# ONE LIFE, MANY LIVES

*...the many lives we live by reading*

A CONVERSATION WITH NIGEL R. KHAN · BY GISELLE HUDSON · 2021

> *"This is my passion. If I die in the morning, I would've fulfilled my purpose."*

We are sitting on a couch in his Trincity Mall store. I'm in my element, because I love books, but I think I've met my rival!

There's a lot to say about serendipity. Although I have my own questions to ask, Nigel just starts talking. I let go in the moment and allow him to share. I watch and listen as he relates story after story; I watch as his face changes to match whatever he is feeling. I am drawn in.

"Growing up with my parents, the entire neighbourhood would have toys. Yes, my mother might squeeze in a toy (she's Chinese)," he chuckles, "but the books always remained there. Batteries not included." He finishes with a quick smile.

## BOOKS WILL NEVER DIE

Nigel continues, his eyes shifting from right to left. "Books are accessed electronically," he says, referring of course to digital books. "Worldwide they've lost about 20% of the market to e-reading, but a lot of people have come back to the permanence of the printed word."

> *"You can't loan a download now, can you?"*

We both laugh out loud. Despite all the statistics supporting e-reading, Nigel's position is that books will never die.

"We are all touchy-feely as humans." Indeed, the feel of paper matters. There is a real human experience to holding a book in hand, smelling the paper, hearing the crackle of the binding and flipping through the pages. Seeing how many pages you've read, and how many you have left, also plays a part in the psychological experience of reading.

## LEADERS ARE READERS

He has seen many patterns emerge from where he sits as the owner of Nigel R. Khan Booksellers.

In his own circle, he sees readers encouraging their children to read. Girls have been influenced by fiction and are good at abstraction as a result. Boys appear to be more visual, and don't score as well as girls in exams. A reader is always better at both conversation and comprehension. "Leaders are readers," he almost whispers. "It's a cliché, but a correct one."

He reflects on the brain drain in Trinidad and Tobago. "Free education is beautiful, but it's sad to see all these kids migrating with all this knowledge to 'make it big' somewhere else."

He is seeing a resurgence of independent bookstores, which is how he describes his own chain.

"Oprah has started back her book club," he shares. Her latest pick is not one but four books by Marilynne Robinson, the Gilead novels: *Gilead* (2004), *Home* (2008), *Lila* (2014) and *Jack* (2020). Oprah calls Robinson "one of our greatest living authors," and says the novels show the way in "seeing the beauty in the ordinary."

Amazon, too, is opening physical bookstores after a long run of being exclusively online. Since opening its first in Seattle in 2015, it now has 24 across major US cities.

## WELL-CURATED BOOKSTORES

How do you perpetuate the love of reading? Khan feels that more bookstores is not the answer.

> *"What we need are more well-curated bookstores."*

He, his CEO Kerry Ann Bishop, and a team of people who love books (and, of course, the number crunchers) stay on top of every list, including the bestsellers and the Booker Prize, formerly the Man Booker Prize, awarded annually to the best novel written in English and published in the UK or Ireland.

They review all advance copies and try to predict, based on history, trends and gut feel, which books will sell in Trinidad and Tobago. They also have to cater to every kind of reader, and consider:

- What will appeal to the "now" generation
- What's just a fad
- What will be a permanent part of the collection, such as the foundational Dale Carnegie and Napoleon Hill bestsellers
- Which books will be game changers, like Robert Greene's *The 48 Laws of Power* and Michelle Obama's *Becoming*

Sometimes they miss, especially in the local market, but most of the time their choices are spot on!

Nigel R. Khan is doing what needs to be done to ensure that books remain and reading is encouraged, especially for the new generation.

He told me about a young employee who complained that the speed of change in the industry was unsettling. "Everything is always changing," she said. "The bestseller lists, the West Indian books..." She simply could not cope. The people who embrace change and thrive in the dynamism of this sector are the ones who stay on at the bookstores.

Nigel is convinced that "once you get people between those pages," you have planted the seed, and started the growth of a new reader.

## YOU CAN ALWAYS TELL A READER

Just as he can pick a good book, Nigel can always tell a reader. "Their conversations are different, filled with colour and a depth of understanding."

> *"Words are integrated into your soul. It becomes so much a part of you... your conversation... your reality."*

"Readers embrace language in a way that isn't theoretical; it isn't logical; it just emanates from the soul. You use the words in context, yet if you're asked to explain the meaning of a particular word, you may have

a little difficulty with the definition. But bet your bottom dollar, you certainly know how to use the word correctly."

He remembers the impact of *Nelson's West Indian Reader, Book V*. "What a wonderful introduction for students in Standard Five, where you had different genres of literature, like *The Merchant of Venice*. Everything was in there to spark that curiosity..."

Then, out of nowhere, though it lands without a thud, Nigel quotes Longfellow's poem "The Day Is Done":

> *The day is done, and the darkness*
> *Falls from the wings of night,*
> *As a feather is wafted downward*
> *From an eagle in his flight...*

## ONE LIFE, MANY LIVES

All books played a part in developing who we are today. The ebb and flow of life demands that you keep pace with the changes and consciousness of the world. Tastes change.

"I used to love sci-fi, *Dune*, Isaac Asimov; then I loved Stephen King, and then John Grisham. Each book represents a life and gives you windows into the lives of others, like *The Diary of Anne Frank*."

> *"We only have one life to live, but can live many lives by reading."*

"When you read, you can really live a full and happy life without saying that you missed out on something."

As a reader, you are highly socially and emotionally intelligent. Nigel contrasts that with connections on social media: a shallow façade, set against an in-depth life fuelled by knowledge gleaned from books.

If Khan could have a billboard, it would say: *Transform yourself.* He feels that only through individual transformation can we transform at a national level, and much of that transformation is made possible through reading.

He is saddened that more Trinidadians are not reading, but remains hopeful. An avid reader himself, he jokes that the worst thing is to let him loose in the container when book orders arrive. "I am yet to read everything in the store, but I'm trying!"

## THE ART OF DISCONNECTING

If you want to develop reading as a habit, you have to learn to focus. Nigel suggests building unplugged moments into your schedule. Start small: half an hour, then an hour, then four hours, until you can spend an entire evening disconnected.

"We've become way too reactionary," he says. "If a fly passes by Mario's and you saw it, it's an issue. You feel compelled to jump on Facebook or Instagram to share."

Being able to cancel the noise and give yourself time to let your stillness speak is imperative. Giving yourself time to disconnect and think matters, because no one seems to think anymore.

"People have outsourced their minds. Suddenly every motor skill and reaction must be instant, as opposed to 'Let me think about this first,' or 'Let's see how we can use this for the greater good.' We have to relearn how to focus."

## THE BEST GIFT IN THE WORLD

Are we surprised that Nigel Khan gives books as gifts? Not at all. But his choices are never detached or careless. This man loves books, and is diligent in pairing each book with the person receiving it.

"Some choices are fairly straightforward. For the wine connoisseur, a book on wine; for the beer lover, a book on beer, of course. For seasoned and budding entrepreneurs alike, I love to gift *The 48 Laws of Power* by Robert Greene, and for those involved in politics, *The Art of Seduction*, also by Greene. I love giving the

*Guinness Book of World Records* to kids, especially boys, and for girls I would usually choose anything by Jane Austen. It's so retro, and the values, the way they related to each other, the insight into the characters, is perfect, especially since our young people, so taken with technology, often lack social cues and aren't always comfortable interacting with real people in the real world. For older people, I love gifting Angelo Bissessarsingh's *Virtual Glimpses*."

## A SENSE OF NATIONAL PRIDE

Khan feels that we don't have a sense of national pride. "We know more about the Statue of Liberty than we do about Lord Kitchener," he says. "We drive past our monuments without cherishing them or knowing the history behind them. We are rich in history. Here, for example, used to be farmland," he points out, referring to the land that now houses Trincity Mall.

## IT FINDS YOU

I return to my questions and realize we've been talking for more than an hour. It doesn't feel like it, and Nigel's answer to "Did you always see yourself having a bookstore?" makes me wish we had more time.

"It finds you. The universe conspires to give you what you want. I've always had a passion for reading, and reading always opened the door for me. It's the one thing I can't quite figure out yet. Good authors... I've met so many in my life. Your passion finds you. That's a mystery. Like Paulo Coelho. Check his history."

Indeed, I did. On his blog, Coelho writes: "It took me 40 years to write my first book." As a child he was discouraged from becoming a writer, because his parents feared he would starve. As a teenager who simply wanted to write, he was sent to a mental institution three times. Still, his passion found him.

"One night, I set the stage for reading. I lit candles, put on soft classical music, and in that moment I wondered: how many people are at home reading as I am? Am I a relic?" Nigel asks, as if delivering an epilogue soliloquy.

Reading is here to stay, and Nigel is doing his part to make sure more Trinis start reading. After all, there is evidence that books can make us happier, inspire us to travel, and encourage us to make life-changing decisions.

You are, in fact, a new kind of hero, risen at a time when the pandemic has forced people to stay home and many are turning to books as an escape. You have become more important than ever, with your local chain of booksellers carrying your name.

So no, Mr. Khan, you aren't a relic.

## THREE TAKEAWAYS FROM NIGEL'S SPOTLIGHT

1 *Books will never die.*
There is a human experience to the printed page that no download replaces, and readers keep coming back to it.

2 *Leaders are readers.*
Reading builds conversation, comprehension and emotional intelligence, and lets one life hold many.

3 *Make room to disconnect.*
Build unplugged time into your schedule, starting small. Focus has to be relearned in a world of instant reactions.



## Nigel R. Khan

Founder and owner of Nigel R. Khan Booksellers, the independent bookstore chain carrying his name across Trinidad and Tobago. A lifelong reader who believes national transformation begins with individual transformation, and that reading makes it possible.

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