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Oakland bookshop can't be judged by its cover

By Ryan Kost

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To Christian Johnson (right), who is planning a film on the “liberal bourgeoisie,” E.M. Wolfman is an “artistic home.” Photos: Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle

music, exchange ideas and look at art. It’s a place where a small publishing house was born, where a film screening series on black independent cinema took root and where several artists have shown their work for the first time.

On more than a few occasions, somebody has come in and seen the space and turned to Carder, eyes wide. “I’ve always dreamed of having a bookstore,” they say (or some variation thereof). But that was never his dream. “The dream is to have a space to gather people together.”

The dream, in fact, started off a bit nebulously. It was early January 2014; Carder had just moved back to Oakland, a place he’d lived on and off for the better part of a decade; and he was feeling disconnected. “I just had a moment where I was like, ‘I need to start something. I need to do something that’s a little bit bigger than I can handle,’” he says.

Carder is fast-talking, free-associating and earnest. He speaks in starts and stops, and you get the feeling that has something to do with the sheer number of ideas running through his head in any given moment. He’d come up in

E.M. Wolfman is a small bookstore with a small storefront to match. It’s the sort of place you might miss on your way to get your hair done at, say, Drastic Changes Hair Design, which sits right next to it on 13th Street in downtown Oakland.

Inside, the place is lined with books, new and old. There are handmade zines alongside locally published chapbooks. Up on the walls are prints by Bay Area artists. If you’re the sort of person who likes the smell of paper and the feeling of tracing your fingers along the spine of a book, then all that is probably reason enough to stop in. But the books, really, are just the beginning.

If you spend enough time in this space, you begin to realize that what Justin Carder — the man who opened E.M. Wolfman General Interest Small Bookstore three years ago in February — is really dealing in is not so much books as it is connections.

In the few years it’s been open, E.M. Wolfman has become a cultural center in downtown Oakland, a place where people might shop for books during the day, but where at night they read poetry, play

punk houses in Oakland, going to underground shows and DIY-style events. At one point, he ran a music venue out of a house.

This is all to say that he knew the value of alternative scenes and the venues in which they thrived. He knew how precarious those spaces were, how quickly they could be lost. And he also knew they could be insular (“you had to know someone or be somewhere”) and homogenous (“it was a very white scene in racially diverse Oakland”).

He turned over ideas in his head, ways to connect the communities he missed to a physical space. Maybe he’d try an art gallery. Maybe some sort of odds-and-ends shop. “I didn’t really know what I wanted to do.” But then, one day, while he was waiting in line at a thrift shop, a tower of books balanced in his hands, he started to see a store lined with them.

Books, he figured, were fairly accessible. A new and used bookstore could be the sort of space “where all types of people feel at least relatively comfortable entering into.”

After that spark of an idea, everything happened quickly. By February — after pleading with the landlord — he secured a lease on a space that had been dark for nearly two years. He took a free class in Berkeley to figure out how to run a business. He set up bank accounts and applied for a business license. It was all almost too much. Exactly as he’d hoped.

But all of that was mostly in service to the physical space. The real work came in other ways.

One day, for instance, he turned to Meagan Day, a journalist who works for Mother Jones magazine whom he’d known for some years and who had been making frequent stops by the store. If she could write a book about anything, what would she write about?

About a year later, they published her book “Maximum Sunlight” under the Wolfman Books label. In it, Day tells the stories of the people who call Tonopah, a small town in Nevada, home. It might have been a magazine piece one day, she says, but it absolutely would not have been a book without Carder’s question and then his help with the follow-through.

One night in December 2016, Carder held a release party for the book. Day read to a packed house while her partner’s photographs, which appear in the book, hung on the walls. A friend who’d written an album to accompany the book performed some of his music. So many connections from one simple question.



Justin Carder founded E.M. Wolfman General Interest Small Bookstore, a multipurpose space.

And Day is just one example. Carder has spent the past three years urging artists to show their work in the gallery he set up in the back of the store; he’s encouraged people to pitch ideas and projects; he’s connected many strangers who have happened to pass through the store. “So many of the artists and people who have shown work here, people who have their books here, just walked in the door,” Carder says.

Carder has also established an artist-in-residency position. The program is flexible and adjusts to fit whoever happens to be doing it at the moment, but essentially, Carder offers up help (whether it’s editing or publicity or design), space in the bookstore and now, thanks to a grant from Southern Exposure, a small stipend.

Ryanaustin Dennis, the most recent artist in residence, had been wanting to start a series of film screenings centered on black independent cinema. So he pitched it, and Carder said yes. Like that, the Black Aesthetic Film Series happened. Dennis is already planning a second season, which will start in February.

“It’s like an artistic hub,” Dennis says about the store. “I think this space facilitates a lot of growth.”

Christian Johnson is next up. He's planning to create a short film — an art-house thriller — that examines “white liberalism and the liberal bourgeoisie” in Oakland. The film would have happened eventually, he says, but there's no denying that E.M. Wolfman has become his “artistic home.”

“Justin is just really a champion of community work and art,” Johnson says. “It's really empowering to have somebody like him stand with you.”

Nearly three years in, E.M. Wolfman is becoming the sort of space Carder imagined in those early days. But he's nowhere near finished with the project. “There's always a list of 100 things I want to do.” He wants the calendar packed, something happening in the space every day of the week.

“Well,” he says, “we'll just keep going.”