

# Moving with the Times

## History of Boulder Book Store

Boulder Book Store first opened its doors in September 1973 at 1133 Pearl Street. We'll let David Bolduc, the owner and founder of the store, tell you more of our history.

**Clip:** David: You know, I got involved in the book business in 1968. I'd opened a store in Denver with some friends, we opened it as a co-op. It was a small store on East 17th, about 3 blocks East of downtown. So then I decided to move up to Boulder and bought this building where the bookstore used to be, it's about half a block to the East of where we are now. It took about a year to renovate the building, and actually ran out of money, I had to rejoin the Catholic Church to borrow money from the credit union to keep going. There was a lumber yard downtown at the time, that was supplying us on a handshake, the guy agreed to keep the account open, I barely knew this man. But he was the first person that when the loan came through that I paid off. It took like 9 months to get this bank loan and just patching it together to keep it going and going.

So eventually we opened in September of '73, and there were three other businesses that were there at the same time who I was also renting space out to. So the bookstore part was maybe 40% of the space, and there was a Mexican import store, and a flower store, and a toy store, and gradually they went out of business and the bookstore just kept expanding there. Til eventually we had the whole space and even renovated more of the basement for the bookstore to expand into.

And then we moved to where we are now in '91, and it took - we were kind of being forced out of the building because someone else had bought the building or owned the building at this point, so we had about 3 months to renovate this space. It was, like hectic. So at some point we had to kind of move the bookstore to a temporary space next to this building - actually, it's where the cafe is now - and about half the bookstore wasn't event out, it was in boxes. And gradually as the space became available and renovated we kept kind of expanding in. On Thanksgiving we needed people to come and put the books on the shelves, we finally had the whole store. So we served, my wife made this big Thanksgiving dinner, and in this big room down here we put up tables and enticed the staff to come put out the books and gave them Thanksgiving dinner.

So many stories to just kind of keep the whole thing, the ball, you know, rolling and rolling. So here we are now! All this time. But those are the early days. But I think, to bring it more kind of current, this event we just did with Mr. Souza, I think is one of the best events we ever did. For a lot of reasons,

obviously started out we had 8 books and sold those like in a day and a half, and then kept ordering more and more and more and finally he was going to tour and came here. And this is the only place in Colorado he was going to come, and you know 850 people came and he gave a great talk and people were crying as the photographs came up of Obama on the screen, and it was just a very good kind of feeling, and also I think gave people some kind of hope for the future, like we're not always going to be living in this kind of peculiar world of what's happening now in politics.

Of course a lot of things have happened in between that event and these early events, but I think they both kind of illustrate something of what the bookstore has stood for and what we all do and what you all do, especially with events that make a lot of difference. Everyone else that works here, it's about 50 people who work here and everyone kind of pulls together and we're trying to stay warm right now because it's about minus 3 degrees outside.

Arsen Kashkashian has been at the store since 1992 and became our head buyer in 1997. He's also seen our store go through lots of changes.

**Clip:** Arsen: Things have changed a lot since I started in 1992 in the Boulder Book Store. You know, I think the biggest change a customer would notice immediately walking into today's store then when they walked into the store when I first started is actually the recommended sections. We thought we had this great recommended section back in 1992, we had one case of books. Now we have 6 cases of books, which is a lot of cases of books, filled with recommendations. So that - it's a wall now, it's not a case. We also have recommended books in all the different rooms - the ballroom, the basement - you know, and these books, these recommendation really connect with our customers in a very personal way. That's one of the biggest changes.

Another change I think you would see is we have some sections from publishers. We have a Chelsea Green section, a Sounds True section, a Shambhala section on the main floor. We have Inner Traditions upstairs, we have Llewellyn upstairs. These sections are kind of deals I've worked out with publishers where we're working with them on consignment basis, and we can display many more copies of their books. And those sections have been very successful. We often see people going into those sections and buying two or three or four Inner Traditions books, where before those books were separated between different sections of the store and a customer might not have any feel for that was all one publisher and that was what they were interested in. And that's something different that I don't think you see in every store in the country, and it's been very successful over the last few years.

You know, behind the scenes there's also been changes in the industry. As a buyer, I'm using online catalogs and Edelweiss, and that's kind of changed how we buy, that's changed how we're able to put the books into our system. And that's a change that maybe the customers don't see, but has really changed the way we operate here in the store. You know, we were the first store to buy

on Edelweiss. It was kind of a fun day, I was here with my Harper rep, John Zeck, and John Rubin, from Above the Treeline, Edelweiss, was here in the store, leading us book through book by book through the buy. That buy took about three times as long to do as a normal Harper buy would have at the time. Now I would say the Edelweiss buys are, you know, three times faster, and the entering of the books into the system, the purchase orders, is maybe a hundred times faster. So it's really changed. We were willing to be up front, we've beta tested many things over the years, and so that's been a change.

One other change, and the customers might realize or people in the community might realize, is we're much more tied in with other community organizations. We do things with KGNU, the local radio station, I co-host a show on that station but also we do events around the community with them. We have a partnership with the library now which is more tied together than when I had started. And so we've really tried to tie in to the boulder community and try to reach people not just in the store but out where they may be. We're trying to do things with schools in a much greater way than we had in the past. And so I think that's been a change for the better.

You know, sometimes I do think of it as the good old days, where we could open the days in 1992 and just get a ton of business, and it doesn't quite work like that anymore, but I think we've adapted to those changes and I think that's why the store is now on its 45th year.

## History of the Ballroom

**Clip:** David: So this building was apparently built around 1880s and this big room behind me which we use for events and also fiction's there, and teen, and photography and art, there are many other sections, but it's also used for events and we push all these cases out of the way. We can sit, maybe 75, 80 people there. So these rooms here, they used to be one big room on this kind of balcony. So the band played up here, and it was dance floor. I remember when I first got into the business most of these spaces were empty upstairs, there were just big open rooms that people could still rent for events.

It was a photographic studio and this guy was living up here, and also used it as his dark room and a place to set up backgrounds for scenes to take photos. And then after him it was a Buddhist shrine room, and after that someone associated with that, the Naropa university was here and this was their performing arts space. And Alan Ginsberg and Ram Dass, and Burroughs and all those kind of beat people who were older at the time came to read here and perform. So it had that kind of history. And then it was vacant for a while until we actually took the space over. But it's had a long kind of interesting history and actually we're kind of proud to have the space.

## Moving with the Times

In today's world, it's hard to survive as a business without growing, changing, and trying new things, so here at Boulder Book Store we're always willing to try something new or to change things up. The biggest change we've gone through recently was with our POS system. In May 2016, we switched from SquareOne, the DOS-based POS system we had been using since 1994, to iMerchant, a windows-based system.

While the transition was scary at first, our booksellers were quickly able to adapt to the updated system. It's made our register transactions smoother, made our buying and sending quicker, and allows us to run many different kinds of reports to help us analyze sales.

We are integrating our new POS System with the Business Office accounting software. This will allow us to save time by not duplicating data entry and also realize greater accuracy in tracking our inventory.

In recent years, we've focused on working more closely as a team. Our Marketing and Buying team has worked in an open office for many years, but it's only been in the past couple years that we've been meeting once a month with our Offsite Sales team to brainstorm different ways we can promote upcoming author events.

The Marketing team also meets once a month now with the Hosting team to go over the upcoming month's events so that we're all on the same page.

Arsen meets once a week with our store managers to go over any staffing issues, hiring or training procedures, important store updates, and just to check in

Once every two weeks we have a Team Meeting, attended by the heads of all the different departments, to talk about any issues that relate to multiple departments, such as big offsite events, new programs and updates to our systems, or to come up with new ideas to increase sales and promote the store to the community.

We've had a staff bookclub for years, but it's gone through many iterations – for a while, we called it The Rapscaillon Society for the Preservation of Rogue Writing and Super Villainy and read mostly science, science fiction, and fantasy books.

In September 2015, our children's buyer Liesl had the great idea to start reading ARCs for the bookclub so that we could read books before they're released (and get our sales reps to send us books so the booksellers don't have to buy a book to participate in the discussion). We've had great success with this, and it's given us an opportunity to champion some amazing books and discover new authors.

As a physical bookstore in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we've also realized the need to focus on what we as a physical bookstore can do better than online retailers – focus on the customer experience.

One of the things our customer's love about us is our Recommended cases at the front of the store. In 2006, we had four cases. In 2012 we added a fifth case, and in

2017 we added a sixth. These cases are our best-selling section in the store, and we've seen many customers during the holidays do all of their Christmas shopping off these cases alone.

With the addition of the 6<sup>th</sup> case, we also decided to add an area where we do a monthly author feature. For this feature we put up a selection of the author's backlist titles on our third rec case and offer a 10% discount off their books for that month. We started with Stephen King and have since done Barbara Kingsolver, Ursula Le Guin, Kurt Vonnegut, Margaret Atwood, and Kazuo Ishiguro.

For the customer experience online, we've been working in the past few years to up our Social Media game. In 2015 we switched our email newsletter program to a much easier-to-use and sleeker program called SnapRetail. It makes setting up our event newsletters much faster, and the final product looks great on mobile devices as well as on a desktop.

We've been on Twitter and Facebook now for many years, and in 2015 we added Instagram into our mix. We now have over 2000 followers and post a mix of recommendations, author events, awesome new books, and booksellers having fun.

A big thing that we as a brick-and-mortar store can do that online retailers can't is events. However, since the crash in 2008 we had been noticing that while our event attendance remained high, booksales at events had steadily dropped – more and more people were arriving at events with books they had bought discounted from online retailers.

In 2011, we decided to implement a voucher system – for most of our events, customers would pay \$5 to attend an event, and they would then be able to get \$5 off the author's featured book or a purchase in the store on the day of the event. It took a few months for our customers to get used to, but seven years later this program is still working well for us. Our attendance at events remains high, and we very rarely see customers bring in books they purchased elsewhere. On average, about 80 to 90% of our audiences purchase the author's book at our event.

We've also been collaborating more with other local organizations on events. In 2016 we started a series of lectures on Nobel-Prize winning authors in conjunction with the Language and Literature departments at the University of Colorado Boulder.

KGNU Independent Radio has been a frequent collaborator on events – they've co-sponsored many events, interviewed many visiting authors on their radio show, and starting in 2015, we've worked together on a monthly radio bookclub, where their news anchor Maeve Conran and our head buyer Arsen interview an author for half an hour on the air. They've talked with a wide variety of authors, including local authors like Laird Hunt, Laura Pritchett, and Peter Heller, as well as nationally-known authors like Hampton Sides, Robert Olen Butler, and Alexandra Fuller.

In 2016, we began a great partnership with Boulder Public Library. Their Canyon Theater seats 200, and with our combined marketing efforts we can put on a great event where we donate a portion of ticket sales to the Library Foundation. In the two

years we've been working together, we've hosted Natalie Goldberg, Terry Tempest Williams, Jan Brett, Geraldine Brooks, and most recently Matt de la Pena and Loren Long.

We've also worked with the Library to put on the Jaipur Literature Festival in Boulder. The first one was in September 2015 and featured authors like Laila Lalami, Simon Sibag Montefiore, and William Dalrymple. We've worked each year to make the festival bigger and better – our head buyer Arsen meets with the Jaipur team to suggest authors and help plan sessions. The festival features two and half days of author talks, panel discussions, and meet and greets.

We've been working with our local schools for many, many years, but in September 2017 we decided to take the plunge into in-school bookfairs. This is a big undertaking for us, but we've seen amazing results! We bring a wide variety of books, both in topic, age range, and price, and put together a packet of book titles to give to students and teachers before the fair, and then help with the set-up, display, and the bookselling. The schools we've been to so far have loved the selection and the service, and we've sold a lot of books some very happy kids.

Despite the many changes over the years, a few things haven't changed – we've always curated books for Boulder, and we've always been a safe, welcoming space for Boulderites to relax, learn, discover, and love books. It's wonderful to have our efforts and our store recognized by PW as a nominee for Bookstore of the Year, and from all of us at Boulder Book Store, we just want to say

**Thank You!**