**INSIDE PUBLISHING PODCAST TRANSCRIPT**

**BOOKS THAT MATTER WITH MOLLY MASTERS**

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**[00:00] SOPHIE:** Welcome to this episode of Inside Publishing, the series where we interview industry experts on everything publishing.

In this episode, we're joined by founder and director of Books That Matter, Molly Masters. We discuss why she felt that there was a need to create a space for women in the book community, what it was like appearing on Dragons’ Den, [and] the importance of collaboration and female representation. **And** Molly reveals some exciting upcoming projects on Books That Matter!

Hello! Today I'm joined by the lovely Molly Masters, founder and director of popular book subscription boxes, Books That Matter, and also the Brave Girls Book Club.

So to get us going, Molly, I wondered if you could give us a bit of a background on why you decided to start Books That Matter, and how it got going and grew to be the successful business that it is today?

**[00:57] MOLLY:** Yeah, absolutely. Thank you so much for having me on this podcast, I really admire what you guys are doing with bringing more accessibility to publishing, because it's definitely not the easiest industry to get yourself heard in.

So I started Books That Matter when I was 20. I was in my second year of university, I believe. Like many other people I had some frustrations around representation for women within the curriculum. And outside of that, too, I started to notice that there were less women being represented in the studies that were being taught at uni.

And it's one of those things that once you start to notice it, you see it everywhere. And I saw it within the adaptations that were going onto TV, the books that were on the bookshelves, and in the price listings and it just felt like there were so many amazing authors that had the backing and had the platform and publishing but that we're not getting that kind of marketing platform, the social media hype, and, you know, ultimately those opportunities that are often afforded to more privileged white male authors.

And it led me to think about creating a platform called Books That Matter about books that do go under the radar, but are of importance and touch on some really important topics like race and politics and abilities and equality.

And that was kind of how Books That Matter started: I knew that I wanted it to be a product-based business in the future. But I just started a platform to essentially soft launch the idea - I didn't know it was a soft launch at the time. But I basically was just putting the feelers out, being like, “is there ever is anybody as angry about this as I am, and [who] wants an accessible way to discover these new voices, and also recognise that there needs to be these platforms for women? Whether that's women in publishing, or women in business as well. And it turns out, there were a lot of people who felt the same way.

And that meant that when I launched Books That Matter, there was this ready-made community. It kind of felt like our own little book club that already felt just as strongly as I did about this under-representation. So I entered the idea into a local business awards - well, not an award, there was no competition! - and became the first female winner. And it was really wonderful not only to have that opportunity, but to see that there was the starting signs of things changing and being the first female winner of that grant money. And feeling like people were really taking this disparity in publishing seriously, in that there were not enough female voices being published and heard.

So that was where it all came from really - just being a bit of an angry feminist and bookworm and trying to put that into action. I'm very, very privileged, very fortunate to have this as my job and to have the community that we've built. It's amazing.

**[03:57] SOPHIE:** It sounds great. And I think it sounds like there was really an appetite for it when you guys came along, and you sort of tapped into that need. And I think it's great, I think you've done such a great job.

So one of the things that I really love about Books That Matter is that each box is so well-curated and always has a really great theme. So I wonder what the process is of how you choose those themes and how you decide what goes into each of the boxes?

**[04:21] MOLLY:** Yeah, it definitely is one of our most asked questions because I think we really like to bring our community along for the journey.

So our social media, which - shameless plug - is Books That Matter UK on TikTok. We share a whole lot of the process when we're curating; when we're deciding themes and titles to put in the boxes.

And so inside each box, for anybody who doesn't know, there's one book by female authorship, and that includes the voices of trans and non-binary people too and also three to five gifts from independent creatives.

Each box alongside the gifts and the book, we've also started our own first kind of foray in publishing with the [Belletrist] collection, which is a collectible edition of essays, so one in each box to match the theme. And they're written by prominent female authors, activists, anybody really, who has a presence in the publishing community and is able to provide a piece of content that's really enlightening to the theme.

So we've had one from Rachel DeLoache Williams, who wrote *My Friend Anna*, which was put into a serialisation on Netflix called Inventing Anna.

 And there’s one coming up which is by a solo travelling writer. She has an amazing book:I can't say too much because it’s not been put out there yet. But we've got some really amazing voices.And it feels like a really nice step into having more exclusive content that's written for us.

In terms of the themes, and the books, that comes about generally looking at publishing trends. At first, it was listening to what we liked and what the community liked. And it still is very much about that. But as our community grows more and more, we've got to think about what is kind of becoming popular, what voices are people really loving. And yeah, just thinking about the themes in that way.

So we tend to make some seasonal themes, but mainly also staying in touch with what's going on in the world and where people are at in terms of whether they want to focus on mental health, or whether they want to focus on different awareness months, and what kind of themes they want to learn about. Because, ultimately, that's what the boxes are for, to bring those themes to light and provide a space for people to explore them.

And then in the next coming weeks we have our app launching, which we’ve spoken very little about at the moment and it’s super exciting. We've been working really hard on it. It’s a space that we want for people to have off social media, so that they can have this space which feels like their book club. And that exists. And it's kind of a safe space for them to explore those themes even further. Because what we found, I think, is that people do have that kind of social media fatigue, even more so than we possibly did at the time of lockdown.

Because there's so much noise at the moment with so many different platforms coming about, we want one simple space where people can connect with each other about books, about authors, about getting into publishing. Yeah, all good things, really. So we're super excited about that.

**[07:30] SOPHIE:** Yeah, that sounds really exciting. Can you tell us a bit more about what the app is going to have? So is it a forum- based sort of thing?

**[07:35] MOLLY:** So it's entirely based around serving our community. For months, we've been doing little bits of feedback here and there and research about what the community wants, and how to build an online community that really serves them and puts the reader at the heart of the reading.

Because I think sometimes, with things like TikTok and Instagram, it can all get a bit lost. It's a very noisy space. It's amazing, don't get me wrong, but I think that there's sometimes an information overload. People don't know what books to read, how quickly they should be reading them, what writers to be reading.

And we wanted to create this space that is just about the Books That Matter audience and they can talk to other subscribers, we can organise events for them, we're going to have exclusive author chats on there. So really moving towards some exclusive content for our subscribers that exists as part of their membership. So for the box, really, to be just the beginning of their experience of what Books That Matter is, and for them to then be able to step inside the app and speak with their favourite authors, make friends who love the same books as them.

We've also got some discounts from other female-led businesses that would be exclusive to our subscribers, as well as loads of great interactive things like eBook downloadables.

We really built it into a space that likes to do as much as possible as we can for people, because I think at the moment definitely people want to be getting their value for money at a time when money is becoming a lot more scarce - especially disposable income for people.

So we really want to just make it feel like we're really serving them and the app feels like such a good and natural way to do that. We're really excited about it.

**[09:17] SOPHIE:** Yeah, that sounds really exciting. And I think that'll be really popular, because I agree that there's so much out there on social media that sometimes you do just want to stay in your own little corner of the internet that's nice and welcoming. And it sounds like this provides a really good space to do that.

**[09:38] MOLLY:** Oh, thank you. Yeah, I'm really excited. And I think there was a time when Facebook groups were really great. But Facebook itself is changing, obviously. Now we know it’s Meta, and that environment is changing very rapidly. And I think those supportive spaces for women to connect and talk are very sacred. And I feel like personally, yeah, they're just not about any more.

For businesswomen, for readers, for writers, I think there needs to be a newer space for people to be able to hold that community. [Where] it feels really great that we can own this space. It's not on any other social media platform as well.

**[10:15] SOPHIE:** Yeah, definitely. You can make it completely your own and curate it that way.

I also wanted to touch on your recent appearance on Dragons’ Den. So I really appreciated and admired how much you stuck to the goals and the mission of Books That Matter when you were questioned about your audience being just for women.

So I wondered how you found that experience? And did you find it challenging to almost disagree with their views?

**[10:41] MOLLY:** It was terrifying. I mean, I don't know anybody who's walked away from or walked into that Den and not been absolutely terrified. But it was incredible. And honestly, one of the most incredible experiences of my life.

I think that, watching it back, disagreeing with the Dragons looks scarier than it actually was. I remember going in there and I was in there for about two hours. Obviously you only see like, 10, 15 minutes. Yeah.

I still have not watched it from beginning to end in full. I don't know why; I've watched it in snippets. And I'm okay with that. But there's something very weird about watching yourself on TV two years ago - like that was filmed two years ago. Wow. I didn't realise it was that long ago.

So it was a while ago now. And it's just crazy to look back on that. And, yeah, I think at the time going in there and having that lead up - the disagreement between Sarah and Deborah, you know - not really fully, I personally don't believe that… The product just wasn't for them. There's a lot of times in business where the product that you produce is just not for that person.

And I know that they had their views, which I will always kind of dispatch my own views with respect. So I completely respect their opinion. But obviously, I disagree with it.

We did have a really good chat after that, which obviously wasn't going to occur. But it was definitely easier at the time to share my own views, because it was a lot different from how you see it on TV, in that they do cut out the most dramatic parts, because it makes good TV, it really does.

Obviously, a lot of people had a lot to say about that, which was predominantly in our favour. And having that spotlight on our ethos really helped people to connect with the business when they were viewing it for the first time on TV. But when we were in there it was actually just a quite nice, lively debate.

And for me, you know, I haven't walked through circles in publishing and in business without being challenged! Some people go on Dragon's Den, and they feel hugely protective. And it's the first time they really have been tested. But for me, it was important to say, you know, I respect your opinion. But this is something that I feel incredibly strongly about.

The reason I created the box was for women. And that is just something that I couldn't ever feel like I've walked away from the purpose. The purpose is always to platform and empower women. And it just wasn't something… I don't think money is ever worth changing the morals of why you started something. And that was just very clear to me in those moments.

When I was in the den, I felt fiercely protective. I remember telling Izzy, who is like my longest standing team member, she's been there since nearly the beginning. And I was saying it's like, the only thing I know that's close to, like, motherhood. I felt fiercely protective of it to the point where I would defend it.

I don't know - it's as soon as I said to Deborah that I disagreed, I thought, “oh my god, what the hell are you doing?” But you just - I don't know, having them challenge it. It wasn't the first time that I had been challenged. But it's the first time that it was all at once and very, very concentrated. Very protective of it. I was like, “No, this is what I stand for.”

And I can't back down because, as much as it would be exciting to work with a Dragon, the reason I went in there was not really for the money because we were invited on, which is a huge honour. But really just to have somebody with us who would be able to guide us but also be aligned with why Books That Matter existed.

And so, for me, as soon as I knew that Sarah and Deborah didn't actually agree with where we were coming from, I knew that they weren't the Dragons for us. And so that made it easier, I think, because it was all about alignment and like, you know, passion for me.

And luckily Peter and Steven and Touker really got it and that was really great. And the women themselves after that moment were super lovely. And they were really supportive of the business, and obviously it is a profitable and successful business in its own right.

And so, yeah, it was scary, but I think it was important to just stand your ground and I think most of the time women are told to compromise and or make themselves smaller in some situations. But in that moment, I just didn't feel… I felt terrified! But I didn't feel regretful for not bending in any way. Because I just don't think that compromising on your morals when you've come this far is worth doing that.

**[15:17] SOPHIE:** Yeah, definitely. And I think you standing your ground and listening to your instinct in your gut, it even further amplified the message of Books That Matter, and the people that were viewing it and seeing it for the first time it would have resonated with them more that you did sort of stick to your guns and not change anything about the business.

**[15:37] MOLLY:** Yeah, thank you. I was so worried about airing because you really don't know what they're going to cut until you see it; I see a single part of it. And I think that was terrifying because I think that was what was scaring me most as we approached the date that it was going to air, because I didn't know if they would include that. And there wouldn't be any clarity on why I turned down the offer.

But I actually think that, as scary as it was, those were the most vulnerable parts of me being in the Den. And I think it made the business feel really human and really real. I'm so appreciative of the amount of people who messaged us and found us and really got behind our message and our purpose. And I think it did, you know…

Sometimes having to talk really fiercely in defence of your product is the way that people then go, “Well, yeah, I agree with that, too.” And you kind of stir up motion and people, which was really great. And we've definitely gained a lot of traction and a lot of positive feedback and a lot of positive opportunities off the back of that.

**[16:41] SOPHIE:** Yeah, sounds great. So did you film that before the start of the pandemic?

**[16:46] MOLLY: S**o it was during the pandemic. So that was a very weird time to be in the BBC studios; everyone was masked up, then you obviously only took them off when you were going into being filmed.

**[17:00] SOPHIE:** That must have been so strange. To me, it seems that just reading in general, and sharing what you're reading, grew in popularity over the pandemic. Did you find that with Books That Matter? Did it grow with that trend?

**[17:11] MOLLY:** Yeah, absolutely. I mean, like all business owners, at the time I was just so frightened of losing everything I'd built for the last two and a bit years. And I didn't really know what to do. I was shielding from pretty much the moment the pandemic started because I have a chronic illness. And that was what I was told to do. And I think for a very long time, I thought, I don't actually know if the business will survive this because it was completely - I mean, we've heard the word unprecedented a million times, but it's a very unprecedented time, and nobody had ever gone - there was no textbook or no blog post to read about how to get through this.

And I think at the start I was very much preparing for the worst. Like, how could we ride this out? What would we do if people didn't have any money or people didn't want to buy things or I didn't even know how we were going to pack the boxes, whether our fulfilment centre was going to be able to. But what we did see was a surge in people obviously reigniting their passions and reconnecting with their hobbies. And we spent so much time with ourselves that we were able to do that. And yeah, we actually quadrupled in size in the space of about three months in the pandemic. And it was incredible.

And that was, I think, down to partly the demand for reading at the time, and that escapism and community. But also I think, you know, we wanted to gift something to ourselves, because the only way we could actually do anything was have something sent to our door. But I also think that at the time, I'm so proud of how resourceful the team and I were because we really did, we went to town on our outreach with working with publishers and organisations like the Women's Prize for Fiction who weren't able to publicise their author's work, they were not able to do events, they were not able to do book launches. And we were kind of excited to be able to platform a lot of that and be able to work with authors, we had our own little online literary festival, we had a brilliant collaboration with the Women's Prize for Fiction. And I think that was in turn such a brilliant thing for us to be able to adapt for the industry.

And that's something that I'm really proud of, and I probably don't speak enough about, but it took some real hard graft to pivot in that way where we hadn't done that before: the collaboration side of things and working directly with our suppliers and organisations and it was probably one of the things that helped us to grow and saved us because we were able to get in front of lots of people who did need the books, and they did need to read to be able to get through this difficult time.

And we met so many amazing people along the way in terms of that collaboration. So, yeah, it was a momentous time, but one that really helped us to grow and I'm so so grateful for that.

**[20:01] SOPHIE:** It was such a - well, it still is. It's still ongoing, really, isn't it? It is a challenging time.

But I think that the word collaboration is really key, because I think that's what got everybody through, in terms of personal lives, in terms of business, and I think it's great that you also experienced that and managed to forge these new relationships and partnerships with other businesses.

**[20:24] MOLLY:** Yeah, I think now the collaborations have become such a natural and very important part of our year, like who we're working with, and what needs our attention.

So, as obviously a lot of world crises evolved during those two years that we were in the pandemic, we worked with Choose Love, and did charitable box and online events with them. We worked with Jameela Jamil’s I Weigh campaign. And that was really rewarding to kind of get women talking really openly about how our bodies have changed through the pandemic, and kind of accepting ourselves and what our bodies have done for us.

And you know, Jamila and her team were very gracious and they donated the profits from their side of the collaboration to Choose Love as well. And that was just a very, very heartwarming thing to be able to do.

I've always wanted to be able to use our platform to be able to support other things like charities and organisations because I do feel like - it's a bit of a cheesy saying - but we do rise by lifting others. And I do feel very strongly that that's how women have got to the place that we are in our ability to be, you know, innovating and diversifying different industries by allowing other women to have a seat at the table. And yeah, that's just something that I always want to continue doing. Yeah. And that was a really huge part of getting through the pandemic for us.

**[21:43] SOPHIE:** Yeah, definitely. Why did you think that reading became so important to people in that difficult time?

**[21:51] MOLLY:** I think when we had so much time to ourselves, we were - I mean, I was certainly within about two weeks of bouncing off the walls. I just didn't really know what to do with myself.

And I think when the world becomes really big and scary, and we feel very small in terms of our impact, and our ability to do anything or change anything, we look to storytelling and whatever format that means to us.

I mean, we were all binge-watching Bridgerton! And my goodness, Normal People was a cultural moment.

**[22:25] SOPHIE:** Everyone was obsessed with that!

**[22:27] MOLLY:** Connell’s chain!

**[22:28] SOPHIE:** And the Instagram account! (laughs)

**[22:29] MOLLY:** I know, I'm still not over it. But things like that - we needed stories just to get through and to immerse ourselves.

And it makes me feel really teary and upset to this day, when I think about what a momentous part of our lives that was - like, we weren't able to see each other, we didn't have any connection. And, you know, there were lucky people who were able to lock down with their families and their loved ones, but we also had a lot of subscribers who were alone and who reached out to us being, like, “This community is all I have in terms of my immediate connection to others.”

And so that was incredible to be a part of, you know, being able to connect people and being able to comfort them in a time where we really needed it. But I think in terms of stories and reading, it is just the fact that it's such a human thing to be able to connect to a character and a setting and a time. And aside from the escape, we know that reading improves our mental health, and it helps us through these crises. And that's something that we're working towards now in terms of we know that the cost of living is affecting people's ability to pursue their passions and their hobbies. But I don't believe that reading is a luxury. And I think that there needs to be some disruption there that is meeting the consumer where they're at, because people need to be able to access books and stories, whether that's eBooks or or, you know, Kindles - whatever people need, audiobooks, podcasts, Netflix.

I think, you know, we're not immune to the price rises as a business. So Books That Matter for now has to stay the same. And we're very appreciative of people continuing to support us with what we produce.

Now, I can't say too much, but we're going to be launching something very soon, because it's been very reactive to people's situations, but which really simplifies our offering and gives people an opportunity to be part of our community and access the stories that they love. And take care of their mental health in a very habitual way. We’re creating something that does acknowledge how people are feeling right now, in that the pandemic kind of just stopped, and we're kind of expected to just get on with it. And we're in the middle of a mental health crisis because of that. But nobody's got time to read or comfort themselves any more. And so we're really trying as a small business as much as we can to acknowledge that and be reactive to it and bring something to life that's going to help people with that.

**[24:54] SOPHIE:** I think that's a really great idea because, as you say, it's like it feels like we haven't really processed what the past two years have done to us, but it's like the world life is up and running again. So we should just get back into it. And we don't want to lose the good aspects, or we were sort of more connected to literature and things we enjoyed in our passions But it's also had such a massive effect on our mental health that it's such a weird situation to be in, and it does feel like it's kind of being ignored a little bit. So it's great that you're acknowledging that and starting that discussion around.

**[25:27] MOLLY:** Yeah, we're just hoping we can do what we can. Because I don't believe that people's hobbies should be a luxury.

I don't think that especially young people in an industry who are really underpaid and overworked, our spare time shouldn't be dependent on disposable income, because we're coming out of a crisis where people have had to not be in work and not have any savings.

And now they're being told that they've got less money and less time for themselves. So people are basically just working to like living to work as opposed to working to live. And I think that's something that we really want to address. Very, very soon.

Because I don't believe that, you know, when we're living professional lives and trying to, you know, “adult”, it’s very hard to make time for yourself as it is. But now you've got no money for it - it's a very different story. And I think that's why mental health is going to take a big hit. So where we can we're going to try and make space for that and to be acknowledging that access to stories - making time for your reading - is something that we can all do if we band together and do it as a community and support one another. I think that it's incredibly important.

And there's not enough time spent to encourage people to read. I think, five years ago, people were probably thinking that meditation was a bit hippy-dippy. But now everybody's on Headspace or Calm. And I think we've all really adapted to the fact that, you know, some things seemed really woo-woo, but they're actually just the things that are really, really good for us.

And so, if we're spending time on meditation and skincare and exercise, for our wellness, and for our physical health, too, I think that what we want to do with Books That Matter and with our new venture as well is encouraging people that reading should be as a big part of your wellness routine as much as you would do, you know, some time at the gym or your skincare routine and your meditation. Like, you should be expanding your mind and giving yourself that time to escape and empathise with different characters. Yeah, it just makes us better people.

**[27:42] SOPHIE:** Yeah, I definitely agree. I think it's a really important discussion to be having. I have one last question. So our audience is made up of young professionals and students who love to read and also want to get into publishing or further their career. Do you have any advice on building a career out of your passions or any advice on working in the publishing industry?

**[28:03] MOLLY:** Absolutely. So when I started out, I did feel like the publishing industry was very closed off. And it was very hard to get into. But there are people who are willing to give you a shot. And I found a lot of those people at London Book Fair. That was where I made some initial connections.

But one thing that I did find when I was a young professional, and I had no money, but a lot of ambitions, was just emailing people and asking for, you know, free tickets and a meeting with them. People are nice: you'll get a lot of rejections, but people do want to help you. And they do want to support you and see people succeed. And I think if you give people that really human interaction - give them a chance to let them know what your dreams are and what you want to do, I think that you'll you'll strike a chord with somebody who's got a similar story to you. People do want to help.

I would say, in terms of starting a business or career out of your passion: find a community. I know that that's what we're really big on in Books That Matter, but find your people who are going to be doing the same things as you. As women, we’re told that other people are all competition, but I definitely think just by reaching out to people on Instagram, joining some groups, trying to find people who will support you… There are so many different business accelerators, Facebook groups about, connecting women with professional experience. There's so much out there.

So I would absolutely say just find your group, find your people who are going to support you along the way and it will accelerate your journey more than you would ever be able to do on your own. Because you don't have to do it all on your own.

I would say that that's the main way of making a passion into your full time. You know, maybe that's your employment, maybe that's your business, but doing that you need to find other people who are aligned with that passion who are going to help you make that a reality. And that's why I admire so much what you guys do, because I think that community is such a big part of us being able to do what we want to do with our lives by kind of referring other people; giving them a leg up, helping other people. And passing it on when that happens for us.

That's whatI'm always really passionate about - making sure that I'm - what's the phrase? It's kind of like, when you do it, you pass it on? Is that the thing?

**[30:24] SOPHIE:** Yeah, I know what you mean.

**[30:26] MOLLY:** You do a good thing, and you kind of pass it over to someone else. So, yeah, I try and employ that where I can in that if someone has made space for you, make some space for someone else.

So definitely, just think, find your community. Be loud about what you want. And I think that's the main thing: as long as you communicate, and you find people to talk to and make your voice heard, that's the best way to go about it.

Use social media to your absolute limits. Because LinkedIn and Instagram are such great ways to interact with people professionally - it's all there at your fingertips. Just don't be afraid of being cringy or being loud and proud of what you stand for and what you believe in, because it will get you places very, very quickly in this digital age. So, yeah, don't be shy is what I would say.

**[31:20] SOPHIE:** I think that's also true. And I think that's all really good advice.

And I think it's also a good place to end our chat today. So thank you so much for joining me and giving us an insight into your brilliant business! Yeah, I think we'd all be looking forward to seeing the upcoming themes, the launch of the new app, and just seeing it grow even more.

**[31:39] MOLLY:** Thank you so much. And obviously if anybody listening wants to check us out, we're booksthatmatter.co.uk or Books That Matter UK on our socials. But yeah, it's been wonderful. Thank you so much for having me.

**[31:51] SOPHIE:** Awesome. Thank you, Molly. Thank you. Bye.

Thanks for listening to Inside Publishing. I've been your host, Sophie, from SYP Oxford. If you enjoyed this episode, you can find more via Apple Podcasts and Spotify. See you next time!