

EIBF's Policy Assistant learns the ropes of bookselling in a UK bookshop

Tora Åsling, EIBF's Policy Assistant, spent three days at Red Lion Books in Colchester, UK, to learn about the practical sides of bookselling from the bookshop manager, Jo Coldwell, and colleagues. As part of EIBF's training, all staff members will, at some point, spend time at a bookshop to experience the daily activities put into place in bookshops of the EIBF network, gaining first-hand insight into the bookselling reality. Read Tora's impressions from those eventful and rewarding February days and the lessons she took back with her to Brussels.

As I walked into Red Lion Books for the first time, I drew a breath and smiled at the familiar smell and sight that hit me.

"It smells like books," I said as my eyes traced the rows upon rows of colourful rectangles neatly stacked on the dark brown bookshelves stretching all the way to the back of the shop.

"Anyone who comes in here and says that never buys any books," Jo, the manager of Red Lion Books, replied jokingly.

That morning we had walked through a foggy Colchester to get to Red Lion Books, which is a small, family-owned, independent bookshop, that opened its doors right on the city's main shopping street in 1978.

Since I had never worked in a bookshop before this training, I had no idea what to expect from these three days I was to spend in the bookshop with Jo. As I walked next to Jo who pointed out the cities highlights that were hardly visible behind the thick fog, I felt as if the weather matched my anticipation: it was like the city was waiting for the right moment to reveal itself, just like the moments before the curtains are drawn at the start of a theatre play.

In the bookshop, my first task was to dust the books and the bookshelves.

"This is such fun and a great way to do inventory and get a feel for the books in your shop," Jo told me as she gave me a yellow rag and told me to go dust the shelves with my favourite genre.

I hesitantly took the old rag and made my way to the fiction section. And then I lost myself in the books.

The next time I looked at the time it was 12.30pm and three hours had passed in what felt like the blink of an eye. I never had that much fun dusting before in my life. This is especially true since I'm allergic to dust. (I know, I know, being allergic both to dust and cats, I am perhaps not ideally built to be a bookseller...) But there's something about books, the way the unique covers and titles just draw you in and make you lose track of reality.

What brings you back to reality, though, are the customers. In less than twenty minutes after arriving at the shop, the morning's mist had vanished and as a few tentative sunrays entered the shop – so did the customers.

They came in all shapes and sizes; old, young, and everything in between. Some were talkative, others were quiet. Most of them walked in on two legs, but a few four-legged friends also stopped by. Two or three mums came in to look for their daughter who had gotten lost in the fantasy or YA section downstairs.

What really made an impression on me was how well Jo and her colleagues, Polly, Regina, Jamie, and Margaret, know their customers. Every other person walking into the shop they greeted by name. They

also knew the names of their partners or children, and remembered what books they bought as Christmas gifts.

During my time at Red Lion Books, I saw Jo and her colleagues engaging with all their customers, from inviting them to join one of their many book clubs (one is the biggest in the country, gathering more than 100 participants every month) to asking them to pose with books that match their outfits for the bookshop's Instagram with the hashtag #booksandclothesatredlionbooks.

I was fascinated to see with my own eyes what I, through my job at EIBF, know is true and try convey every day: a bookshop is a community hub and a veritable pillar of society. The shop itself connects people, and its activities, such as events and book clubs, is not only beneficial to the bookshop, but also to other local artists, authors, and businesses who display their works or provide venues and delicious food for the events. When a bookshop thrives, so do the city's other local businesses.

In conclusion, my time at Red Lion Books was eventful, intense, surprising, and heartfelt. I find it very valuable that I was able to see, first-hand, the practical side of bookselling; all of these things, like customer engagement, ordering and receiving books, meeting publisher reps, returning books and managing the stock, which I knew about in theory but had never seen in reality.

I'll remember Colchester through its people, who are as diverse as the weather was during my three-day stay in the city, or the 20.000 titles that can be found in Red Lion Books.

In the end, I proved Jo wrong – I bought not only one, but three books before the end of my training at Red Lion Books.