

Libro.fm Podcast - Episode 34

Interview with Mairi Oliver (Lighthouse Books)

Intro Theme:

Libro.fm podcast with Craig and Karen supporting local bookstores, audiobooks and more. Join the world of stories. As always, thank you for listening.

Craig Silva:

Hi, I'm Craig, and welcome to the Libro.fm podcast where we talk to authors, booksellers, narrators, and more.

Karen Farmer:

And I'm Karen. We have a very special three episode arc for you coming up, and this is an honor of our 10th anniversary here at Libro.fm. We've been around for 10 years, if you can believe it.

Craig Silva:

That's ridiculous and awesome.

Karen Farmer:

It's amazing.

Craig Silva:

And I hope we're here for a hundred more years.

Karen Farmer:

Yes.

Craig Silva:

Do you want to say why it's three episodes instead of only one like it was originally supposed to be?

Karen Farmer:

Oh, goodness. I would love to. So we interviewed three amazing people that own and work in bookstores. And while we initially intended to speak to all of them for 15 minutes and create one episode with excerpts from these conversations, couldn't be done. These are the coolest people ever. And we wanted you to hear all about what they're up to in their very unique independent bookshops. And so now we're doing three episodes because we talked to them all for at least 30 minutes.

Craig Silva:

Sorry, Libro marketing department. Yeah. So it was supposed to be 15 minutes, and we just could not talk to these people enough. And after every single one, we were like, "I want them to be our friends."

Karen Farmer:

Well, for this first episode, really excited, we're talking to Mairi Oliver who owns Lighthouse Bookshop in Edinburgh, Scotland. And you're just not going to believe all of the cool things that they're up to over there.

Craig Silva:

Yes, I am obsessed with their pay-it-forward program, which we talk about on the podcast. So if that sounds interesting to you, stay tuned and stick around afterwards and maybe we'll talk a little tiny bit about what we're reading. Nope, we won't. Nevermind. I'm getting a nod. I'm getting a head shake from Karen. So don't stick around after. Go do something outside. It's really nice out.

Karen Farmer:

Enjoy your summer and enjoy the interview with Mairi.

Craig Silva:

Hello, Mairi. Welcome to the podcast. For our listeners, we'd love if you could tell us a bit about yourself.

Mairi Oliver:

Hi. Hi, Craig. Hi, Karen. My name's Mairi. I run Lighthouse - Edinburgh's Radical Bookshop in what is currently sunny Edinburgh. I've been a bookseller for about 15 years, and I've had the bookshop for seven years. Yeah. So this is what I do.

Craig Silva:

What drew you to this life of books initially?

Mairi Oliver:

What is not to draw one to a life of books.

Karen Farmer:

Amen.

Craig Silva:

Very true.

Mairi Oliver:

I'm one of many that read books under the covers with the torch and stayed up too late. They're the building blocks of me. And I thought I was going to be a lawyer. And I started down that route. And then I discovered that I did not have the emotional stamina to do human rights law. Power to the people who do it. Some people are fueled by the hell fire of injustice and it just made me really sad. And I was like, "I don't want to be sad for the rest of my life." And I was lucky enough to be diverted by a friend and a boss at the time to do some stuff with books.

And then I basically ran off to Australia, determined to become a bookseller. And a bookshop in Sydney's North Shore, the lovely Jay at the Constant Reader gave me my first real bookshop job. And then, yeah, it just was like, "Yeah, this is it." Actually, for me, wanting to get through the day, get through a life has to be about making the world a better place or playing my part in making the world a better place. And books gave me a home to do that in a way that felt like more me than fighting in a courtroom or... It was like, "Okay. This is it. This is where I dig. This is home." So yeah.

Craig Silva:

That's such a good answer. I had this as potential follow up, ask what drew. And I'm like, I'm so glad I asked now. What a beautiful answer.

Karen Farmer:

Well, we're so excited that you and your team are partners with Libro.fm. I think it's only been since July of last year, so less than a year that we went international, which is hard to believe. I'm curious what it is about audiobooks that drew you to want to partner with us and if you hear any interesting anecdotes from your booksellers or your customers about how they're listening to audiobooks.

Mairi Oliver:

I mean, I think we're a pretty neuro spicy team. And I think that for a lot of people with ADHD, autism or people with small children who will interrupt a train of thought, which is also in our team, I think audiobooks provide something that a print book can't. And so it means that if you are a reader and a lover of books, it gives us a chance to still be able to do that, still be able to read. I think in a ever so slightly melodramatic way, audiobooks saved my life during the pandemic when the shop closed during the first lockdown and my team went off to on furlough and everyone was locked at home and it was just me in the bookshop doing eight, nine hours in the shop on my own and then doing three hours of walking around the city delivering books by foot to people's doorsteps.

I'm not meant to be alone for such lengths of time. And that's when I discovered audiobooks. And I was using the library app that we have here, the Libby app. And it was suddenly like, "Oh, actually I can listen to a book a day. I can get lost for 12 hours in a story and not feel completely alone and divorced from the reasons that I do this." Yeah. And I think Jim similarly found audiobooks during the pandemic as well with a small kid. And then suddenly, it turned out that we were all listening to them, but we weren't talking about it. Just that thing of like, I don't know, we had them siloed off, audiobooks separate from books.

And then as soon as Libro reached out, Jim was like, "This is the thing for us." We get to talk about performance, we get to talk about the books that are the ones you listen to rather than the ones you have in print. And as soon as we started talking to people about it, I think partly because our demographics and our audience reflect the team quite a lot, we found that a lot of people were either already listening to audiobooks or were coming in and being like, "I'd love to read, but with my ADHD, I find that a real struggle." And being able to be like, "There's a really great audiobook of this one. Here's a Libro bookmark. Go away and listen to this." And people being like, "Oh, I can do that."

So yeah. We found that there's a special... In any other bit of the book world where we all have our little area that is our passion, and then suddenly you find other people who are the romance readers or the sci-fi readers or the audiobook listeners and little sub-genre nerdism. And yeah, it's really nice being able to find those people and be like, "Yeah, you can talk about audiobooks here." It's like, it's not sacrilegious to do that in a bookshop. Also, you can buy your books from us.

Karen Farmer:

It's a win-win.

Mairi Oliver:

So you can buy your books from us.

Craig Silva:

It's win-win all around. I love what you said about the accessibility of it. Every time we get any kind of feedback through our channels that I have X, Y, Z, autism, whatever, and I just discovered your company and now I can enjoy books again. It's the best feeling.

Mairi Oliver:

Yeah. A friend of mine has got long COVID, and she's a writer. She has a whole world built on books and is now unable to read. And audiobooks have been this lifeline for her, where it's just like, okay, I can still be in this world that has always been my comfort, that was kind of taken away when she wasn't suddenly no longer able to hold a book up, let alone focus. They're a gift for readers, I think.

Karen Farmer:

Thank you so much for sharing that.

Craig Silva:

Yeah. I've seen Lighthouse described as an unapologetically activist radical bookshop, and I was wondering if you could tell us more about what that means and what Lighthouse's mission is and what sets it apart from other, maybe more standard bookstores.

Mairi Oliver:

So we're part of a broader tradition of radical bookshops. And in the UK, there's an Alliance of Radical Booksellers, which includes some amazing bookshops like Five Leaves in Nottingham, the Feminist Bookshop in Brighton, Housmans that's been going since 1945. There is this tradition of radical bookselling, which is about marrying your values to your business and sort of saying, "It matters to me the books that I sell. It matters to me how I contribute to the economy. So a writer whose ideas damage the world, whose platform is about hate. I don't want to be part of the economy that makes them a living off sharing those ideas. So I'm just not going to sell their books."

Or conversely, I think we need more queer writers, more feminist writers, more writers of color, more people who are writing their own stories, histories in own voices. And the radical tradition in radical bookshops is about doing that. Queer books are far more accessible now than they were 10 years ago, 20 years ago, 30 years ago. The shop here used to be called Word Power. It was opened in 1994. And before Word Power, Edinburgh had three radical bookshops, WomanZone, which was a feminist bookshop run by volunteers, First of May, which was a workers' bookshop, and Lavender Menace, which was an LGBT bookshop. And when those all folded in the '80s, early '90s, Word Power came up having it under one roof. And that's the shop that I took over and have turned into Lighthouse.

And so, it's partly that, just how we run a bookshop, how we run a business. The activist side of it is that we think a better world is possible and worth fighting for. And that, like I was saying before, we all dig where we are, and books are the way we choose to fight that fight, whether that's giving people the knowledge and the experience to be able to fight certain fights, to understand environmental justice, to

be able to understand what ecological collapse is, to then being able to do something about it, or arming people in different ways. We can weather the storms out there better if we see ourselves represented and celebrated and valued. And so being able to read and access books that do that for you so that you are shored up for the other fights.

So that means that we kind of go out to places to get those books into the right hands. We march at Pride. We're part of organizing groups for various campaigns. We've supported Fossil Free Books, which is a big campaign in the UK to try and create a fossil free books industry. It's about walking the walk in every little bit of the way we're doing it. We're a living wage employer. We want to give jobs that are dignified and joyful and allow our booksellers to be more than just living on the breadline. It's kind of about that.

Craig Silva:

I'm going to cry. It's amazing. I want to go to this bookstore now.

Karen Farmer:

I'm like, Mairi, are you hiring by any chance? Don't tell my boss I said that.

Craig Silva:

Do you need podcasters?

Karen Farmer:

I think I saw that your Lighthouse journey started in 2017, and obviously so much has happened since 2017. We already mentioned COVID is one of those things. And I'm curious if your vision or what you expected this to look like has changed along the way and how you've adapted from 2017 to now.

Mairi Oliver:

Yeah, definitely. We have a lot more books than we used to. It's taken a while to get us to the stock level. So just the experience of the space is different. In terms of a vision, I'm not the person that took over the shop in 2017. You kind of find this with third spaces, whether that's like bookshops, I think queer bookshops are a particular experience of that, but other kinds of community spaces, the feedback loop is really strong, where if you build something to shore up people, you find that it shores you up.

I'm gayer than I was seven years ago. I value and understand the value of mental health and well-being in ways that I didn't before. I used to work every hour, seven-day weeks and never take a holiday. And it was always go, go, go. And it took a long time to be like, actually, if I want to dismantle capitalism, the way that it oppresses people, I have to start here, moving our full-timers to four-day work weeks. The shop has kind of just evolved in little ways to reflect and exist as this expression of what we believe in.

So I think just in some of the mechanics, it's a different place. I think we're a lot less apologetic about some things. We can be bold. We know what we believe in. We are a bigger team, so our ideas are tested out on each other. I have three writers who work for me who are Mohamed Tonsy, Jessica Johannesson, Christina Neuwirth. They're writing these things, they're having these ideas. They're in these spaces in a different way than just booksellers. And I think that's meant that we can be more unapologetic about the stances that we are taking because we know why we're doing it.

That also means that people know what we are about more. So we waste a lot less time arguing with transphobic people because they just don't come here. And we waste a lot less time arguing with-

Mairi Oliver:

... waste a lot less time arguing with people who disagree with our stance on against genocide and Palestine, because we have flown a Palestinian flag in the shop for many years. And so because we're not having to firefight all the time, each opinion with people who disagree with us on profound levels, we're able to have a lot more nuanced conversations about bits and pieces of like, well, how do we build that better? Or what do we do about that? Which is far more interesting way of spending the day. So I think, yeah, it's making us build the next thing better.

We started a romance festival, which other radical bookshelves were like, "Really?" And it's like, yeah, because joy and pleasure are radical. What's the point in building this better world if we don't get to be happy and in loving it? So I think, yeah, we take ourselves, I take myself less seriously. We're a little bit more settled into the bones of we're going to get it wrong, but people know what we are about, so they'll call us in in constructive ways and then we get to rethink or explain ourselves. So I think it's more fun than it was when it felt like everything was a battle, and that makes the feel of the shop I think a little different.

Karen Farmer:

I love that.

Craig Silva:

God, that's amazing. Speaking of the shop, I have one more shop question before we ask you two sillier questions and then let you go. I saw that you have a Pay It Forward program, and I looked at it a little bit about what it was on your site and it seems amazing. I've never seen that at another store, and I was just curious if you could, for our listeners, explain what it is and how it works.

Mairi Oliver:

I mean, Pay It Forward has existed in so many fields in so many ways. We all understand the principle. Somebody who puts money in the tin and somebody who doesn't get to take money out of the tin. It's a very basic level of collectivism. And we thought nobody gets what a difference a book can make than other book people. If you are a book person, that lifeline that is the book that you needed in that moment for whatever reason, other book people get it. And so we are just a conduit for one book person to get money to a broke book person to buy the books that they want.

And so we do that in a few different ways. We've got an online version of it so people can literally just put money in the pot. And then we have tags in the shop where people will be like, "I will leave five pounds to spend on a queer writer," or, five pounds to read about nature, or, "Have a nice day. Here's a drawing of a duck and 10 pounds." One can pick them off the wall and use them. And it's basically a voucher that's just sitting there waiting for the person who wants it. We don't ask any questions. You just get to use it. And it's the same on the website. There's a code on the website, so if you need to use it, and we really haven't seen that be used in anything but the most wholesome way. And people use it on lots of different things.

The other thing is if you're broke, you don't go shopping. So broke people don't go into shops, especially families and families with children. Kids pick up books and then you have to explain why you can't give them that book. So with that, we take Pay It Forward out into the world. We work with a few organizations that provide books to families who don't have books at home, and they basically use some of the Pay It Forward money and we sell the books at cost and they get to pick their books and get them delivered.

But it's not charity. It's not us doing it. It's people looking out for each other. Sometimes it's like 50p. People round up the end of their bill. And I think with the cost of living crisis, I don't know what it's like in the States, but here, books that were \$8.99 are now \$10.99. Books that were \$12.99 are now \$14.99. And if you were just able to afford the \$12.99 book, suddenly you can't. Having two pounds shaved off your bill suddenly makes it accessible again. So it's nobody saying, "You should be reading this book. I'm going to give you this book that I love regardless of what you want." It's just like, "Hey, you want books? I've got some money. Let me help you out."

And lots of other bookstores are doing it as well now. And I think you'll find versions of it where people donate different books or do them through different organizations. And there's pages of Hackney in London now have it category as books in Glasgow. I mean, it's an idea that we picked up from a coffee shop. I saw there was a local coffee shop next to us that used to do it mostly for rough sleepers, but it was just tags for coffee. So you could buy your coffee and stick a tag for someone else, and then anyone else could come up and pay for it using that. I was like, coffee people get coffee people, book people get book people.

Craig Silva:

I'm obsessed with this. I've never seen that at any stores near me. I feel like you should write a how to guide and then send it to every bookstore.

Mairi Oliver:

Definitely. I've forgotten my brain now. There is a bookshop in the US. It's a bookshop somewhere in middle America that was doing it and during COVID, when our regulars ended up on the wrong side of the Atlantic, we were providing Pay It Forward for each other and passing stuff forward. So there are some places in the States doing it, and I think people come up with their own little version that works for them. And for us as a business, it's not like... For us it's cashflow because it means that people who have money will spend more, and then that means that the people who are broke still get books with that money. So yeah, everyone should have a Pay It Forward wall.

Craig Silva:

I agree.

Karen Farmer:

Agreed.

Craig Silva:

I'm going to go down to my bookstore and be like, I heard about this thing. Listen to my podcast.

Karen Farmer:

Well, we have a couple of sillier questions for you now. We call this our lightning round and we're going to ask you two questions, and they shouldn't be things that require much thought. And I think Craig has the first one.

Craig Silva:

Yes. What book genre do you think gets the least love but deserves more?

Mairi Oliver:

I mean, in bookshops, romance. I think romance does terrifically well in virtual spaces and in eBooks and audiobooks. Bookshops don't take it seriously enough, more romance sections in bookshops to show that it's the great genre that it is. And translated fiction also.

Karen Farmer:

Yeah.

Craig Silva:

It's funny how many romance-specific bookshops are opening. There's one opening here in Boston in September, I saw. They just signed up for Libro, which is how I found out about it.

Mairi Oliver:

The great hack [inaudible 00:23:47] new bookshops.

Karen Farmer:

Oh, totally. What is the most creative excuse you've ever received for someone wanting to return a book?

Mairi Oliver:

I can't remember the last time someone returned a book.

Karen Farmer:

That's amazing.

Mairi Oliver:

Or did anything interesting.

Mairi Oliver:

Or did anything interesting. Oh, you said it. Yeah, no, sorry, I'm screwing up your lighting round.

Karen Farmer:

No, that's okay.

Mairi Oliver:

Yeah. Maybe it's because of who they're buying from. I mean, we had one person try and return books from a different bookshop with the sticker bookshop on the front, and it was clearly someone who'd never been into the shop before and it was like, "You're in the wrong place."

Craig Silva:

That is so funny.

Mairi Oliver:

But yeah, it just, it ... Yeah, fortunately a rarity.

Craig Silva:

Very fortunate for sure. That's awesome.

Karen Farmer:

I do customer support with Libro, and it's oddly a hard part of my job when people want to return books, especially when it's something that I really loved. When someone's like, "I want to return *One Last Stop*." I'm like, "No, no. Give it another try. Come on."

Craig Silva:

What excuse? Like, what is the ... Like, they didn't like it?

Karen Farmer:

The top two I get are people just, they're like, "The story is not for me." But interestingly in the world of audiobooks, the number one excuse is I can't handle this narrator's voice. It's just of a timber or a cadence that I personally cannot continue forward with. And I'm like, "I get it. That makes sense." So it really speaks to how important that casting decision is.

Mairi Oliver:

Oh, completely. I recently listened to the audiobook of something. I was chairing an event and I needed, there were several books in a series and I was like, "Oh God, this is terrible." And then I ended up, they finally sent me the print books and it took me a while to erase the book voice for my ... And then the book was incredible, but I was like, "Oh, I think if I just stuck with the audio, I probably would've thought it was terrible."

Craig Silva:

I'm glad you didn't say the name of the book. I was like, some narrator is about to get thrown under the Lighthouse bus.

Mairi Oliver:

I get ... The thing is it's like you love one reader and then you send it to someone and they hate it. It's such a ... I think there's a lot of British readers that are like, "Why are so many books in an American accent," or a very particular East Coast American accent or like ...

Craig Silva:

I resent that.

Mairi Oliver:

It's like what universal blanket American accent that, yes.

Craig Silva:

Yes.

Karen Farmer:

Before we let you go, I'm sure this question won't surprise you, but we were wondering if you have a book recommendation for us and our listeners, like something that you've read recently or enjoy or just love to hand sell?

Mairi Oliver:

So there's one book that I know doesn't have an audiobook yet, but I'm hoping that if audio listeners demand it, that they shall receive. There's an amazing book called *Namesake: Essays on a Warrior Woman* by a writer called N.S. Nuseibeh. And she is a Palestinian British writer who's written a collection of essays about Arab feminism, what it is to be in these liminal spaces where you're not quite Arab enough, you're not quite ... What does Islamophobia look like today? What is the lived experience of a young woman growing up in East Jerusalem who will pass as white in one moment and be very much an Arab, a Palestinian another moment?

And it's so full of humor and nuance and it's so clever. But it also deals with disability. All of those different bits of feminist discourse, bodies, fat, food, family, brothers, and woven through it is the history of her and one of her ancestors who was one of the acolytes of the Prophet Muhammad. And it's sort of she's got this warrior woman who fought in battles and then there's her, this deeply anxious, troubled person being like, "I'm the warrior," and she is the warrior and has to wear that circle. And it's beautiful for anyone to read. But I feel like at this moment we should be reading more Palestinian feminists and N. S. Nuseibeh is brilliant.

Karen Farmer:

I can't wait. I'm going to go get that today.

Craig Silva:

Yeah.

Mairi Oliver:

Gosh. Does Libro ... Do you guys get to go to publishers and be like, "There should be an audiobook of this"?

Karen Farmer:

We have really close relationships with the publishers and we definitely provide feedback, but we are unfortunately not part of the actual creation of the audiobook itself process, but we do have an outlet to speak to.

Craig Silva:

I'm happy to form an audiobook lobby.

Mairi Oliver:

More of them, more of them in the world. And maybe I'm, this is just me summoning it into existence. Please world, make a book of *Namesake*.

Craig Silva:

We'll all cross our fingers. Awesome. Well, thank you so much for your time today. I'm sure you have a billion things to do and shelve, and I think you said you had shipments coming in earlier, so we really appreciate you taking the time.

Mairi Oliver:

Well, thank you so much. And thanks for everything that Libro is doing to support bookshops, to drag bookshops kicking and screaming into the 21st century where we have solutions and have books in different forms. I think it's really special and, yeah, for us and the kind of bookshop that we are, it's really great to find other businesses and people who are doing the good things where they are. So thanks to Libro.

Karen Farmer:

Thank you, Mairi.

Craig Silva:

Thank you. And thank you for all your shop's doing, obviously. It was really great to hear about.

Mairi Oliver:

Thank you. Cheers.

Craig Silva:

Bye.