

The Booksellers of our Better Nature

Carrie Laben

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New York City. March 2020, the first days of the crisis that would define the year. The words “mutual aid” began to appear where they’d not been seen before, from lamp post flyers to Reddit neighborhood forums.

Everyone from New York Governor Andrew Cuomo to Britney Spears was using the expression. Loosely organized groups ran errands and made deliveries. Friends sewed masks for friends, then for friends of friends. And well before the summer’s boiling-over of righteous rage at police brutality, sustained protests attempted to hold Cuomo and the prison system accountable for leaving incarcerated at-risk people in facilities like Rikers Island, which became a hotspot for COVID.

Some of these efforts were organized by radical groups, others emerged organically like an ecosystem. Those with different skills and circumstances found their niches. People, for the most part, didn’t want to wait in isolation like princesses in towers. They wanted to help.

Around this same city, a local news site, Gothamist, reported multiple incidents of police tasked with enforcing physical distancing congregating and making arrests without masks, Cuomo stood firm on the prisoners and exploited prison labor to produce hand sanitizer. The rich fled to the Hudson Valley, the Hamptons, and the Poconos in unwitting re-enactments of Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Masque of the Red Death*, which couldn’t help but contribute to the politicization of the crisis by an alienated segment of society on the hunt for conspiracy theories.

In New York City, as everywhere, grassroots efforts and government action overlapped and obscured each other in such a way that it may never be fully possible to tease out what worked, what might have worked, and what could never have worked. Despite this, the initial impulse to share and help, to reach out, suggests that there is a core of readiness, of flexible individual responses to crisis and of underlying resilience in the community, not based on top-down direction, but rests in the heart of humanity, ready to go.

One small story of solidarity and community organizing comes from New York bookseller Jeff Waxman. When bookstores closed their doors this spring to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and hundreds of booksellers were laid off, funds were raised to be distributed by the Book Industry Charitable Foundation, cheerily donated by the same publishers who keep booksellers living and working in precarity the rest of the year. Many bookstores launched crowdfunding campaigns, with varying degrees of success. The federal government’s Payroll Protection Program funds brought some bookselling people back from furlough. But most stayed unemployed.

Two days after NYC closed nonessential businesses, Waxman was part of a group of booksellers who formed The Bookstore at the End of the World, a collectively organized online bookstore using the newly-launched bookshop.org. There was an immediate outpouring of support that put between \$500 and \$850 into the pockets of forty-seven booksellers from a dozen shops across the country, but the surge of support was short-lived. Over the next two months, sales dwindled and bookstores remained closed. Booksellers, like many others, had to start coming up with new ways of living. There was a growing appeal in the worker-run cooperative model.

Waxman says that removing daily employment with its long commutes, distractions, and professional obligations, opened his eyes to what was happening closer to his home in Jackson Heights, a diverse community in

Queens. There were the colossal and growing needs of undocumented people, a large part of the community, most of whom could not obtain unemployment compensation or social services.

Waxman and his partner, Katherine McLeod, met on stoops and street corners with other organizers to hash out the particulars of a project to sell books on 34th Avenue; a beneficiary of the Open Streets program that barred car traffic from stretches of road in every borough and opened them up for socially-distanced recreation. New York City, despite being highly regulated, does not require a license for booksellers on the street. So, the group laid out used books gathered from their own shelves one Sunday morning and waited.

This was the birth of Open Borders Books, a bookselling collective with two ideas at the center: everyone should be able to afford books and so-called nonessential workers like booksellers had something essential to offer the community.

The collective sold the books on a pay-what-you-like basis, dedicating half of all sales to local aid organizations. In Jackson Heights, “We have a progressive local political scene and strong workers’ rights groups, so there was no question about finding recipients for these funds,” says Waxman. “They were all around us, doing work we could see to improve the lives of our neighbors.”

In the first month, operating for four hours every Sunday, they were able to contribute \$657 to Make the Road, an organization offering legal and material aid to undocumented people. In August, \$992 went to New Immigrant Community Empowerment. In September, they sent \$1000 to the Jackson Heights Community Fridge. “Used books started to flow toward us from friends and well-wishers from all over the neighborhood,” says Waxman, “then all over the city.”

With winter looming, the project transitioned to offering mail order and browsing space in a garage, as well as uniting with other mutual aid projects to share resources and information.

According to Waxman, “Open Borders Books is a growing and active collective and the members will determine where it goes from here, but the pay-what-you-can model will always be a part of its DNA. We’re here to provide access, first and foremost.

“Books have a physical longevity that give them many lives and many readers,” says Waxman. “Helping them from one shelf to another severs them slowly from the dirty business that first transformed them from art to commodity, and makes them into something that can inform or entertain, fill a belly, change a mind, or line a bookshelf...[F]inding ways to take these things back and bend them into tools that serve whole communities, on and off the page, is the job at hand.”

Carrie Laben is the author of the novel, *A Hawk in the Woods*, and the forthcoming novella, *The Water Is Wide*. They live in Queens, where they are at work on their next novel.



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