

**Laura:**

Thank you so much for having us, Hodge and I are pretty thrilled. We are very stoked when anyone young reads this book and has a chance to have a conversation about it. That feels enormously helpful because you all are a part of what happens next in either the city of Portland or whatever city you land. While you're here, you're tuned into what's happening in the city. I will just say, when I heard that your class was a serving 'Engaged Humanities' class, I thought of something Hodge said once, which is that Street Books is the real community college, right, just like out there on the street and available and non-traditional students can come. We're so happy to be here, and what we've done this year and since the book came out is a number of Zoom Q&As, with people all over, not all over the country, but kind of regionally – not necessarily in Portland. We went to the Methodist church last Sunday. We've done an octogenarian book group in Lake Oswego, which was super... posh. We had to fend off all the women from Hodge [laughs] but anyways, we've been able to have all these conversations. It's been part of the discussion around compassionate conversation around what's happening in our city and how to respond to that and then it's also the part of how to write a book like this, how we did, quite miraculously, so today we're happy to field questions about either one and go in whatever direction y'all want. I'm curious, not to put you on the spot, how many of you have read the book all the way through? How many of you have read sections and had a chance to kind of look through it? Okay, so you're generally familiar with the structure of the book, which is kind of an alternating viewpoint. Hodge's is slightly better in those sections than mine, we worked it out.

**Audience:**

I was wondering, I feel like the answer to this question in my head feels kind of obvious because you guys run a street library, but when I was reading through this, I think, this story is really impactful in the written word. I was curious when you guys decided to tell this story, specifically about your guys' friendship and starting Street Books: what made you guys decide to put it out in the form of a book, rather than say in the form of a documentary or other forms of storytelling? What pulled you towards telling this story in the written word?

**Ben:**

Well, because Laura said, let's write a book! [laughs] That's how it started.

**Laura:**

Yeah, I think it's because we were down there, mucking around in books every day in the street library, and that was the connecting force for Hodge and I, at first. I write about this in the book—me setting up and being like 'eh, I don't really know if this will help people if they're really struggling', and then Hodge strolling up and studying my collection and kind of teasing me that I didn't have P.G. Woodhouse, the author he thought every librarian should have. I think books are a very natural kind of tool. I think we struggled over time to capture everything, and I write about that and, I think, struggled with how to capture everything that happens in a day on a city

block in Old Town, and the conversations that I got to overhear and the ways my mind is blown and I would ride my bike home and think, ‘man, it is impossible to capture what I just witnessed.’ I guess the magic and the rule around writing is you just have to try and know that you're going to fall short of what is in your head. So I would say that is the not-particularly-short answer of why we chose to book. I will say there is a beautiful documentary, it's not released in the US, but it's a German film crew that followed us, and followed Hodge, and it's a look at Portland some years ago, so it's rough in spots, but it's not like it is right now. That's great—Hodge smoked a lot and he doesn't anymore, so you'll have to ignore that. But that's cool because that aired on German, French and Portuguese public television, so we have a tiny fan base in those countries— otherwise unknown.

**Audience:**

In the book, and even in this general short conversation we've had so far, we've been touching a lot on how Portland is much more nuanced than most people take it for and the issues are so much more complex than what they're watered down to. I guess I wondered if you come across that while you're promoting the book and what do you say to people who take Portland at face value?

**Laura:**

That's such a great question, I think it's what we're all grappling with. Once in a while I'll look at the news when I go to my parents' in Washington state, they live in the Gorge, and if you based whether you wanted to go to Portland ever just on the news at six or whatever, it would be terrifying. Our city is in a big struggle, but I think nuanced is the key word there. The idea that there are many truths you have to hold at the same time, we're seeing that globally now with the awful things— it requires us to have to sit with a number of things that are true at the same time, which is a very uncomfortable feeling. I think with regard to stereotypes about Portland, and what is happening in Portland and stereotypes about people living out on the streets or in the margins, we have been able to, with this book and with Hodge telling his story and his perspective, push back at the real stereotypes. We've had lucky media, you know, in 2011 when I first started this, the Portland Mercury wrote up a cool little article about me, and there were some hateful, troll-y comments back then, like ‘Homeless people should be ground up for school lunch.’ You have to be able to admire the poetic, you know –[laughs incredulously] I think being able to document the full life of a person, or at least show a bit, pushes back at that. We had a news crew follow us one time, it was such a gross schmaltz Christmastime, shopping-cart-in-slow-time, and I hate that stuff, I hate the sad looking guy with the paper plate at, you know— I understand different people do different things to try and help people, so I don't want to totally crap on that, but Street Books and the story of has been able to kind of sidestep some of the more stereotypical things.

**Ben:**

The stereotype of homeless people being...well, whatever you stereotype them as, they will surprise you. My goodness, you know, you do all that?

**Audience:**

First of all, for both of you, this is such a phenomenally written book. I've never read a book where the perspective shifts every one or two pages, and there's a lot of really powerful lines that I took away in reading this book. I guess one question I have for you, in exploring this perspective and going on this journey, what tips do you have for staying positive in the face of terrible things going on daily?

**Laura:**

Yeah, that's such a great— thank you for your testimonial about the book, oh my God! I'm just going to carry that around for the rest of my life!

**Audience:**

Both you and Mr. Hodgeson do a great job of writing, there is so much here.

**Laura:**

I love that, I love that he called you Mr. Hodgeson. [laughs] Do you want to go first on that, in the face of terribleness? I think especially your perspective—

**Ben:**

It is a little tricky not letting it all bring you down, because it's kind of sad; um, by keeping it short. These shifts go by pretty fast, and you'd be surprised that you've had about enough, at the end of a three hour shift. You try to get into it, ask people what kind of book they want, and help them out, and by keeping it short is my short answer to it.

**Laura:**

By keeping your exposure to sadness short, that makes total sense. I think one thing Hodge writes about too in his section is the small kindnesses. He witnesses these exchanges, someone folds up a paper bag and asks if it can be of use to someone else. It's a very simple gesture; we would assume that it's not worth very much in our capitalist wheels, but that is something very powerful. There is an already formed community and already formed ways in which people care for each other. It's weird, because you'll have a day where you see some very rugged things and people really suffering, but you also really see and sense the ways in which people take care of one another. We've had that up-close, kindness extended to us. We also, it's worth saying aloud, from the start have considered this very much a collaboration. It requires them, on some of their worst days, to come up to us and ask 'what have you got today?' and talk about books. You know, if you've gone camping for a week and not showered, the first thing you feel like is not

engaging in a conversation with someone who has some books and might be strange looking, standing out there. We always felt that that was a very important part. And a number of our librarians we have met while they lived outside, and they have become a very important part of our team, working on the ‘other side of the counter,’ as Hodge says, that’s been an important thing too. In terms of staying positive, it is gnarly right now. You all are young, you don’t even have a big space to compare it to, like ‘you know, a decade ago-’. This is real and fresh for you. I will say, unsolicited pro-tip for staying positive, throw your phones over your shoulder and don’t look at where they land, and go out onto this wonderful campus where you are and spend time outside looking up at trees- the underside of trees. I have a writer’s sub-stash of that, of trying to find beauty in the face of some real awful stuff, but, man, the screen time is so linked to not feeling good. It’s amazing when you create some frictions for yourself, don’t keep it next to your bed, don’t look at it first thing, do what you can— I’m just thinking of these Silicon bros who design these apps, so they, y’know *ting!* and — anyway, I’m sorry! [laughs]

**Ben:**

Well, also the Street Roots Newspaper, anyone heard of it? I had gotten in the habit of just giving the guy his dollar and telling him to keep his newspaper, and Diana one upped me, she’d buy a paper and give him five dollars for it, so I go, okay, well she’s not going to outdo me, so I buy a paper and give him five dollars for it, and then I wouldn’t even keep the paper— well, there was this guy, he didn’t have anything in his hands, I’d seen him before. He asks me, “You want to buy a paper?” And I realize this guy’s just working me for five bucks, and if I don’t stop now it’ll always be that way, but then I thought ‘What would Diana do?’ Immediately, I knew she would give the guy his five bucks... who cares if he’s just working me for it? And, I don’t know how this ties into that question, but it sure made me think of that story.

**Audience:**

I grew up in Portland, so it means a lot to see people doing good and appreciating the beauty that Portland brings, especially Old Town, because I always thought it was so beautiful. That aside, you talked about so many memorable experiences that you’ve had. What would you say, when you think of the good that is life on the rims, is a memorable moment that sticks out to you that really made you feel like ‘yeah, we’re doing the right thing here?’

**Ben:**

The requests. I got to thinking, ‘isn’t this kind of a bit much, aren’t we being overindulgent?’ And, I got a request for a book by Paolo Coelho and there was the girl that asked for it, and when she saw the Pablo Coelho, her face lit up. I thought, well I asked a question and that right there is the answer.

**Laura:**

Yeah, and that speaks to your question about how to stay upright and positive. Taking requests... you know our policy of taking requests and asking somebody what would you like, what can we bring you next week, and then writing their name down, and then spotting them— I'm sure, when they've been out for so long, sort of disenfranchised and disconnected, there's a little bit of wariness, like 'yeah, right, I'll see you next week with a book with my name.' I'm sure there's some skepticism. So when that happens and you say, 'hey, Paula, I've got your poetry', there's a crazy illumination that happens. People are just so glad to be known, and to be called by their name, and recognized, so that's a huge one. I will say, when you said that, I thought of this one moment from when I was on my own that first summer, and I was standing on a Max platform with this giant bag of books, about to ride down and get on the bike, you know, this guy came up and asked me for a buck and I said, "No, y'know, I don't have cash on me but I run a street library—" so he started looking at the books I had and he left with a western and we shook hands and it felt like it had gone from something where he needed something from me financially to this exchange that felt like a great one. And then I got on the Max, and I was riding and putting stickers on that had this Street Books label on the books, and I just had this moment of sublime, like this is the job I want to be doing and I'm so happy going where I'm going. And the interesting thing is that was around 13 years ago and I feel like the fact that I'm still here and still very much engaged speaks to what a powerful good time it is, on some level it is this beautiful pass into knowing exactly what needs done and forging this community.

**Ben:**

I have another: we got to Red Door and they were closed, so we had time on our hands. We decided to go across the bridge to the Right 2 Dream. Most everybody had already left for the morning so we were pretty brief at Right 2 Dream, and Olive had a phone call and she was way behind me. I saw a group of people and I was thinking like 'well, should I go up there and offer them a book?' I was parked just waiting to decide and see how far Olive was, and a guy from across the way waved his hand and I knew right away he was reaching into his bag— well, he wants to return his book. Sometimes we get those driving from one stop to the next and somebody goes oh, reaching back— drive-by returns I call them. Anyways, that made up my mind that I will go over to them. I went over and said, "Hey, we've got books over here you want to look?" 2 or 3 of them did. It's little teensy things like that— you know, how much good does a book do somebody? It might be a lot but it's easy to say it's not much, but it's not much hundreds of times— so, yeah, it adds up.

**Audience:**

For Hodge, I know that writing a book takes you into spheres that are not places that you have been before. I know a lot of people who live outside, there are stories written about them, research is done about them, like that's why Right 2 Dream is so important: its people making

their own policies. How do you feel going into spheres that you might not claim as your own, and how does it feel being perceived as a representative sometimes?

**Ben:**

Boy, I did not catch that.

**Laura:**

So, how does it feel going into spheres that you may not have traveled in— as a houseless person, often your story is told for you or research is done about you, but it's not so often that you get to have a platform to articulate your own story. Like, how about this perspective and being able to write a book— I think you run into a chance of tokenism, being propped up as a mouthpiece for the story. In this case you're telling your own story-

**Ben:**

Actually, I was a bit of an exception, because most of the people living outside are more or less handling it. I was such a wreck for two whole years, I was going around without the slightest clue of how to I was going to do anything to get out of that situation. As far as I knew, I was going to live out my days on the street. So, I guess you could say I had the inside track of how to tell this story— I know I haven't come very close to answering your exact question, but that's what I have.

**Laura:**

It's great you mention Right 2 Dream. That's one, if you remember, if you ever saw the corner of Fourth and Burnside it was the Right 2 Dream rest area, put together by Right 2 Survive. I think we talk about it in the book and it was very much self-governed, and it slept 60-70 people a night. It was definitely a burr under the saddle of the city, because they did not want an open lot right in downtown with tents and, in fact, for some years they were fining that area for recreational camping, which we always thought was kind of entertaining, it was not recreational at all. But that was an interesting experiment, and it ran seven or eight years before they moved to their current location. They're smaller and not as connected now, and one of the critiques about moving was that it would be kind of tucked out of sight and that people would think 'well, that was fixed.' If you go by Fourth and Burnside it's fenced off now, and people are sleeping along the outside of that fence on the ground, the sidewalk. So, for us, the city eventually waived those fines for Right 2 Dream's recreational camping. But at the time, I remember they were starting a tiny house hotel on Alberta St. It was fabulous, very cute, three of them or so, it was like \$125 a night to stay, and I saw that and was like 'you have to be kidding me.' Meanwhile, this place is very carefully keeping people, giving them a place to sleep, and a place to lock their belongings. We pushed back, we wrote an op-ed to then-Mayor Hales. Anyways, I'm glad you mentioned that because that is a great example of a self-governed, self-determined rest village. There are safe rest villages coming out now in the city, and they are run by an organization

contracted by the city, and that is its own set of problems because they are no longer self-governed. There's a lot of debate about those.

**Ben:**

I'd like to add to that story a little bit. On Fourth and Burnside, where the China Gate was, the original Right 2 Dream, do you remember the history: the food cart, we wanted to set up a food cart. And they said, "Well, no you can't do a food cart. It has to have a paved lot." So, I said, "Okay, we'll pave the lot." They said, "No, no good, you got to have a permit to pave the lot and we're not giving out a permit." It wasn't until somebody said, "Can you go, homeless people?" He said, "Now I got 'em!" and set up Right 2 Dream. It was kind of an outrage, they were allowed to stay there for two to three years, until buildings started to go up across the street. 'Oh no, not *those* people' and then they issued instructions that they had to move across the river, to a place across from the Moda Center, where they were tucked away out of sight.

**Laura:**

Yeah, it was a funny backstory. The owner was kind of like 'Hmm, how can I really stick it to the city. I wish I knew a nice homeless person' and then Ibrahim Obara, from Right 2 Survive, said 'Hello! I happen to know some people that might help.' It was like a dollar a year for rent.

**Audience:**

In my project, I'm exploring Alberta St and the history of gentrification and I'm creating a walking tour for Alberta landmarks that display gentrification. I was wondering, since you guys have such great insight on Portland and its history, is there anywhere in Alberta specifically that you think I should include that displays the gentrification that has happened and continued to happen?

**Laura:**

If you're looking at Alberta in particular I would direct you towards the artist Cleo Davis. Have you heard of him yet?

**Audience:**

I haven't.

**Laura:**

Him and his wife have done a fantastic job at going in and actually putting in some historical markers along Alberta Street to show what used to be Black-owned businesses. Same with Williams, which is a corridor where there's lots of new construction, which I think of as the Portlandia era, you know. Everyone was watching the show thinking what a fabulous place to live, where young people go to retire. When they put a bike lane along Williams, bike advocates were like 'Yay, what a great idea' and they had no idea the history and the way Williams had

been systematically gentrified. A lot of the homes had been red-tagged or red-lined, so that they were devalued, and the city could claim that they needed intervention. Cleo Davis's grandmother had a place along Williams that she'd bought, it was an apartment building so that she could live with extended family. She planned to keep them together forever, and build up generational wealth. That was flagged for needing repairs and was eventually demo-ed. He actually got an apology from the city about that. So you might want to follow his research and his story for that. He also did a pretty great archive project, kind of a residency and archive project at PSU where he researched early Portland Black Panther founder, Kent Ford. And Kent Ford does a great tour of old spots, where this was a dental clinic run by the Black Panthers in Portland, this was a health clinic for kids, and stuff like that. Super interesting. I would say we constantly see people who have been impacted by the gentrification of Portland. The largest predictor for people living outside in cities is the cost of housing and the lack of reasonable, affordable housing. Some people sometimes are like 'Whaaat? Why are so many people—well, they *must* have made a series of bad decisions.' And in fact, in West Coast cities, over and over, housing costs are a big predictor of whether someone is going to have a place to live. That sounds like a great project—Cleo Davis, I would say, is a great start. Alberta, Williams— what is it, EDPA 2: Emanuel Displaced Persons Association, part two, is an interesting lawsuit that a group of people— Alicia Bird who is a part of our board, brought together a group of people that are descendants of the Black community whose homes were razed to build the Emanuel Hospital. They brought a lawsuit— I can't remember the current status. Oh, but also, the Emanuel Hospital has a pretty interesting display in the alcove of the dining area essentially saying like, 'Upon reflection, this is some very racist stuff.' It might be worth scoping that too.

**Audience:**

I worked for Multnomah County this past summer, the Department of County Assets. Each week on Thursday, we would go sit in on the board meetings. Each week, we would go sit in and there was this one really large dispute that was going on that when community members could come and speak to the board, every week this is what they would come talk about. Unfortunately, I can't remember the specific name of the street but it was a street in Old Town, where community members who lived on that street— who were housed on that street would come and say 'I feel really unsafe,' because of the houseless population living on the street. But then, the next week, community members that lived outside on that street would come and say 'Well, that's not our intent, we need a place to live.' So it was like watching this conflict happen in real time and it didn't feel like there was any sort of conversation happening between these two groups. I was wondering if you guys have come into contact with people, working with Street Books, people who have very different ideas about the narrative of 'oh, it's dangerous to be around people who live outside' versus 'this is my reality' and, if you have seen those conflicts, how did you facilitate them? If you haven't, what might you recommend for these conversations or diffusing conflict over this conversation.



**Ben:**

The old Right 2 Dream by China Gate on Fourth and Burnside didn't get that many complaints. There would be people that would go and pick up trash like two blocks out. One of the business owners went to the trouble of pointing us out, 'no, *them*, we don't mind, but everybody else-.' You can see why people get nervous around the houseless people— doggone it, they just look like a tough crowd.

**Laura:**

Yeah, I remember when the pandemic hit and suddenly there was a huge stretch of tents around one side of the road. There was an article in the Oregonian where they had interviewed all the people who now felt less safe, and I remember thinking well that's only the business owners. I know a bunch of people in the tents who also feel unsafe, more unsafe than ever, so I think there's always this assumption, the criminalization and suspicion of someone who's poor. I'm not talking about someone who's poor and really means you harm because we don't want to romanticize someone who is not being their best self, and we have definitely encountered people like that outside as well, and Hodge kind of writes about that. But I think that we have done what we can, with Loaners and with conversations with people who are maybe initially a little bit skittish or freaked out— and you know the book groups, like the octogenarian book group in Lake Oswego, there was no one out there that looked scruffy, at all. On the way there, it was just— so we have been able to talk to communities that did feel a little bit scared. And I always try to assume that everyone is doing their best and is on the right team— not that there is a right team, but I don't want to have a stand-off with someone who says 'that's gross' or 'that's dangerous.' I think you get into these sort of weird standoffs with social service agencies and nonprofits maybe against the city when everyone agrees that people should have a place to go to the bathroom and nobody should have to sleep in the doorway and that somebody should start their cool new business if they want, and not have to have something broken or somebody hurt outside. One thing I have seen that is hopeful to me, Street Roots vendors and Kaia Sand, who is the executive director, if you pick up a paper, she is the one who writes the column each week— they just convene. There was a real scrap in Laurelhurst Park in southeast Portland; there were campers and there were neighbors from pretty wealthy homes in the area that were kind of going back and forth. They held a sort of circle with the people that had gathered there and vendors, which was cool because vendors have either experienced living outside or were currently, and facilitated it with people that were living in nice houses nearby, they circled up— and man, it's just knowing each other. Like, 'Oh, you need a battery-less flashlight, I have a spare in my garage, hang on.' Like immediately, people spoke, they exchanged names and there were people that were housed, with probably more than they needed, hustling to their places to help. So that is like, that's the beginning. Being able to say, now that I know you, and I know that you are also just doing your best, how can I be of help? But it's that initial knowing and being willing to look beyond what you see on the news.

**Audience:**

In this class we talk a lot about being interdisciplinary, being like cross-disciplinary, and how to work in different perspectives. How in your work have you found that it's necessary to employ different disciplines and employ different perspectives to find a solution and how has that been valuable?

**Laura:**

Man, these are hardball questions, that was an A + question, where's your teacher? Wow okay—employing different disciplines to engage the problem of houselessness.

**Audience:**

Yeah, or just how do you think that's important?

**Laura:**

Ben, do you have an idea of an answer, because I have something in mind, but—

**Ben:**

I'm trying to remember the name of a movie in the book but it's not coming to me.

**Laura:**

Which movie— oh! *Leave No Trace*? It was *My Abandonment* by Peter Rung.

**Ben:**

Yeah, but that's not the one I'm thinking of.

**Laura:**

It'll come to you. I would say that we— one thing that I have learned— did you think of it?

**Ben:**

It was Isaac Asimov. A guy was looking for science fiction. I go, “How about this?” He goes, “Isaac Asimov, who's that?” And I said, “Did you see that movie iRobot?” And he goes, “Oh, with Will Smith, yeah!” I said this is the guy that wrote it, maybe 60 years ago. I think he checked out the book— does that count as two disciplines? [laughs]

**Laura:**

Absolutely. I think it's also interesting, and I don't know if this answers your question either, but one thought I had was, we get a range of people with different experiences who are incredible readers. Like the one guy Hodge received— you're going to love this— Hodge calls me one night and says the guy turned down Nietzsche, not because he didn't want to read Nietzsche but because it was the wrong translation. And I was like yes! Tell that story to the world. And so,

over time, we've had people who were not able to read, who said I need Dr. Seuss books or early reader books, so we've been able to connect people to adult basic Ed support, so they can practice. So I said, "Oh, then you won't want this graphic novel about Jay-Z's life?" And he was like, "Oh, well actually-." So, you know, there are ways to connect people. When in the past, we were out of Louis Lamour, and I had a regular western reader, I could recommend Cormac McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses* so then there's this weird, cool little bridge into more literary reading than they wouldn't have done before. I think that's some of our techniques. On a more non-profit structure level, Street Books was originally a 3 month art experiment: what would happen if I rolled out with this kind of weird looking thing, and waited, and invited up people who never get invited to do cool looking stuff, ever? The assumption is that we want them to clean up, and they need to shower, and they need to have a job, and they need to live in a particular house with a key, and then we will invite them to cool art projects. That seems to be what we kind of do as a society, what happens if we say, hey this is for you? This is actually for you. My thinking of this has changed over time, but the fundamental part of Street Books is that everyone is welcome. We now have these fall events that are outdoors. This recent one was down on the main between the park blocks and Broadway, next to the Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall, and I had to meet with the security guards and say, "Look, the people that you're most used to bouncing are the ones we want to come tonight, so if you see scrappy folks that aren't dressed up for a party, pushing unwieldy carts, that is who this party is for." There's just so many things that have to shift, including the security guards. One was gleamy-eyes and said, "Thank you for your work." But the rest of them were kind of like, 'wait what?' And then our patrons, who are used to being bounced from stuff, have to pass a person that they are used to being bounced by. And they see that they actually are welcome. And we have a DJ and we have free food. We have moved away from a fundraiser model where we invited like four of our patrons and the rest of the people were comfortable and housed, and they came out to help some poor people for the night— because that is a gross model, that is not bringing all of us up. And again, I don't want to bad mouth any non-profit trying to do good work, but the whole model has been largely collaborative, hugely welcoming, a kind of radical hospitality, in hopes of shifting the system. The system, you remember, works very well for some people, as it has been designed, and not so well for others. I hope we answered your question— we'll be thinking about that one for a long time.

**Audience:**

Yeah, just kind of— meeting people where they're at.

**Laura:**

Yeah, yeah. 100%.

**Audience:**

One of the things that I think worked so well with your book is the vignette structure, and that you're always starting a new little story, and shifting between something maybe a little sad to something funny like the jokes and the limericks. I have to say, this isn't even a question, but my favorite place where there are different perspectives is when you guys remeet, and Laura you're like 'we hugged and I cried' and Hodge makes a joke, and Hodge was a part of the making of this book, so— I just thought that was a very clever way of using perspective in books. Different people have different versions of stories, and that was such a wonderfully powerful way of showing that.

**Laura:**

Aw, thanks—

**Ben:**

Some of the sections are so short, you have to turn the page. It creates the illusion that you're reading a page turner.

**Audience:**

I'm an education professor, and my love is literacy. So when you're mentioning the adult literacy connections and whatnot, which is a little bit related to our research—we're going to have a literacy question. My question is how much do you encounter that, or do you see people who never approach, or their friends bring them and then something comes out from that?

**Laura:**

I think we see people who are aware of us, and for whatever reason, just don't come. I mean, Hodge articulated at a time that that might've applied to him. He's outside, he's waiting for a meal, and he's got a book, maybe as a guard, but he's not actively or confidently going up to something like that. In part, that's why it's collaborative: it requires someone to come up like that and be a part of the operations and the library shift unfolding. I would say it's very common— I've seen some heart-punching things. I've taught for many years in schools for literary arts, and I encountered a kid that I had in a class at Jefferson High school. And I observed him and realized he was down there and outside, and that was very crushing but it wasn't shocking, because we have encountered so many people that the system does not serve well— people who have already started out with a really crappy hand and they have made their way the best that they can. I think that that is something that is so amazing to be able to say, "This is for you." We'll get you any book you want. Some people want coloring books and colored pencils and some people like graphic novels. We have comics— we have just such a range. I think there is this chance for people to access the Humanities and culture who have never been offered that. I had a funny encounter with a woman that passed and she did a double take and came back to my display and said, "Wait a second, are you telling me Tommy Orange's book *There, There* is

available right now down in Old Town and I'm like number 360 at Multnomah County," you know. So it was great to say, "Yes it is available but not for you, sorry, you'll have to wait for the Multnomah County System." I think that's been such a huge part, recognizing that people have not had a great experience, they didn't grow up with books in their homes, they didn't go to school and be nurtured and be connected to services if they were struggling with dyslexia, stuff like that. That's been amazing, too. And to kind of tease people and be like 'c'mon, you know you want to-' Hodge works on some of these people, sometimes. He'll try to lend the hard-to-get-rid-of titles.

**Ben:**

*Knitting and Crocheting*. I had to work on that one. You know, not mentioned in the book, but in the second half of my time outside, I had come back to myself and I was perfectly content and happy living outdoors. That was when I met Dawn, who was not mentioned in the book, and she was just sort of laughing. Turns out her reputation around the neighborhood is that she's crazy. She might have been a little out of it, but she was fun to be around. Whether or not she was crazy, I don't know, 'Doctor Paige calling Dr. Suess!' – Well, I thought it was funny. I wanted to get that story in before we ran out of time.

**Audience:**

I really liked the story at the beginning of the book, the motorcycle glove, before you started Street Books. The level of mutual respect, and reciprocity, and self-determination that you displayed, in like allowing someone to pay you money back. I'm formerly unhoused and I feel like it's either the tokenization charity model or hostility and fear, and that, I feel like I've had to explain to people, teach. You know, how did you just know that? I feel like it's not that intuitive to people, in my experience, unless you've had lived experience, so how did you know?

**Laura:**

The story, if you haven't read, is that basically I lived with my boyfriend, now husband, and his brother in a big house, and we had no yard, just kind of a strip of dirt out front. It had never occurred to us to do anything, but we had a guy come and knock occasionally and ask if there was any work he could do. I was like, I don't know if you can improve this, but I did have the idea– I had won, bizarrely, some Harley Davidson gloves, that were worth something. I got them in a raffle– where I won them in a raffle, I can't even answer that now. But I said, 'Let's do this, if you can get some money for them, at the Jolly Roger.' Some time later, he came back. I'd said if he could sell them, let's do half. I think what we have to do is decide if we never see a person again, that's also okay. I had a guy early on, and I think I mentioned this in the book, Coop, who said 'oh that's a really sweet idea, Laura, but you'll never see the books again.' So what if that's not what the project is? What if someone who's in a full-blown episode takes a copy of *Loaners*, which happened last Saturday, and just continues through the city? Isn't that one of the most amazing, potential modes of distribution that we could have hoped for? Who knows where that

will land? Maybe that person in a more subtle state will have a chance to look at it. But to your question, I don't know that I had any particular insight going into it. I certainly was kind of going out of my way. When you offer someone the opportunity to come through, that's an incredible feeling. There will always be people who take advantage of that and never come back, I imagine there will be, but I don't think that we should overlook what it means to invite someone to return the next week, assuming that they'll do their best. That has been the case. You know, we don't have a huge rate of return, given how Street Books and the rain and the number of things that can happen. But because we assume that people will return it if they can, we encourage them to pass it on to someone since we can't. We have a good rate of return among our regulars. They do their best—or they have this epic story when they come to find you, about why they can't return it, which is equally as—we assume that it's hard. So thank you for that question. I think when we—when somebody feels that we're bringing them in and we're trusting them, that is a very incredible sensation, especially if it's been an incredibly long time since someone has looked at them. We saw, I see you, I'm going to be here next week with a proper translation of Nietzsche.

**Audience:**

All the students are working on projects right now and they last across the year. You have this part in the book where you say, 'how do you keep a project alive?' I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about the juncture of the 3 month project and something more permanent? Thinking about the after life of the project and new life for it, what was that like?

**Laura:**

I encountered someone who had read the books and recently said 'Oh, I'm glad you're still doing Street Books! The book made it sound like you were getting kind of tired.' [laugh] I was like, wow, well, I guess, maybe so. There were ebbs and flows to this project, especially, I had two little kids and I was trying to be home with them and also doing Street Books on the side. I feel like, really with Street Books, it has survived over time because people have come forward and said 'this is cool and I want to be a part of this.' We've been able to sort of build to the next level, so we all just kind of scrap it for the first years, no one really gets paid, it's a side hustle. Then, I begin to apply for grants, I get some. The thing about writing grants is you have this really brilliant idea you've been carrying around going, 'what a beautiful idea,' then you get a grant and have to do it. That's the come-to-Jesus moment. I would say not hunkering down and being possessive of a thing, being an open source mode where people come on and you welcome them. I think it's easy like we have a partner, ATX in Austin, Texas. It's a great project and it's been running, but that guy is pretty solo. With the pandemic, he lost his volunteers. Recently, for our fall event, I was telling him he has to open this up and recruit people, but he's a little stubborn. I feel like those are not sustainable if you're solo. I think, you know, writing a grant or articulating a plan is a great first step into something. Going curious into what's already being done is super vital. I think a non-profit will often show up and say 'here I am, with some fabulous ideas to cure your life!' without being curious about what has already been going on at

the street level– what is really, actually needed. In that way, with Street Books, I kind of launched hopefully without talking to everyone I saw, ‘would you like a book out here?’ I did a little bit of that but– man, really I think it’s just about dedicated people over time. Street Books has some key people that have been with us since the very beginning. Also, take breaks, take care of yourself, get rest. but stay at it. Also, you can make stuff– that was a three month art project, I did not know what I was doing. I did not imagine it would be a non-profit, I do not have non-profit managerial experience. So there are things right now that you will do that you don't know how to do, and you will learn as you're making it, so I would say be open to– don't say I can't do that because I haven't had the right training. [to Ben] Any sage words? Final advice?

**Ben:**

I already got my final joke in.

**Laura:**

That was it, huh? Well, thank you all so much for your questions!