

"I was brought up by a mad mother who was a Stalinist, whose only interest was books and politics, and she gave me the love of books and a lot of things I'd rather not have had, but she did give me a love of books. It's important to hand it down."

– Benjamin Trisk

Benjamin Trisk Cultivating a culture of Conversation at Exclusive Books

For centuries, coffee houses have played a pivotal role in the intellectual growth of the societies in which they operated. They were centres of discussion, and second homes for some of history's most renowned politicians, literary minds, and intellectuals.

It is indeed near impossible, to separate coffee culture from great literature. Cafe Procope, the oldest coffee house in Paris, was frequented by such luminaries as Voltaire, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander von Humboldt and George Sand, while Hemingway, Rimbaud, and Jean Paul Sartre favoured Les Deux Magots. In Prague Franz Kafka, Eduard Bass and Max Brod were regular patrons of Cafe Montmartre.

It is this legacy of intellectualism, conversation, curiosity, and creativity that buoys Benjamin Trisk's determination to change the way we see bookstores today, transforming them from the typically quiet, staid environments they have been in the past into convivial meeting places, bursting with character, conversation and of course - books.

A freshly brewed perspective

For Trisk and his partners, the purchase of Exclusive Books in 2013 was a joyous homecoming. On reflection, through all the executive roles he has held over the years, it was his years as CEO of Exclusive Books which he recalls most fondly, "I've always wanted it. I was the CEO in the early '80s; I always wanted to own this business. This was the most fun I ever had. The most pleasure in business that I ever had was in this business. It is my passion." For him, it is the desire to start conversations and reignite intellectualism, while sharing his love of literature, which has inspired the beginning of a series of impressive changes to

many of the group's larger stores. Gesturing to the store behind us he tells us, "Conversations go on here. People talk about books to one another. I don't want Wi-Fi in my stores. I want people to talk to one another; I want them to discover the literature that I love. I'm a luddite."

He is obsessed with quality and his attention to detail is noticeable when you cast your eye across the newly revamped Exclusive Books within the Rosebank Mall. Your eye is immediately drawn to the gilt lettering of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's opening stanza of Kubla Khan, which floats gracefully above the heads of the baristas at the coffee bar. Soon you find yourself walking, flat-white in hand, around the museum-showcase-like countertop, taking in the words that encompass all that is good about reading and coffee, as they lie lovingly intertwined with trinkets, such as reading glasses, keys, old one Rand coins and coffee beans, before settling in to turn the pages of your latest literary find. "It is not simply about owning a bookstore," Trisk comments. He speaks passionately about his determination to create tangible and entertaining experiences for his customers. He is enthusiastically hands-on in his efforts to do so too, whether he's showing the artisans how to use chains to distress the wood used in the store's coffee bar, or contemplating cooking a special meal once a month at the store to introduce the local readers to traditional Jewish cuisine. At a time when the consumer is calling for a more personalised retail experience, Trisk is giving the reading public just that. He's approaching each store as an individual entity. While there are some fittings and purchases that will obviously be standard across the group, from shelving to physical book procurement, for example, he has grand plans for personalising the retail experience at each of the major stores. "Take The Real Meal - we've sold over 50,000 copies", so we

Profession



*"In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.
So twice five miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girdled round;
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery."*

- Samuel Taylor Coleridge

sell huge volumes - sometimes too much I think. I would like to see a bigger independent book market, but what I am doing, is encouraging all of our stores to look at themselves as standalone bookstores.

"The group's rejuvenation began with the revamp of the Rosebank store, and rolls out next in Cape Town at the V&A Waterfront, where his plans for transforming the store into a meeting point, a place for conversation and the enjoyment of good food and wine, comes together under the same roof and across a large balcony with the best views in the country. In 2015, the Hyde Park store will expand to twice its current size, all to accommodate more books, and the best tapas bar. Benjamin also has plans for a variety of regular events at the different stores, which will cater to all age groups, and they manifest his genuine passion for re-engaging the reading public at large, on a much more personal level than is typically found in chain stores. "It's about theatre. I think my role is much more than a bookseller. I think that we're curating South Africa's taste and I've gambled a lot on the idea that we can bring people back to books, and we're seeing it." Of some of the recent special literary character days Exclusive Books has hosted for children, Trisk says, "We are going to be doing that increasingly and it's going to take us time to get traction - we don't have much traction at the moment - but I believe that we will ultimately get what we want. If you come in on a Saturday morning, you will have seen a fancy bean bag back there; there

are another two in the children's section. You will find children sprawled on them reading books."

The business-end of selling books

While many of us can be swept away by the romantic dream of owning a bookstore, in surrounding yourself with literary masterpieces on a daily basis, and enjoying intellectually stimulating conversations with the regulars, Trisk's keen business sense ensures that the back-end is strategically managed. Stock-levels for each store, for example, are to a large degree individually driven, taking the immediate community into account.

In the business driven centres, such as Exclusive Books Rosebank, there is a strong business section catering to the financial district surrounding it, which is balanced by a strong fiction section. I noticed the arts and music section is also slightly bigger there than in most stores, catering perhaps, to the more artistic, bohemian culture which has been on the rise in the Illovo, and Rosebank areas over the past few years. There is a very big cookery section in Exclusive Books' Kolonnade, he says and shares, at my personal request, that the Hyde Park branch has likely got the biggest poetry section of all the stores countrywide. One of the important lessons that Trisk tries to instil in his staff, and one he feels they do well understand, is that Exclusive Books belongs to the community, that people frequenting the stores

Benjamin Trisk poses proudly for South Africa Deluxe, outside his new Exclusive Books concept store in Rosebank.



Profession



"My favourite book is a book by Aldus Huxley called Point Counterpoint. My favourite author may well be Thomas Wolfe. My favourite poets include Matthew Arnold, E.E. Cummings, and Walt Whitman"

will feel let down, disappointed if they perceive something to be wrong. He explains that in all the years he was in mining, he never found himself at a dinner party where someone said, "I don't like your gold, or your diamonds". He says people are always quick to tell him what they do and don't like about the book stores. "Own a bookshop or a chain, and they will tell you everything that's happened to them, good and bad. And I actually like it, because they are involved."

He says that there is only one "aquarium" store in the group, and that is at Sandton City. He believes that people do not take

ownership of that store in the same way as they do the others, because of its location in a huge centre where they tend to transact quickly. He smiles, "At the Rosebank store, it's the same people that come day after day, the same people come in and have coffee, it's a meeting place." We discuss some of the challenges facing the brick and mortar book shops over the past few years. He is matter-of-fact about the situation, "I cannot compete with online. I cannot compete with price and with their efficiencies. The way I have to build this business is like this - what I am doing here. I think we're doing stuff here, that no-one is doing in the world. I think we're really at the cutting-edge of how to sell books and present them differently. Nobody is doing this."

There is indeed something truly special about the newly revamped Exclusive Books' store in the Rosebank Mall.

Perhaps it's the heady scent of bespoke, locally-roasted coffee as you approach the store, or the many rows of books that draw your eye inward as they reach from the floor right up to the ceiling. Perhaps it's the luxurious distressed-wood coffee bar with its decadent delicacies, or the cosy seating dispersed in many crooks and crannies inviting you to pick a book, and start turning the pages. For me it was the wonderful afternoon of intellectual conversation and story-telling, and of course, the artistic focal point of those magical few lines that drew me in and made me want to stay. ■ Lindsay Grubb

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