

“The Great Good Place”

An Interview with Mitchell Kaplan, Founder, Books & Books

EDITORS' NOTE Mitchell Kaplan, a Miami Beach native, founded Books & Books in 1982. Located in Coral Gables, Florida, Books & Books expanded to its present location in 2000. Housed in a Mediterranean-styled building, the bookstore hosts over sixty events a month, consisting of author readings and signings, demonstrations and workshops, live music, reading and discussion groups, programming for children and families, and a variety of other community-based events. All of this is achieved in



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an old world setting of floor-to-ceiling wood bookshelves, wood floors, and a courtyard café, managed by James Beard-award winning Chef Allen Susser. In April 2005, Books & Books opened a location inside the Bal Harbour Shops Mall, specializing in high-end art and design books and continues the tradition of the Coral Gables and Miami Beach bookstores with a full schedule of author events and programs. I The Café/Bookstore Books & Books at the Adrienne Arsht Center opened in 2015, and in 2016 Books & Books partnered with the Studios of Key West and opened a store under the guidance of Judy Blume and her husband, George. Books & Books is also conveniently located at Miami's International Airport. In the spring of 2017, Books & Books opened another community-centered bookstore in Pinecrest, a city in Miami-Dade County, at the Suniland Shops. A new location opened recently in Coconut Grove on Main Highway. Books & Books was named Bookstore of the Year in 2015 by Publishers' Weekly. Kaplan is a co-founder of Miami Book Fair and serves as the Chairperson of its Board of Advisors. He is the former President of the American Booksellers Association (ABA) and also served on the Board of ABFFE, the American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression. In 2011, Kaplan received the National Book Foundation's prestigious "Literarian Award for Outstanding Service to the American Literary Community."

Will you provide an overview of Books & Books and what have been the keys to its success?

I founded Books & Books in 1982. I graduated college with a BA in English and after a brief stint in law school and teaching high school for three years, I found a small store in Coral Gables, Florida, that I was able to convert to a bookstore. My inspiration came from all the bookstores I

admired, those from the past and those stores I continued to visit when I was younger. Stores like Shakespeare and Company in Paris, where James Joyce and the Lost Generation found a home, The Gotham Book Mart in New York City, where Borges was read to on each of his trips to the city when he developed blindness, and City Lights in San Francisco, home to the Beats and where Allen Ginsberg first read *Howl*, became my north stars when I envisioned what I wanted Books & Books to become. From that Coral Gables store we now have five

more stores in South Florida and an affiliated partnership with Judy Blume and her store in Key West.

The notion of the "great good place" informs everything I do, and I think that attitude is what has led to our sustainability for almost forty years. People love to congregate outside of their home and work; that has become excruciatingly clear during this pandemic. A bookstore, my bookstore, is just such a place. We have cafes, we present authors and we make our space available to groups of all kinds. All of this helps build community and community makes us all stronger and able to face whatever challenges we must.

How do you describe your leadership style and what do you see as the keys to effective leadership?

I try my hardest to not be a controlling leader and that was initially hard. I started my business from scratch and for a long time I was its only employee. As the years have rolled on, I believe that my biggest leap forward is my ability to delegate. With that comes the need to allow others to make mistakes without completely dispiriting them. I love it when I feel I can teach those who work with me what I know, and I love it even more when they do what I do and do it better. It's also extremely important that they develop a kind of passion and the satisfaction that brings. Bookselling isn't the most lucrative field, but it can be the most satisfying and that's what I want to foster in others.

What are the keys to independent bookstores remaining relevant and current with the disruption taking place in the industry?

There has never been a more important time to be an independent bookseller in an independent bookstore. Like much of what's happening in retail, much is broken in the world of publishing. What's not broken is the ability to publish important, relevant and vital books that are so important as the world is in the process of remaking itself. Distribution is the main problem facing our industry. How does an author's book find its readership? With so many books published, guides – responsible and

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trusted guides – are necessary to get the word out about what’s new and what’s important. This happens best through an independent bookstore and, even more important, through a vibrant, diverse and economically healthy independent channel. When the means of distribution is centralized, as it is through Amazon, we run the risk of having one of the more fundamental means of getting ideas and important voices under the control of very few. The healthiest way to keep our ongoing discussions alive and to find the voices of emerging thinkers and literary artists is to ensure that there are thousands and thousands of guides offering what publishers and writers have to contribute to our national discourse.

How has Books & Books adapted its business to address the challenges from the pandemic?

Almost overnight, Books & Books has moved into the virtual world. We’ve always had a website and encouraged some online ordering, but our site was mostly informational. As we had to lockdown and were closed for many weeks, we made sure to let our community of customers know how important it is to support us if we’re still to be a force for good in South Florida. We ramped up our ability to take orders online, we moved our in-person events to virtual online events, and our community has responded. Although we’re operating at a fraction of the business we had before the worst of the pandemic, with expense trimming and with some early government support through PPP loans, we’re working our way through all of these challenges. What kept us going, I believe, was that we’ve always kept a dialog with our customers and that’s what we continue to do and I know that everyone, even when not going out in the same way they once did, appreciates even more the importance of places they identify with.

How important is it for Books & Books to be an active member of the communities it serves?

This is why I do what I do. Serving our community is why I opened a bookstore; it’s why I co-founded the Miami Book Fair, to bring authors and their readers together to create the next generation of readers, to find audiences for writers who feel isolated because of their color, gender, nationality or economic standing is, for me, the greatest gift I can give and is the most rewarding calling I have. In the future, I hope to find ways to double down on all of this; there’s lots of work that still needs to be done

and I’m working on ways to open up bookselling to neglected parts of South Florida and to put books in the hands of young people who still don’t have the means to develop libraries of their own.

How do you define resilience and what are the key characteristics of a resilient company?

Resilience is baked into everything a bookstore owner does. I opened during an economic downturn in the early 80’s, I had to overcome the rise of the “super store” phenomenon, the discounters put thousands of stores out of business, and then the internet and internet shopping behemoths like Amazon continued the slaughter. Resilience is the ability to be tough and to find ways to overcome obstacles and the only way I could rouse the spirit to fight these good fights was because of the passion I have to be a bookstore owner. I would not allow myself to be defeated. That has meant that I had to be wily, constantly environmentally scanning, knowing what innovations were out there in retail and in the book business, but also knowing who my allies are and having a very clear vision of what Books & Books is and to stay the course even in the face of such adversity. I continue to be guided in the firm belief that there is a community of people who want what Books & Books has to offer and we must make sure to communicate with them every opportunity we have.

As a business leader, how are you able to build a resilient culture within your organization?

Listening to every stakeholder in my company is the most important thing I can do to build resiliency, while at the same time be as transparent as possible about every aspect of the bookstore’s business. Its successes, failures and challenges allow everyone to buy into the stores’ ability to find solutions to problems and to have everyone feel empowered to make changes. When employees understand just what Books & Books is about and have a clear sense of our culture, I give them latitude even when they make mistakes. A sense of pride in what we do must give members of the Books & Books team the same kind of satisfaction it gives me.

Do you feel that resilience is something a person is born with or can it be taught?

This is the hardest question of all. The nature versus nurture question has never been adequately answered as far as I know. There are those who have a can-do attitude in the face of any challenge and there are those who shy away from any difficult situation. I guess I believe that unless someone is so pessimistic and set in their ways, good patterning by a leader and developing a work culture where one can safely take chances on making decisions that might turn out badly can influence whether or not someone will face problems with the necessary resilience. ●

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