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As told to Kate Silzer, 2351 words.

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# On failing and succeeding in working in the arts

**Writer and bookseller Aimee Ballinger discusses what it took to open (and run) her bookstore, what draws her to challenging art, and her love/hate relationship with social media**  
**Can you please introduce yourself?**

My name is Aimee, and I own a bookshop called Burning House Books on the south side of Glasgow. It's kind of an art and counterculture bookstore. I sell new books. I use a lot of small publishers. I kind of want the space to be a space where people come in and they don't know what they want. It's like the opposite of buying a book online, basically.

**In the hyper-digital age that we're living in, what do you see as the value of having a physical space for your bookshop?**

The experience of shopping is changing a lot. People are really tending now towards these like artisanal crafts; I find there's a real boon for handmade ceramics, handmade clothes, things like that, where you have more of a relationship with the maker or the seller, and that's kind of what I'm doing. I just want to talk to people about books—and people come in and they want to talk to me about books as well. I know a lot, but I also am always open to people ordering stuff in. It just feels almost collaborative the way that I'm doing it. I think especially after this last 18 months of everything being so purely online, people are just dying to see something that they haven't seen before.

**You've mentioned trying to get a job in the arts and the struggles of that. Can you elaborate on your experience and what it means to you to create this arts-adjacent space?**

When I graduated about 10 years ago, I knew I wanted to work with books, but not so much standard publishing. I knew I wanted to work more on the art side of things. [With] unpaid internships, especially in the arts, you couldn't get anything without putting in like a year, sometimes even two years, sometimes part-time, but often full-time, completely unpaid labor for these companies. So I was doing that. I was working five days a week at American Apparel to try and get the money.

Me and my friends used to run this poetry collective absolutely years ago, but we'd have this little bit of money leftover from [making] a book...and they just gave it to me. It was like £500. And I just bought the first few books for the collection, and then started the website and an Instagram. And then I just built it really slowly from there. I don't know if I would necessarily recommend it because I'm 31 now, and I've only just started to make it kind of work for me financially and it is really important these projects work for you financially because you've got to live.

My story of my failing at working in the arts, it's not really a unique story, I think. I'm really lucky I had this quite latent tenacity, and just kind of kept it going on the side. So many times I thought I should just drop it, but I kind of just kept it going somehow. And it has culminated in me having an actual space, which is amazing. But I'm not saying if you can't get a job in the arts because you're a working class person you can just do it yourself, because I'm just lucky. It [isn't] the answer for everyone.

**Can you tell me a little bit about your personal writing process?**

In the spiel for the newsletter, I'm always like, it is a personal essay through the lens of things that I would maybe sell or fall under the umbrella of things that I see as related to Burning House Books. I started it about three and a half years ago. I was getting a little bit of social media fatigue; I wanted there to be something that wasn't just Instagram that I could rely on. So I started this mailing list. It's become way more than I thought it ever would be. I kind of write these very self-indulgent personal essays. I went to see The Ballad of Sexual Dependency slideshow [by Nan Goldin] when it was in the Tate, so I wrote about that. I've written about Prince before, because I'm a huge Prince fan, and sometimes I just need to get that out of my system. It's kind of quite nice to have this self-directed practice that occasionally results in me getting commissioned, because it has so many subscribers, and actually, recently, it was listed (which was amazing!) in a top [20] culture newsletter [round up] for Elephant Magazine.

I'm working on a novel at the moment, but that's going to take forever. But I wrote a short story that was published in Worms, actually. [Burning House Books] feels like more of an art practice than a shop...that probably sounds really pretentious. It's been with me for so long in all these different formations and I've met so many people through it.

**You have an affinity towards books outside the mass market. How do you find these books and what are you looking for when you're evaluating them?**

I spend a lot of time researching. Like 90% of having this bookshop is me just reading, researching, and because I'm looking for stuff that is less mainstream, it really takes quite a lot of digging. So pre-COVID, any new city that I go to, I'm straight in every single bookshop, like immediately. Even if they look kind of boring, I'm still like, "I want to see everything."

The name "Burning House Books" comes from [a] David Wojanrowicz painting. The first few books in the collection were very based around his work and New York and the AIDS crisis, and all those kind of counter-cultural, subcultural writers and the artists from that time.

When I'm looking for newer stuff or I'm looking at new presses or new writers, I like it when people really push boundaries, like write things that are maybe even uncomfortable to read or dealing with a subject matter that hasn't been dealt with before. I love things like that. I don't even care if the writing itself isn't that polished. In fact, I'm looking for the opposite of that most of the time.

If I read a newer book, like from a smaller publisher or directly from the writer, I try and trace back what I think their influences would be and then also get those books in the shop. I'm trying to kind of layer up and get the full strata of writers and artists as well.

**I love the idea of this lineage of artists and writers.**

Yeah, exactly. Nothing comes from nowhere. I love reading through stuff, reading around. It's kind of how I came to be interested in all of the things that influenced the shop, is just by one thing leading to another, leading to another.

**You mentioned that you started with this fascination around activism in New York, and in the US, surrounding the AIDS crisis. What drew you to that place and time and movement?**

Something that huge [the AIDS crisis] happening in my lifetime and me not even hearing a whisper of it was shocking to me. I first read Close to the Knives [by David Wojanrowicz] and I was like, "This is fucking wild." It's the same with a lot of artists and writers who come from protest movements; they're kind of forced into it. They're not professionally trained or institutionally trained artists and writers. They're kind of backed into a corner and then this work just explodes out of them.

And then the writing itself [was] so affronting, so beautiful, was dealing with these things that we don't talk about. In the States and in the U.K., [in] our culture, we don't talk about death, we don't talk about sex very openly. And these writers were dealing with it in this way...[it was] impossible to ignore it.

**I read *Close to the Knives* last summer and it completely bowled me over.**

I first read it when I was 21 and I just couldn't get over it. I hate being hyperbolic about work like that, but it was the single most influential thing with my own writing, and also with setting up the shop and with my intentions for the shop.

**How has your taste in literature evolved over the years?**

I feel like it went from zero to 60 miles an hour. I think I now have extremely avant-garde reading tastes. I really love reading things that are challenging. I have the most basic, boring, pedestrian tastes in TV and film. I just watch any old shit and I'll watch it over and over and over again. Terrible, poor taste, terrible stuff, I love it. But with reading and with books, I really don't enjoy just a novel. I feel like I need adrenaline from reading. I feel like I need it to feel like I've just ripped off a plaster, like a band aid like, "BAM!" I want overwhelming feeling and to be challenged as well. I'm kind of asking that of people who come into my shop as well. I'm like, "Give it a chance."

**What's the most challenging book you've read recently?**

I read a book by an author called D. Mortimer and they are a poet primarily. And they published a book with a very small press [that] I've been working with since the beginning of Burning House Books. They're called Pilot Press based in London. And they released D's book called Last Night A Beef Jerk Saved My Life, which was a kind of mix of poetry, prose, [and] cultural theory.

You know when you're just reading something and you're like, "I don't know what I'm reading right now, but I like it." I appreciate doing something new and challenging and interesting way more than I appreciate nailing a good story. Even though both of those things are really incredible skills.

**What made you want to write a novel? What drew you to that?**

I always considered myself a fiction writer. I always thought that that was going to be the thing I did,

but through starting the newsletter, and through being commissioned, I kind of drifted into this more non-fiction arena that I love. So the novel just kind of came from me being like, I think I'm tired of my only writing being primarily non-fiction and writing analytically and examining other people's work within my own work.

It's just a massive word document on my laptop that I'm dipping in and out of. I don't know if anything will ever come of it. I would love for it to be able to even just reach that novel-sized word limit, but it's very much just something to stretch a different part of my brain. And also being able to write purely fictionally and creatively kind of helps me a bit. It feels like doing a workout and then I'm able to come to my other writing and it feels fresher and it feels less like a slog.

**I saw that you've written some book reviews or literary criticism.**

It's the hardest to do and the worst paid writing work that you can get.

**Where do you look for inspiration and book recommendations?**

I definitely look for other writers that I admire, things that have influenced them. So if I'm reading an interview with a writer and they will name check either another writer or a book specifically, or even a publisher, I will just follow that around. Also, I really do just have a lot of respect for a really good press. I love anything that Semiotext(e) puts out, especially on that Native Agents and Active Agents imprint, so that really helps to have really good publishers that I can know whatever they put out will be really good.

**What does your relationship to social media look like these days?**

I have a hideously unhealthy relationship to Instagram, like every Instagram user. It's still really good for the shop, I think. It's been amazing. I actually have been one of those annoying people who have been able to find a sort of...I don't want to use the word community because I don't think that that's necessarily possible online. I think you can make connections, but there needs to be a word that isn't "community" for internet friends, because it's not the same. Especially now that I have a real shop, it's just like, "Wow," it's wildly different, but it's allowed me to connect with other writers and artists who I wouldn't have had access to before.

I just think it all seems like fun and games. It's like when you start smoking, when you're a teenager and you're like, "This is amazing." And then you've got like, "This is so cool." And then you have a fucking crazy habit, 10 years down the line, you're like, "I need to stop smoking. I'm going to die." With social media, it feels like, "Cool, Instagram, amazing. There's all these connections. I'll start a shop. This will be great," and now I'm like, "What was I thinking?" But it's also good. It's fucking social media. It is what it is.

**Yeah. That sounds right.**

I'm all for it, but I also hate it with absolute burning passion, which is normal, I think. I hate it. It's been great. I'm very grateful. I hate it so much.

Aimee Ballinger Recommends:

*Close to the Knives: a Memoir of Disintegration* by David Wojnarowicz

*Let The Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York, 1987-1993* - Sarah Schulmann

The album *No Motive* by 3 Teens Kill 4

Semi-wearable art knitwear by Esther Gamsu @estergrams

La Lanterna an Italian restaurant in Glasgow where me and my Italian-American husband go when we miss New York </3

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Aimee Ballinger

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