

BOOKS TERRITORY

Putting Literary Miami on the Map

“I knew that there was a sophistication here,” said Mitchell Kaplan, the owner of Books & Books, “because I witnessed what people were reading.”

By Jordan Blumetti

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The Books & Books flagship store in Coral Gables, Fla., encourages lingering.

It’s not just the historic setting (the building dates to 1927), the walls of reading material or the sun-drenched courtyard and cafe. There’s also a warmth and satisfaction in all that it represents. That’s the vision Mitchell Kaplan had in 1982 when he first opened the doors to what was a much smaller operation back then.

Thirty-seven years, an international book fair and eight additional locations later, Kaplan is celebrated as the man who turned Miami into a book town, and one of the foremost literary centers in the world, starting at a time when nobody took it seriously.

“I came of age on South Beach in the late ’60s, when Miami was seen as a fairly irrelevant place,” Kaplan said. Authors were his heroes: “To me, being a writer was always the highest calling one could have.”



The Coral Gables flagship store. Mitchell Kaplan has also opened several other locations, one of which is operated by the beloved children's author Judy Blume and her husband. Scott McIntyre for The New York Times

As Miami's readers and writers grew more diverse so did Kaplan's bookshelves, which are curated by a staff whose members have deep roots in the city. Scott McIntyre for The New York Times

College in Boulder, Colo., was his first true immersion in literary culture. In addition to reading the various literary movements of the 20th century, he learned that behind the writers were intrepid and comparatively unsung booksellers — Sylvia Beach of Shakespeare and Company, Frances Steloff of Gotham Book Mart, Lawrence Ferlinghetti of City Lights — without whom there would be no movement.

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After a stint in law school in Washington, D.C., he returned to Miami in 1979, where he finished his master's degree in education, taught high school and worked part time in a chain bookstore until he saved enough money to open his own.

His timing was less than auspicious. In 1982, "Miami had just come off one of the most tumultuous periods any city has ever experienced," Kaplan recalled. The combination of the Mariel boatlift, the McDuffie riots and the city's violent drug culture had journalists sounding the death knell. Indeed, a publisher's notion of Miami literature didn't amount to much more than drug dramas and diet guides.

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Scott McIntyre for The New York Times

Fortunately, most of the decisions Kaplan has made in his career have been instinctual. He simply wanted a bookstore with what he called the right sensibility, and Miami turned out to be the place that needed it most. Amid all the turmoil, he said, there was also an excitement reverberating through the city. The dials had been reset.

"I knew that there was a sophistication here that nobody gave Miami credit for, because I witnessed what people were reading," he said.

After convincing publishers in New York to send writers, he started a reading series in the store. In 1984, he and Eduardo J. Padrón, now the president of Miami Dade College, co-founded the Miami Book Fair, which has since grown from a one-week affair into an organization that sponsors events throughout the year, drawing hundreds of thousands of participants. Writers like Isaac Singer, James Baldwin, Hunter S. Thompson and Toni Morrison came for readings early on and drew huge crowds. In the late 1980s Kaplan expanded the Coral Gables store, then opened his second on Miami Beach, down the road from where he grew up.

Kaplan co-founded the Miami Book Fair in 1984. It has since grown to sponsor events throughout the year. Scott McIntyre for The New York Times

All the while Miami's immigrant populations were expanding. As the readers and writers grew more diverse, so did Kaplan's bookshelves, which are curated by a staff whose members are deeply rooted in this city. Voices and narratives that had long been overlooked found communion in the bookshop.

Kaplan had a front-row seat as Miami rehabilitated and reinvented itself. "In the psyche of the world, Miami became more relevant. I was able to be a small part of that," he said, with characteristic modesty.

Today he has seven stores in the Miami area, with another in Grand Cayman and one in Key West operated by the beloved children's author Judy Blume and her husband, George Cooper.

These are challenging times for indie booksellers, and Kaplan has trod a circuitous path to success. He's opened cafes, co-founded a production company with the filmmaker Paula Mazur and started a podcast. There have been years of work, some luck and a lot of promotion involved, all for the sake of sustaining literary culture, which is something that this community values far more than free two-day shipping.

"It's a small tribe we belong to; we have to do all we can to foster it," he said. "And also to discover what has been ignored."

Kaplan is fond of this quotation from the poet Ocean Vuong: "In a bookstore, you get a human being who is also a mapmaker of possibility."
Scott McIntyre for The New York Times

Standing in front of a wall in the cafe covered with photos of the writers who have visited the bookstore over the years — just a sampling of thousands Kaplan has brought to this city — he shared a quotation he heard the poet Ocean Vuong deliver this year at a booksellers conference. It seems to crystallize Kaplan's entire career:

“In a bookstore, you get a human being who is also a mapmaker of possibility. As booksellers, you are practicing, to my mind, one of our species’ oldest arts, the art of fostering, sharing and shepherding our most vital stories into the future.”

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