

Libro.fm Podcast - Episode 35

Interview with Kalima DeSuze (Cafe Con Libros Bookstore)

INTRO THEME:

Libro.fm Podcast with Craig and Karen.
Supporting local bookstores, audiobooks, and more.
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As always, thank you for listening.

Karen Farmer:

Hello and welcome to the Libro.fm Podcast where we talk to authors, narrators, booksellers, and more. I'm Karen.

Craig Silva:

And I'm Craig. Welcome to our second 10th anniversary episode. Hope you listened to yesterday's. It was great. And today is great as well. We got to sit down with Kalima DeSuze, who owns Cafe con Libros in Brooklyn, New York. She was amazing. We learned about how she roller skates and mountain bikes and in her spare time runs an amazing bookstore. I cannot wait to visit this bookstore the next time I'm in New York.

Karen Farmer:

Oh, me too. It's an intersectional feminist community bookstore and a coffee shop, and I basically am on a plane there right now.

Craig Silva:

Yeah. I love when bookstores have a really small footprint and we get to talk about how they curate and what gets in and what gets out. So we got to do a little bit more of that on this. And I love just learning about the inner workings of how bookstores work.

Karen Farmer:

Yes. All right, stick around and hear what Kalima has to say, and we'll see you at Cafe con Libros soon.
Hi, Kalima. Welcome to the podcast. To kick things off for our listeners, we would love it if you could tell us a little bit about yourself and kind of what you're up to in the bookselling world.

Kalima DeSuze:

Hi, I'm Kalima DeSuze. I am the owner and founder of Cafe con Libros, an intersectional feminist bookstore and coffee shop in Brooklyn, New York. A little bit about me, I literally just came from skating with my friend. We are all 40 years old and above, and we skate twice a week as part of our self-care. We talk about business stuff, life, parenting, all types of things. So that's just a little bit about me. And what's

happening at the bookstore? It's been a very interesting season of high expectations about what we should be carrying versus what's on our shelves. So it's been very, very interesting. A learning sort of experience, but a little bit challenging too.

Craig Silva:

Yeah. There's only so many shelves in the store.

Kalima DeSuze:

Correct.

Craig Silva:

It's got to be hard to narrow down.

Kalima DeSuze:

Yes.

Craig Silva:

Starting a business is a lot of work. Do you have any advice that you would give to aspiring bookshop owners or any small business owner for that matter?

Kalima DeSuze:

Yes. I think to be very clear about why you want to being a small business owner. I think that folks can move a hobby, that's something that they love so much into a business, and then it spoils the magic. To get really clear about why you want to do this. And then make sure that you have all the things in place. One of the things that's really important to me is having a community of people that I can surround myself with who can provide me with business advice, who can provide me with just emotional support, spiritual support. Just having a strong community because this is a very, very rough business.

The book industry is very rough, the margins are very slim, and it's going to take a lot to succeed, if you are to succeed in this business. So make sure that you're community, that you are fully healthy on as many areas as possible before you enter this. And just, do not romanticize the book industry. You cannot solve sort of the reading gaps in our communities. That is not an issue that folks should be taken on. We should be organizing around it, but please come into this with your eyes wide open, your expectations, very, very realistic. Smart goals. Just smart goals. I'll leave it at that.

Craig Silva:

I am guilty of romanticizing opening a bookstore. So for people like me, what is a thing that I should be aware of? Or in my mind, it's just a cat in the store and reading books all day, but that's not really what it is.

Kalima DeSuze:

Not really what it is. The book industry is, the margins are slim, but I think what's actually happening right now is that it's so expensive for folks to buy books. When I started in the book industry, I think the hardcovers were at the 26.99 or 27.99. 7 years later, you can literally bump up against a book that is either \$30 or 32.99. And in our current social political economic state, people have to make very critical

decisions about can I buy this hardcover book or can I buy a book in general? And folks are not buying \$30 books, they just aren't. Right?

It is very difficult to keep up with rent, keep up with competitive salaries, keep your bookshelves stocked because you have to do that, and just to keep up. Books release every Tuesday, so even stocking in terms of staying up to date is very difficult. So it is magical, right? If you're going to have a unicorn space, what's better than a bookstore? Don't get all wrapped up in that. It's a lot of work, and your brick and mortar is not going to be the moneymaker. You've got to do a lot behind the scenes with partnerships in order for you to make it work.

Craig Silva:

Maybe I'll just go to bookstores and not open one.

Karen Farmer:

Speaking of things that you do besides running the brick and mortar, I know that book clubs are a big part of your space, and I saw that there's an intersectional feminist book club coming up. Can you tell us a little bit more about what inspired you to create book clubs and to invite people into this space to talk about them?

Kalima DeSuze:

Yes. I have been part of book clubs for so long, and I feel like you get 10 people together. We were reading one book, we're all reading one book, and everybody has something different to say. So you get this experience of having this one text, but having different experiences, different analysis, different relationships to it. And the only way that we are going to learn and be sort of outside of our own box is when you bring people together and we get to sort of share those ideas. So when I am in a book club, I feel like I've read the book 10 different ways because I have 10 different people telling me from their own social location what this book means to them. And I think it is amazing.

It's also a space to develop intimacy, to practice vulnerability, to be connected to people at a different level, and to nerd out. We were skating and I was telling my friend the reason why I love book clubs and podcasts is because this is a safe space to nerd out. We get in our elements. You get me if I go crazy on the book. If I'm somewhere else, they're like, "Is she okay? It's just a book." But when you're with your people, they get it. So I think we need to create more spaces where we're with our people.

Karen Farmer:

I love that so much. It sounds like you've kind of dialed a successful recipe for book clubs. I know I've been a part of a lot, and some of them are great, and we have great discussions and sometimes it just never quite gets there. Do you have anything in the book club secret sauce that you're willing to share that you think people should keep in mind when starting one?

Kalima DeSuze:

Yeah. First, I think it's really important to have rules and ground rules and things of that sort so that people can feel supported in this space, but also to have a framework. We are going to talk about it from an intersectional feminist framework, which means that we are going to talk about it from a race, ethnicity class, immigration status, sexuality, all of that. We're bringing all of that in. And also suspending that our way of thinking is the only way of thinking, and to sort of be open to what other people have to

say, and sit with it, grapple with it, just let it move around a little bit. Don't always push back, but ask more questions than having responses.

Karen Farmer:

Thank you so much for sharing that.

Craig Silva:

I'll try that for my next book club. I feel like every book club I've done, it comes the day and everyone goes, "I didn't read it." So framework. Got it.

I recently read a book titled *Palaces for the People* by Eric Klinenberg, and it's about social infrastructure, civic life inequality. It talks a lot about third place being really important, a place that isn't your house or your office or workplace, a place for people in the community to gather. And I immediately thought of my local bookstore. So as a bookstore owner, what place do you feel bookstores have in local communities for people?

Kalima DeSuze:

Yeah. I can speak specifically to Cafe con Libros because we're also a coffee shop, and I think that that makes us unique in the sense it is the place where everybody knows your name. You come in, we know your drink, we know your name, we've seen you pregnant, we've seen you with a newborn, we've seen you when the baby's two years old. People are not buying books all the time, but one thing they are for certain to buy every single day is a coffee. So what we get to do in that coffee shop with books is to have deeper conversations because the books present an opportunity for folks to engage in larger issues and larger structures and larger conversations that a normal coffee shop may not allow for while they are literally waiting for a latte.

So I think for our bookstore, what our endeavor for us to be is a space where people are excited to come because they know that the person behind the counter is going to smile. Maybe that's the only person that may smile for them, or maybe they work from home and that'll be their only conversation with a person in real life. But also a space where, again, you just get to nerd out about feminist books. And it's okay, you don't have to explain yourself like, why is this entire store feminist? That's not something we need to do because you're coming in here for a specific reason. It's a place for people to feel just seen. And I think that bookstores can do that with the right types of books that they purchased and the ones that they choose to be front-facing versus spine only. I think that that is powerful. Those spaces are really powerful.

Craig Silva:

So hitting a little close to home when you're like, "The only person that smiles at you is the barista because you work from home." I was like, "Huh? Oh, man." I was like, "That's true."

Karen Farmer:

We both work from home. So your store has been a Libro.fm partner for quite a while, which we are very, very happy about. I would love to hear your thoughts on audiobooks and kind of how they fit into the work your store is doing and also just the whole ecosystem of the book world.

Kalima DeSuze:

Yes. So you named quite a few things that I used to do, and now I have slimmed my life down and I'm trying to get it under wraps, but I find that as I'm getting older, I'm turning 45 in August, and I'm having a lot of anxiety around how many books I'm going to get through by the time my time is up on earth. I literally am having ... I just got Sally Mooney's new book and I'm like, "This is a sick one." I'm having emotional reactions to it, but because I trust it so much, I know I'm going to zoom by it. But I think what audiobooks have allowed me to do is to knock books out while I'm running, while I'm biking, while I'm skating, while I'm showering, anything. I literally podcast an audiobook all day long, even in the car. My son will say, "Mom, are we reading again?" Yeah, we're reading all the time.

I'm doing it all the time. So it has literally, for me, and I would encourage for everyone else who's having these types of anxieties, it literally makes our reading goals more accessible. The way that people's voices take on shape, I'm reading *The Poppy Wars* right now, the way the people's voices are taking on shape, I'm in the world of these fighters and I'm using my brain in a different way and I'm enjoying it in a very different way. I don't have to create that scene. Somebody's creating that scene for me. I don't know, it's like an auditory experience that I've never really had an appreciation for until now that I'm turning 45. I'm like, "I'm trying to get through all these books. Look at all these books. What's going to happen to me?"

Karen Farmer:

Yes. Thank you so much for sharing that. I too have the same anxiety that is often on my mind as well, and I'm like, "Choices, I can't make them."

Kalima DeSuze:

Correct. Correct. And I just want to also say that people will say like, "Oh, you're not actually reading." We are reading. Audiobooks are reading, and we have to dispel that. We have to sort of have more conversations. It is reading. We are using our brain, and we're using our brain in a very different way and that we need to stop being purist or uppity about, "Oh, you're not really reading unless you're picking up a book." That's not true.

Karen Farmer:

Plus one.

Craig Silva:

Yeah, at Libro, we've made many t-shirts with that exact slogan on it.

So we have one more real question before we were going to ask you a couple of sillier questions.

Kalima DeSuze:

Okay.

Craig Silva:

This one's also about the bookstore. So we were talking earlier, there's only so many shelves, you can only stock so many books, and it's hard to decide which ones to order and which ones not to. And I know that your store ... I guess, how do you decide between stocking whatever the big, new bestsellers that you know will sell a ton of copies versus the types of books that you want to have in your store?

Whether it's diverse voices or it's queer authors, how do you decide, which could even have financial implications if you don't have the next new whatever, Stephen King book, that everyone's going to come in asking for? How do you make those choices?

Kalima DeSuze:

It's a very difficult choice. It's very, very difficult. With Barack Obama, I loved Barack Obama, but I was really late to ordering it because it just did not fit into my intersectional feminist bookstore. Same thing with *Spare*. These are books that could have made us massive amounts of money, but I think that it is really important that I hold true to my values and to my mission. I used to teach grad school and social work. Social work is a predominantly women-led fields, but the people who had the most power in the classrooms were the one or two males sometimes. And it's so interesting that we yield power in a capitalist system and a patriarchal system. We yield power all the time even though we have the majority. So I make these very difficult decisions like, am I going to have this male-identified book or a man's book? Or am I going to have a female's? It's always going to be a women's book. It's always.

But then, even within women, we have big names that, which one do I do? I make those decisions based on quantity. So I may just buy one of maybe a white woman's book, like we bought *Pineapple Street*, just one or two, and that it will not be front-facing. Right? We have it on our shelves, but it won't be front-facing. And I will really commit myself to buying three and then commit myself to hand-selling it or making sure the staff hand-sells it. Because some people don't even know that these books exist, because they don't have the marketing, they don't have the support behind it, they're not getting interviews. So it's really up to the bookstores to push certain books into the hands of people. My bookstore is like, two people can switch their hands out, and then that's the length and that's the width of the bookstore. So I really have to make critical choices, and those are some of the ways that I make it.

Craig Silva:

Wow. Plus on top of all that, that Obama book was huge. It's not going to be on the list, so it's too long.

Karen Farmer:

Well, Kalima, we are now entering the lightning round portion of this podcast where we have a couple of quick questions that hopefully you don't have to think about too much. This is supposed to be fun. It's silly. So I will pass it over to Craig who has the first one for you.

Craig Silva:

Sure. If you could add any feature, and it doesn't have to be even a realistic one, to your bookshop, what would it be besides more space?

Kalima DeSuze:

I was just going to say more space. Couches.

Karen Farmer:

Ooh. I love that. Okay, my lightning round question for you is, if you could switch lives with any literary figure for one day, who would it be?

Kalima DeSuze:

Angela Davis.

Karen Farmer:

And why? Nice.

Kalima DeSuze:

I want to know her brain. I just want to know what was she thinking, what was she feeling? Or bell hooks, either one. I just want to be in this space.

Karen Farmer:

Totally.

Craig Silva:

Solid answers for sure.

Kalima DeSuze:

Toni Morrison was like an editor as well, right? So she helped Angela Davis in her memoir, and I just want to be there. What were you thinking? What was your vision? How did you have the courage? Things like that.

Craig Silva:

Awesome. Amazing answer. I would've said something very stupid, like some wizard or something. Well, we end every interview with asking for book recommendations. So what book are you either currently reading or read recently that you think all of us should be reading?

Kalima DeSuze:

I just finished reading *A Thousand Ships* by Natalie Haynes, and I literally wrote this down because I read it, audio, and I put it down and said to myself, "This book has to be on my shelf. I'm going to buy the physical copy." It's the feminist telling of the Trojan War, and it tells the perspective of the women behind the war who were impacted by the war. What she says is that we tend to focus on Achilles and Armageddon, all these people that we are focusing on, but we never talk about their wives, their daughters, their mothers. And she said, "Finally, we're going to tell their story." It broke me down. It's a beautiful story. And it broke me down because I'm so in love with *The Song of Achilles* that I never thought about the women, the people that he killed, like Hector's wife. I never thought about what it meant for her to see her husband's body being dragged around Troy. So for right now, that's what I would recommend. It'll always be-

Craig Silva:

Amazing. I pulled it up while you were talking, and the cover is also gorgeous. So I also think that this needs to be on the shelf.

Kalima DeSuze:

Yes, yes. It's amazing.

Karen Farmer:

Awesome. Well, Kalima, thank you so much for your time today. It's so wonderful for us to get to meet you in person. And thank you for all of your wonderful support and partnership. We are just so grateful for you and the work that you do.

Kalima DeSuze:

And I'm grateful for you all. I love your podcast. I have so much fun with it. Y'all are really funny.

Karen Farmer:

Oh, thank you.

Craig Silva:

Thank you.

Kalima DeSuze:

And I appreciate it. Thank you so much.

Karen Farmer:

Thank you.

Craig Silva:

Thank you.