now and they need stuff to do, but still slightly educational, but also fun.

[00:25:00] So we did these children's boredom boxes. They were very popular. We sold out very quickly. And then we did adult book boxes and I don't know, I'd like to think it's something that we would have come up with eventually. Uh, the Bookshelf is nothing if not a constant focus group and brainstorming exercise, and we throw a lot of spaghetti on the wall to see what sticks.

But I certainly think the pandemic really forced us to be creative about the ways we sold books online. Part of the reason we love the adult book boxes was we wanted to mimic the in-store experience. So it's great to sell. Oh, what's an example. Early pandemic. We probably sold 50 to a hundred copies of *Untamed* by Glennon Doyle.

That's great. We love that book. We love Glennon what an awesome thing to do. However, we still have a bookstore that's not being shopped or browse because we're close to the public and it's full of books that we really do need to sell. And that has [00:26:00] been the case all year long. Like we have constantly fluctuated between overstocked and then understocked on what online customers want and because they're missing the in-store experience.

Right. And so a surprise book box for adults was then a fun way for us to get to sell books that weren't selling in store because we weren't open, but books that really we felt like deserved to be sold and deserves to find a home. And so adult book boxes and kids boredom boxes, I think were the surprising ways.

And then turning the in-store events we did into virtual experiences. So turning the real retreats into a virtual experience was also a surprise. It's not my first preference. I still prefer in-store events, but I think we're learning ways that we can still bond and do life with an experience gathering virtually with our long distance customers in a way that's fun and makes sense for our store and also is financially gratifying. Does that make sense? That is the answer to that.

@julireadsitall [00:27:00] asks, if you could change or add something to the Bookshelf, what would it be and why?

Well, I always wanted a sandwich shop, that would call like a fish sandwich, the old man in the sea, and you could buy a sandwich and then also buy a book. I just love sandwiches so much. I really do love sandwiches so much, but. Jordan and I constantly look at each other now and we're like, aren't you glad we didn't buy a restaurant? Like, that's the one, one perk to this entrepreneur thing is we didn't buy a restaurant. So probably early adolescent or young adult, Annie would have said, man, we should have a sandwich shop because I really did think it'd be fun to have themed sandwiches around books, like have a literary sandwich shop.

Um, but that is certainly not something I want to do any longer. Uh, so. Rip to that idea instead, you know, I think I really wanted an event space, which we were able to add. And now it is a shipping facility. Um, gosh, [00:28:00] if I could change or add one thing, I mean, those are the two things that come to mind, but the events space we did ultimately add, and I'm really grateful for it because it then became a shipping station this year.

If I could change or add something to the Bookshelf, what would it be? I don't think anything right now, except maybe right now in the way the Bookshelf is running, it would be really nice to have two things, a podcast studio, as I stare at this very decorative pillow on my couch. A podcast studio, I think would be really nice, but I don't, I just don't know that financially that makes sense. But w we're we're just dreaming here. So that would be one thing.

And then the other thing would be, I say, a shipping facility is upstairs. I wish that you could understand that the bookshop is a very historic building. And so it does not make sense for like books to go up and down these stairs, which sounds so silly, but it is, it would be a lot of work for our staff to take shipments up and back and forth up and down stairs.

And so right now [00:29:00] we do like pre boxed things like our, no stress, November gift boxes and shelves subscriptions. We do that stuff upstairs more or less, but downstairs is still where we're doing everything else. And so it is chaos and like a little messier than I would like, like our current little shipping area is in the children's section of our store.

I don't know what 2021 holds, but it would be nice to have designated spaces for things. So like a designated space for shipping that wasn't invasive to the store itself, designated space for podcasting. I don't even know that that needs to be at the Bookshelf because I record on Wednesdays when I work from home. And it'd be nice to just have that space at my house.

Um, but I don't know what that looks like to have a designated space to do shelf subscriptions in an ideal world. I think I would have designated spaces for those things instead of just a free for all on the floor of the Bookshelf. Um, so Julie, that or a sandwich shop apparently.

@aushellbell asks, what do you do with books that don't sell? How long do you leave them on the shelf?

This is a great [00:30:00] question and certainly has changed a lot in 2020, just again, based on who's coming in the store, what's selling on the floor, what's selling online, et cetera. It's just a totally different way of doing business, but typically we return books that don't sell.

That is one great perk of books. You know, the downside to books is that the price is printed on the back of the book. And places like Amazon just sell them for a lot cheaper than we can. But the plus side is that unlike regular merchandise, we can return books if they don't sell, I can't return a Herschel backpack for example, if it doesn't sell.

So typically what we do with books that don't sell is either we put them on our sale cart or we return them for store credit, uh, publisher credit I mean. How long do we leave them on the shelf? A year or so, if they are in hardback, like we like to give them a fair shake.

Then when the hard back becomes a paperback, we put the hard back on the sale cart or return it. And we do inventory every January. I'd love to start doing inventory twice a year. This year is not the year for that. When we do inventory, that is when we do a ton of returns and we kind of [00:31:00] really have to evaluate.

It's almost like when you're a kid and you're evaluating your stuffed animals and you have to decide which ones need to go in which need to stay. It's a very personal thing. So we really do evaluate, okay, this book has been here for a year. Can I sell it or does it need to go like, and that is truly, we haven't read every book on our shelves, but we have for sure and for certain touched every book on our shelves and know every book on our shelves because of inventory and just because of the nature of our small bookstore. So we either return them or we put them on sale and we give them 12 months or so to, to find the right home.

@seize\_the\_page, do you ever read books you'd be embarrassed to admit you've read? And do you ever get burned out on reading?

I don't read books I'd be embarrassed to admit I've read, unless we're talking some of these more PG 13 / R rated romcoms that maybe then my mom will say, could I read that? And then I have to say no. And then I'm a little embarrassed.

[00:32:00] Um, otherwise, no, I like. I, and I think we've talked about this a little bit, like guilty pleasure. I have air quotes up right now. Like I just, I don't know. Maybe the older I get the less, I care about that. Like the less I care about guilt over what I read, um, or watch, I am very rarely embarrassed by what I have read, except yeah except maybe a steamier romcom than I would normally read.

Sometimes I'm embarrassed. I don't even know if embarrassed is the right word. Sometimes I, sometimes I'm reading something that just, I would enjoy. So for example, this month, you're listening to this in December. This month, I have been reading the Diana memoir or not memoir the Diana Biography by Andrew Morton.

I'm not embarrassed to be reading that. But it is not helpful to the Bookshelf to be reading that like, like it is not helpful to our bottom line. I'm not like hand selling copies of the Diana Biography left and right. Um, so I'm not embarrassed, but sometimes I do feel like I'm wasting time. And what I have to remind [00:33:00] myself is no, I watched the Crown. I want to read this book.

And, and, and the same was even true of like the Meghan and Harry book. Other people I know, hated that book and thought it was so dumb. I really liked it. Loved it, thought it was interesting, learned stuff about how Harry uses emojis that I now will know for the rest of my life. I'll take it to my grave and I'm glad I read it. I'm not embarrassed by it, but I do acknowledge it may not have been beneficial for the store.

And I do have to often evaluate my reading in that way. Like, is this something I can hand sell? Is this something that will help the bookshelf? Um, is this something that will be beneficial to our customers? So. I don't know, embarrassed, not so much, but certainly always evaluating my reading. Yes.

And then do I ever get burnt out on reading? I think I had moments of that this year and prior to this year, I think the answer would be, but no, but I think in 2020, there were definitely weeks where I truly did not want to read anything. My brain was tired, running the Bookshelf [00:34:00] in this way has been, um, I would like to be clear, I am so grateful that we have even had the opportunity to run the Bookshelf this way and that we have been financially viable during a global pandemic. Has it been an exhausting way to do business? Absolutely. Yes.

Am I evaluating what that looks like for the following year? Yes. And so, as a result, there were weeks of this year where I really did want to read. And I really did have to, whether it was for podcast content or for shelf subscriptions, that's really a big part of my reading life now is reading for shelf subscriptions.

And so, yeah, I do think I experienced some burnout this year and I think that would have been scary to me before. I think now it's just. It's okay. It's seasonal and yeah, I'm going to be burnout, but then I'll read a book that surprises me or blows me away or redeems everything. And I read a lot of those this year.

I read a lot of books that completely redeemed and rescued reading for me. [00:35:00] Yeah. So I don't think doing, I don't think reading for work on its own takes the fun out of reading. I think like sometimes take the fun out of reading and just the exhaustion of what's going on in the world can take the fun out of reading for me but I think overall for somebody who reads a lot for a living, I don't think I experienced as much burnout as you might expect.

@ellen\_hatfield, of all the ways you've had to pivot for COVID, do you think you'll make any of those changes permanent?

I love this question, because again, this is something I'm constantly re-evaluating this year. Um, it's hard to even find time to evaluate. Um, but one of the things I've like written down in my planner to look at it, January is like, what in 2020 are we going to keep doing in 2021? And what do we need to kind of let go of so? I don't fully know the answer to this question yet, but I will tell you, I suspect virtual events and [00:36:00] catering and serving our online customer base will now be something we always do.

I think before COVID we were doing that. We already were doing virtual events and we already were doing online sales. And, uh, and I'm really grateful that we were already doing those things because we were already like halfway in the pivot. Do you know what I mean? We were already halfway there.

And so COVID just made us have to really lean in, but it wasn't something we were entirely unprepared for. Grateful every day for that. Um, and for that reality. I suspect that in 2021 and beyond, we will continue relying, and if not relying, still providing virtual events and catering to, and thinking about our online customers, whether that's through making sure shelf subscriptions are the very best service that can possibly be, making sure our virtual events are as free of technological glitches as possible and are events that reflect [00:37:00] the state of the store.

So I'm going to give you an example too. One interesting thing about the pandemic is that it is allowed authors, who we previously would have been unable to do events with, to do events with us. Erica Bauermeister is a great example. She wrote *House Lessons*, a book I adored this year. I was able to talk to her, even though she lives in the Pacific Northwest, she would, and I love her dearly.

She would never have come to Thomasville, Georgia for an in-store event. And you know what? I don't even know if I would have been able to host her in-store in Thomasville. I don't know that I would have had a big enough crowd to even warrant her attention and warrant her time. It's not all Erica Bauermeister or traveling's fault.

It's also, we live in a small town and for us, a well attended event is 10 to 12 people. And is that worth somebody flying out from the Pacific Northwest, probably not, but a virtual events and the fact that we've sold oh, Gosh, I don't know, 50 or more copies of her book. Uh, and so being able to do a virtual event was entirely worth [00:38:00] it.

That being said, author events are extremely stressful virtually for me because it is all and I, or for the Bookstore, because it all relies on our technology. And so I don't know if we will rely on virtual author events in the future, but virtual events where we do like literary lunches or lunch breaks or Q and A's or holiday shopping previews.

I think those are things that wound up being both financially profitable for the store and also really fun. And relatively stress-free for us to do. Author events were always a little stressful because both our technology and their technology is at risk. Um, so I don't know how many virtual author events we will continue to do, but I do think we will continue to do virtual store events.

And I think we will certainly continue to think about our online customers because you really came through for us this year. And so we want to make sure the bookshelf is for you too. So I think. 2021 is going to be a year of trying to balance and [00:39:00] figure out what do we do in store? What do we do for our in-store customers, the customers that we know by name and face, and we love, and what do I do, what do we do for our online customers who supported us through a pandemic, who promoted us through a pandemic and through, and who we have become friendly with? Like, we don't know their faces, but we do know your names.

And so what are the ways we can be a business that is both profitable for in-store Thomasville, for our local economy, for our local community, and how can we continue to be profitable and innovative for our online customers? Those are the two questions I think we'll go into. I know I will go into 2021 asking and ways that I think we will be glad we pivoted in 2020. Um, because I think it would make us, it has made us a better business, honestly, it made us have to think creatively and, and I think that's always a good thing, even if the thing that caused the creativity isn't good. Oh, I am, okay. Ellen. That was a great question.

I [00:40:00] just want to end on one last one by @abookstorenow, what brings you the greatest joy in your work?

I thought about this and I have three relatively short answers. There are three things that bring me great joy in my work. The first is kids. One of the saddest hardest things about 2020 is that we have not done in store story times. We have not really had a ton of in-store customers, um, until maybe the last couple months. And so we have missed kids in our store. Our children's section is vibrant and colorful and fun, and it was made for kids. I love the children at Storytime. I love the enthusiasm of kids who love to read. Um, I love watching Olivia do an amazing job with our local kids. And I loved in 2019 getting to read to kids at Harper elementary school. Kids bring the greatest joy to my work. And I am so glad they are [00:41:00] involved in the Bookshelf.

The second thing, I love the elderly and, um, Olivia and I talked a little bit about this this year. So we have had to say goodbye to a couple of our elderly customers this year. And one day I think I will write about what it is like to grieve people that you don't fully know but you certainly know a part of them.

And I, I want to write about it because writing is how I process things. And because I feel like I have lost people I know on the internet, but all I knew them through was the internet. And so it's been weird to like, figure out how do you grieve that loss? And then in store, we lost earlier this year, just precious customers who meant a great deal to us.

And we didn't know how to fully grieve that because we didn't fully know them. And so the most we felt like we could do is write a card and tell their family how much their presence in our store meant to us. And Olivia and I also talked to Olivia is extremely close with her [00:42:00] grandparents. I was extremely close to mine.

And so there is something about the older population and Thomasville skews older, our local community skews, older. It's part of the reason we've been cautious about how we've reopened. I could name for you some of our precious elderly customers who remind me of my grandparents, my relationship with them reminds me of my grip relationship with my grandparents, Olivia and I talked about how special that is as we lose our grandparents to get, to have pseudo grandparents or like replacement grandparents in the form of these customers, uh, is really something special.

And they bring me a lot of joy. And so kids and the elderly, there's a weird answer to this question, but it is true only when I feel the most joy. That is absolutely true. Um, and then the third way, and I've already alluded to it. It just ties into these two things. The other thing that brings me great joy in my work is getting to watch other people excel in their work.

And there are a lot of hard things about managing a business, owning a [00:43:00] business, managing a staff, just, just difficult things that come. I think other companies have human resources. And when you're a small business, you're kind of the accounting department, the human resources department, all of the above.

And I think as an Enneagram five, it can sometimes be difficult for me to like really fully be in tune with what my staff, what the bookshelf staff is dealing with on a daily basis. And this pandemic has affected all of us. Not just in our work, but in our personal lives and trying to grasp that well and trying to manage people well is always trying to manage people well, is a goal like that is what I aspire to is, is to do a good job in that.

But what brings me a lot of joy is getting to watch our staff be so good at what they do. And they are, they are remarkably good at what they do. And to get to watch Olivia interact with Dumbledore's Army, our little kids group that meets at the Bookshelf right now, they meet virtually to get to watch Laura, just package your shelf subscriptions like [00:44:00] the Wiz that she is.

Like, it is truly amazing to watch Nancy hand sell a book. Nancy is a remarkable sales woman. To watch Caroline patiently package up your orders and ship things out when we didn't ship really barely at all. It's like compared to 2020, we did not ship very much at all in 2019. And to watch Caroline pivot and to do that, to watch Lucy pivot into a virtual role where now she is living in Pennsylvania and doing her job remotely, I can't tell you what joy it brings me to watch people be so good at their work.

And so, yeah. A bookstore now, @abookstorenow, those are my three answers. I love kids. I love the elderly in the Bookshelf. That is such a weird way to word that answer, but it's the truth. And I love watching and I get a lot of joy from watching the people who work at the Bookshelf, be extremely good at what they do. And when you support the Bookshelf, you are supporting people who are really good at their jobs. Um, the people who work at the Bookshelf are so [00:45:00] good at what they do. And I hope you can sense that virtually. I know you can sense that in store.

So okay, boy, this, we went a little long, but I hope this answers some of your questions about what the bookshelf has looked like in 2020, what life here has looked like. I hope it is clear how grateful we are for you, who choose to listen to this podcast every week, or maybe you just pop in for reading recap episodes, whatever the case may be, we are so grateful for you.

And we are grateful for those of you, we're grateful for all of you, but we're especially grateful to those of you who have chosen to support the Bookshelf financially, whether through Patreon or through purchasing books through the Bookshelf this year, thank you.

I always say this and I hope you know that I mean, it, thank you barely begins to cover it. Like, it feels like such a small thing to say in response to such an outpouring, but thank you for the ways that you have supported our shop this year. And if you were unable or couldn't support us financially this year, that is okay. We are grateful for every like. Every comment, every share.

Um, it really does matter. Uh, it really does matter to getting the [00:46:00] word out about the store, the book, the word out about Thomasville. Our small town is being able to survive and that is that's the goal, right? We want Thomasville and we want the Bookshelf to be here longterm.

That's what we tell our in-store customers. It's what I'm telling you now is that the goal is that the Bookshelf will be here for many, many years to come in the vibrant, quaint downtown that you have all grown to love. So. Thank you for all the ways that you support our store. We are so grateful for you.

From the Front Porch is the weekly podcast production of theBbookshelf, an independent bookstoe in south Georgia. You can follow the Bookshelf's daily happenings on Instagram @bookshelftville. And all the books from today's episode can be purchased online through our store website, www.Bookshelfthomasville.com.

A full transcript of today's episode can be found at, [00:47:00] FromTheFrontPorchPodcast.com.

Special thanks to Dylan and his team at Studio D Production for the transcript, for sound and editing and for our theme music, which sets the perfect, warm, and friendly tone for our Thursday conversations. This week, I'm reading *Wintering* by Katherine May.

If you liked what you heard on today's episode, tell us by leaving a review on iTunes, or if you're so inclined to support us on Patreon, where you can hear our staffs weekly, new release Tuesday conversations, read full book reviews in our monthly Shelf Life newsletter, follow along as Hunter and I conquer a classic and receive free media mail shipping on all your online book orders.

Just go to patreon.com / From the Front Porch. We're so grateful for you and we look forward to meeting back here next week. [00:48:00]