

# *A Look into Independent Bookselling with Hilary Atleo, Co-Owner of Iron Dog Books*

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**The Lyre:** Tell us about your bookstore. What's special about it?

**Hilary Atleo:** In many ways we're a really normal kind of generalist bookstore. The pandemic has obviously made things different, because instead of just applying a vision to it, we've had to do a lot of adapting to what folks actually need ... We have been trying mostly to be a community resource over the course of the pandemic.

My husband got a job at SFU as a professor, so we moved to Vancouver and we had been planning on opening our own shop one day, and obviously real estate in Vancouver is ridiculous, so that was the main reason why we started with the truck. So I said, well, if we put it in a truck then we can serve SFU some days a week and we can spend the weekends going around the festivals and bigger markets.

Our bookshop is really important as a community space. Because my husband and I are both Native, we have a very strong Indigenous selection that we are always working on, not just because it's something that we think will sell or that we think we should have, but because we ourselves are interested in that. We also have a little science fiction section that I work on all the time and a little feminist gender queer sci-fi, which is my main area of interest. We are working harder to make things like our activism section, which is not in all of the bookstores you'll visit. We also have a critical race section and a gender studies section. I'm trying to work really hard to always find things that we think are interesting.

One of the questions about running a bookstore, or business in general, is the balance between doing the things that you care about and the things that you do to pay the bills. I feel really lucky in

our neighborhood because the things that we care about—that I think make us special, like these specific interests—and our level of customer service work really well for where we are.

**L:** Where did the bookstore’s name come from?

**HA:** We named it after our dog, I always called him the cast iron dog. We moved to Vancouver, and then we moved across the street in our second year here; that was our tenth move in ten years. We were really good at just packing everybody up and going, and so I always called our dog the cast iron dog because he’s totally bomb proof—he can eat anything. We moved him from place to place and he’s just going along with everything, totally easy going.

We were going to call it “Black Dog Books,” but there are about three million things called black dog something and so my sister said: “Why don’t you call it ‘Iron Dog Books?’”

**L:** What were some of the challenges of opening Iron Dog Books?

**HA:** The truck and the store each have their own unique set of challenges. The biggest thing with the truck aside from

the weather ... and people always laugh when I say this, but I swear it’s a real thing: the weather and the lack of a toilet are really big challenges with the truck. So aside from that stuff, with the truck the biggest challenge is finding a place to take it. There’s very few places where you can go sell, there’s all kinds of restrictions on markets ... It’s like we all love farmers markets, but because you have to make or grow everything you sell there—obviously a bookstore can’t be there.

And then it’s really hard to say with the store because we were only open for four months before the pandemic hit. That has had a significant effect, but I would say the biggest barrier for the shop is actually the same thing: real estate. Finding the right place, finding the right size of place, being able to take on the risks.

**L:** What’s your favorite part of being in the bookselling business?

**HA:** Do you want the real answer or do you want something that sounds good on paper? The real answer is: all the books. Opening the boxes and seeing all the books. But I think if you are asking why keep going, because I could just work for somebody else if all I ever

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really cared about was opening all the boxes and seeing all the books, I actually think it's space making—it's building this space for things that otherwise I think aren't maybe represented. On the truck we have a sign that says: “we specialize in underrepresented narratives,” and I think that is true. What independent bookstores do is set down our roots. We think: *what does our neighborhood need?* My shop is always looking for that book that no one's talking about, but that everyone who shops at our stores would want, and there is a lot of that. There are a lot of things that aren't for everybody, that are just for this select group ... like for only a few weirdos, and if we can be a place where a multitude of weirdos are like: “oh you have my books,” that is actually the best.

**L:** We'd love to know what's selling well at your store and/or some of your top

book recommendations. Would you be willing to share?

**HA:** What's really cool about our industry as an independent is that a little bit of what sells is what we're excited about, and a little bit of what sells is what the community is excited about. So the thing that is selling really well without any help from us is a book called *Braiding Sweetgrass* from Robin Wall Kimmerer. It's hands down our top seller of all time—it's been number one on our list of sold books for the last couple years and I think it will be again for this year. We're selling a lot of Eden Robinson's *Son of a Trickster*, so these are both books by Indigenous authors. Especially the last book of the trilogy, *Return of the Trickster*, that just came out.

This whole past year we have seen real increase in reading critical race topics and activism topics, which is honestly great. In terms of hand selling, we have some new poetry that we're really excited about, such as a brand new release by Selina Boan. I've been reading a lot of Australian fantasy which is not my normal ... I mean, fantasy is my normal genre, but I didn't know that there was a whole Australian tradition and so I've been recommending and handselling that a lot. The one I just read is called

*The Rain Heron* by Robbie Arnott which is pretty weird and atmospheric.

One of the problems of recommending books is that, I actually think that you're trying to find the right book for the right human. So there's no good "this is the book everyone should read" because I actually think that only like 20% of the population should read anyone's books; we are all so different.

**L:** Since the theme of *The Lyre 12* is 'New Normal', we are interested in knowing what challenges Iron Dog Books has faced during the pandemic. Have the book sales been affected?

**HA:** A lot of it is really boring, like a lot of it is logistic challenges. Let's see, global shipping basically shut down, and if it didn't shut down, it really slowed down. We hardly do any importing ourselves and what importing we do as a business is directly from the States. But a lot of the things that we buy from Canadian folks are coming through the Internet and through international shipping, so they're coming in boats and they have to get to the ports. We buy a lot of puzzles from a Canadian warehouse but also puzzles made around the world. I found several North American and European suppliers, but the ones we

were buying at the time were all printed in China, specifically in Wuhan. So you know at the very beginning of this, it was all shut down.

Sometimes I think we don't appreciate the incredible interconnected nature of marketplaces and products and distribution. Shipping times went from being one to two weeks to being six to eight weeks for some products depending on where it's coming from. Or in some cases months.

The other practical things were ... when we first started, I really felt that it was our job to deliver anything no matter how cheap, if people needed it so they didn't have to leave the house. But then one day somebody ordered a \$2.99 book delivered quite far away from us for free. We had delivered other very cheap things but nothing that was only \$3, and so I was like "this is just a dead loss" and that was when we put in our shipping minimum, and we're still doing the delivery ourselves.

So, like I said, a lot of it is really mundane ... The flip side of all of this is that folks did become a little more aware of the interconnected nature of global markets. I think that the recognition of how problematic that take of consumption

is has led to folks, especially because you couldn't get things early on, saying "Well you are in my neighborhood and I can get it today. Is it the exact puzzle I wanted? No! But I can get it in twenty minutes if I come pick it up from you."

**L:** Did any specific type of book or item become more popular than usual?

**HA:** Puzzles. You know how everyone talks about the seasons of the pandemic? Where they were like: "and that's when we made sourdough" ... it is like that in my industry too. So the seasons of the pandemic were puzzles, and then stay-at-home activities. Let's include in that cooking and adult activity type things, not necessarily coloring books, but books on stay-at-home dates with your partner or books on those sorts of things. And then it took a really sharp turn into a critical race because of the letter of George Floyd. It's something that we always have wanted folks to read about and so it was a slightly dislocating feeling to have white folks watch and read this stuff.

So then there was that period in the pandemic. I don't think that we have necessarily been affected as much by trends after that, as we still sell so much critical race literature; I'm excited

because I get to curate more the way I've wanted to curate before. Maybe after that we could call it the "Season of Obama," because then [Barack] Obama's biography dropped and that was what we sold for a while, but those were the big things. The trends of the pandemic were like overtly puzzles and then overtly like do-it-myself, stay-at-home type things and then it's been this reckoning of ideas. Also recently and in the fall, a lot of self-love books like fat- and body-positive and mental health books were big.

**L:** Are you implementing any changes going forward as a result of the pandemic?

**HA:** There are a lot of things we started because of the pandemic that are permanent now. Until March 16th of 2020 we didn't have a public web store at all, like, you couldn't buy online. On March 16th, it was clear that we were going to close our doors. We told the small number of people who are on the shopping list that they wouldn't be able to get in the store, but we said we're turning the website on, so that's permanent.

We tried, as I said, a whole bunch of different shipping options, and I couldn't handle the madness of getting something shipped from Toronto to me

only to have it ordered by a customer in Toronto. So, one of the things we have done with our shipping is we have limited it, and now we just ship to BC and the Yukon. We won't ship to anywhere that isn't in BC or in the Yukon, because there aren't necessarily a lot of book shops in BC or in the Yukon who do that, and so I think you're totally justified buying from us in those areas.

Because I really believe in local resiliency. Let's take *Braiding Sweetgrass*. If you like *Braiding Sweetgrass*, you're significantly better off to go down to your local bookshop in whatever town you live in, and special order it through them to show that you want to read *Sweetgrass*, than you are from buying it from me and getting it shipped. Because what you're trying to do is create a community around you of ideas, right? To show that these ideas have value, to show your bookseller that there's a market for this so that they should work harder on their Indigenous Studies section. So because of the huge environmental costs with shipping, and the ideological one—where we really need to build the community capacity, not just provide the services, to show that the ideas are important—we don't

ship outside of those areas and that's a permanent change.

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I don't know if it's obvious, but I don't really care about making a lot of money. I just care about paying all the bills, paying everyone fairly and paying myself fairly, because we are rooted in this idea of reflecting our community back at us and also cultivating our own interests. I think Indigenous literature is really cool and I don't care if you don't like it, I'm gonna stock a whole bunch of it—that kind of stuff. I would like more space though, because I would like more books.

*Editors' note: This interview has been edited for clarity and length.*