Rebecca Gediking - podcast interview

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Welcome to this episode of Inside Publishing, the series where we interview industry experts on everything publishing.

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Hi, welcome to this week's episode of Inside Publishing. I'm Sophie, podcast officer for SYP London, and I'm joined today by Rebecca Geddy King, Library Services Director at GLL, and a recipient of our SYP Trailblazers Award this year.

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In this episode, we cover her role and career,

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advocating for libraries and what their work means for communities, including GLL Literary Foundation work, as well as what the award recognition means to her.

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So, Rebecca, thank you for joining me today and for taking the time to chat to me. First of all, to get started, tell me kind of a bit about what your role is.

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What does it consist of, and and what does your day to day look like?

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Hi, thanks so much for asking me to join you. I really

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like the work that you guys do, and it was important for me to to get involved in this conversation.

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So, my current role

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is Library Services Director at GLL, and that involves overseeing and setting the strategy for our public and prison libraries, our archives and museum services. So we've got 124 public and prison libraries across the UK.

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I sit as part of our management team because GLL is a larger social enterprise, and we manage 250 leisure facilities across the UK, and so we reinvest all surplus back into the communities that we work with.

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And my role is planning for the library side of that.

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Great. And and what kind of tasks and stuff do you get involved with, sort of in your day to day?

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Oh, it varies. It's a wonderful job. It's so interesting. So it's looking at you know reader engagement, health and literacy, advocating for libraries, looking at business services, and looking generally at you know people development and managing libraries as infrastructure for local authorities, really to be able to deliver all of their objectives supporting local communities to thrive, and that's what we see our rollouts. My role particularly sits across all of those work streams, working with fantastic colleagues to deliver all of these services. Great, and I understand you've worked with GLL for a while now.

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So tell me a bit about kind of your career so far and and how you got to the role that you're in now.

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Yeah, so actually, I started working in libraries when I was about 17.

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I was a Saturday assistant and really loved the role.

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In my holidays from uni, I would come back and do additional hours and work additional services. So I worked for the home library services for a summer.

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I also delivered adult acting classes at the time. And then when I was leaving university, there was a role available in the children's libraries team,

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and I just I loved it. I loved the work. I loved supporting people access reading, and I loved the kind of informal education aspect of a library. That you know, really anything is possible. You could come in and you know, for one purpose, and leave with a whole new other set of information skills. But it was also working in you know local public libraries. Sometimes you're supporting people at their lowest moment,

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you know, trying to bid for housing or with you know very specific inquiries, and so there is a real role for people who care about people,

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you know, in in that environment. So I I did that for

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quite a long period. So I think from about 2007 to about 2010,

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I worked for as a children's library. Then I started managing my own library.

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Well, it wasn't my own, the public's library, but I loved it very, very much. Quite a small library, a Victorian one, and we did a lot of community engagement,

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getting people in to to try different things,

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and then a job became available at GLL to manage all of the children's library services across our portfolio of libraries, and so I applied and was successful, and that was in 2012. So I worked for GLL for quite a long time in the children's role,

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and then I decided to go for a like it's like a head of service role, partnership manager for Bromley Libraries

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in 2019, which

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that was very very different. You know, we did look a lot at the like changing some of the programming and

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what kind of services.

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We could deliver. Bromley is now the kind of largest, highest issuing library in London, so we're very proud of what we've achieved there. And in 2023, I became the library services director for all of our JLL libraries, working with teams. But I think the main thing about libraries is the people, and one of my real passions is is developing other people to share their passion in the libraries, and I think that's what creates brilliant services. To be honest, and encourages people to work with us. You have to love working with people and supporting people to to really do this job.

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And would you say that's one of kind of the the big skills that you need to work in library services, communication, and people skills. Yeah, I would say so. I think that's the start point because I think you do have to

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analyze and take the time to understand what people are asking for, what they might need. But I think there is it's a variety of skills you need. Really, it's you need to be analytical,

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looking at you know the data that comes in, you know what books are being borrowed. Are we buying the right things that people want to use? Are we you know monitoring what goes out? And I think more and more we're needing to be more entrepreneurial as librarians. You know, are we

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managing our libraries as a business as well? Because I mean, we we support lots of local businesses

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to set up their services, but for us, it's like: Are we actually advocating and demonstrating our role in society and how we can support, you know, all of those political aims as well? So it's a very varied job, and I think you know, for all all staff involved, it's such a range,

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but yeah, fundamentally, it's supporting people, and and you know, and the job can be whatever you make it. Really, if you've got a real passion for children's library services, you can put on very exciting activities that will inspire them and engage to read. If you are very interested in kind of like reference and like the history of a local area. There's lots of things that you can put on that people would be interested to come and see. So I think it's about finding your passion as well as you know supporting the community to find theirs. And you see a great mix of innovation and activities across all libraries in the UK.

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Great to hear.

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I guess, what is your your favorite part of the job that you do now,

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and you know, in your previous experience?

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Well, the jobs have changed very, very much. So I'd say one of my favorite tasks when I was in the children's role was delivering rhyme times. I mean, singing to the under fives is is pretty special. Like they get very excited, and you know it's a great start to the day.

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I think now

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my favorite. Well, I love all of aspects of the job. I think it's it's very varied. But one of our

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biggest achievements was setting up the GLL Literary Foundation, and that's something hugely close to my heart. I think

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we were really sad to see that National Literacy Trust reports were showing that children's reading was at their lowest level.

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We were seeing it in the libraries, and we were talking to authors who are fantastic, you know, local authors that work with us, who were just really kind of down and sort of saying that they couldn't make their career sustainable,

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and you know we were just like we must be able to make a difference here. Like there's got to be something that we can do.

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And there was other research from the National Literature Trust about the benefits when you know when children meet an author, they're far more inspired and likely to read for pleasure. So that was really

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that started our thinking on starting the literary foundation, and what we've done is we've kind of established it to you know support authors, inspire reading, champion public libraries. Really at the heart because our librarians are you know connectors of people. We're working with schools, we're working with readers, we're working with families, and we're working with the authors. So we were like, actually, if we can bring everyone together and make this worthwhile,

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we can give it a go. So we had, and a key part of that as well is bringing in our business libraries. So I think a lot of the authors had said, you know, the delivering is the fun part. You know, they've already written the book. You know, they're delivering some of the activities. But how do you make the events engaging? How do you manage your business, your brand, your marketing, the finances of it? Like, it's a bit of a whirlwind. It doesn't just stop with writing a great book. So,

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bringing all of that together, I think, was incredibly rewarding for for all of us. I mean, in our first year, we supported 20 authors, and that was 2025.

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And this year, we've got 42 as part of the program. So we've got the 20 from last year who stayed on for a second year, which we developed for them, and 22.

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But I think it's it's been wonderful to hear their feedback. So the feedback from the children, you know, when they've met someone local and they're like, "Oh, you know, I know that shop that you mentioned," and yeah, wow, you know, you're from where I'm from.

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But equally, hearing from the authors, you know, some of them have genuinely said they were ready to give up, and

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you know, this has been a lifeline that they've found a community together.

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There's been a lot we've learned together in the first year, and we're so excited going into the second year. We've got all of our online webinars starting next week, and have delivered quite a vast program. And it's been nice

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to see so much happen, really, as part of the Literary Foundation. I mean, it's it's a team of us with ideas, really, and now they're alive, and we are, you know, loving the work that goes into that.

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But it's been nice to provide development opportunities for other people as well within our team. So a lot of our librarians, who are the kind of literary foundation champions, supporting, they've gone out to do you know public talks at conferences. You know they're delivering the events with the authors. They're making better connections, and it's it's a ripple effect, really, isn't it? It's creating a whole ecosystem. We get them to work closer with publishers, and I think that had become a bit distanced in public libraries a little bit, so it's just yeah, it's bringing everyone together again, and I think I'm getting a lot of satisfaction

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from working with that in my role and supporting others to do it too.

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So I'd say that's yeah, probably one of my favorite things. But the role is so big, like you know, we're getting to do development activities in prison libraries, and it's lovely making a difference there. You know, all of our partnerships are so different. So we work in Lincolnshire Libraries. You know, that's a massive, massive county.

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And to be able to, you know, reach so into some of those rural communities is also very, very rewarding.

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You know, we've got Greenwich, we've got Bromley, we've got Wandsworth, all with their own distinct identity,

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and that that's been really nice to see. And Bromley has had significant investment over the last year, about 11 million pounds, on refurbishing and renovating all of their public libraries. So having brand new libraries as well to deliver activities is is incredible, and it's lovely to see the excitement and the drive and and passion of teams and partners in in making libraries relevant.

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That's great to hear.

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What's kind of been your your proudest moment with the foundation so far, or your your favorite memory, I guess, from

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it? Oh,

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I think all, well, all of it, but that's a cop out. So I will give you a more detailed answer.

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I think just

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all taking those steps together. To be honest, from the very beginning when we registered it as an independent kind of foundation, we knew

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this wasn't just a project. This was a long-term commitment from us all in creating something that would make a difference, and I think we've had

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real support and encouragement from kind of all aspects of the literary sector. So I think you know being invited to the London Book Fair was was wonderful to be able to talk about the foundation and bring people on the journey with us.

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just generally, like people were curious at the beginning as to what we were going to do. So when we did our very first event

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in 2025 in Battersea Library, bringing

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all of the community together,

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everyone was just that room was just full of possibility, and I think that's what we hoped and wanted.

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All our partners were just kind of like, "Yeah, let's let's look at this and make this happen."

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So I think it's just yeah, it's been filled with positivity, really. And I think that first event after setting up the foundation was was really special and something that sticks with me. But I think, to be honest, every

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every talk you see you do with the with our authors, so I think you see them grow in confidence. And so, some of the later talks, you're actually sitting there really proud of certain authors, and you're like, wow, you know, at the beginning, you were really quite shy, and we had to do a lot more of the questioning of kind of pulling them out themselves. Now they are kind of rolling with it, and I think that's that's fantastic. It's lovely to see,

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and a few special moments in there as well. I mean, when Nathaniel Law won the Carnegie Award, the Shadowers' Choice, and we were out of our seats giving him a standing ovation. I mean, we were so excited for him,

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and I think that yeah, there's been a lot of proud moments, book launches.

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Everyone's done so well.

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Great, that's wonderful to hear, and it is,

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you know, some great work that you guys are doing. So it's it's nice to hear that you can feel the kind of impact of it as it's taking part and growing. On the other side of things.

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What would you say is the most challenging part of your your job?

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It's as I've mentioned before. It's quite a a large portfolio, but I think it's

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probably people not always valuing public libraries. I find that quite a challenge. I think they are such a vital infrastructure for communities,

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and a large part of my role is using my voice to advocate for public libraries. And I think in

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the, you know, that they're always one of the things that people consider if there are kind of like funding challenges or financial problems in in areas,

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and you have to kind of work with people to say, okay,

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how can we provide the very best service for communities with what we have?

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But I think sometimes places don't utilize their libraries as well as I would like to to see, and it's yeah,

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kind of running that with like, why can't you see it? We are doing so much. You know, we're not just one thing or another. You know, we are a vital information service,

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making access, you know, equitable for for everybody. You know, we are free, safe, trusted. You know, use us for health information, for local authority information, and I think that's that's probably the biggest challenge. And I think certainly other librarians that I work with across the country,

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whenever there's kind of political changes or you know big issues with local government funding, libraries then become a bit more at risk, and we all try and support each other through that. So I'd say that's probably one of the challenging aspects of the role,

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and you know, trying to make them a bit more.

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I think advocating in terms of evaluative data. So people love doing the events.

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You know, you love doing rhyme time. Do you love counting all the people that were at that runtime and getting their feedback, not always, but we need that. You know, we do need that to be able to share and say, actually, you know, across a year, we had this many people, we

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did all these things, and this is how we impacted people's lives, and that's what we need

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to to get better at capturing. And I think there's been a lot of movement in the library sector, with everyone pulling that data and information together. So, so yeah, there's always challenges, but there's always opportunities as well.

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What would you say is kind of the biggest misconception about your your role? I think obviously your role probably consists of a lot more than what people think at the outset,

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what would you say is the most common thing that people don't realize? I would. Well, I would say as soon as I say I'm a librarian, people think I read all day, and they say that that's their favorite job that they would love to do that, and I'm like, I would love to do that too.

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It's not that I do read a lot on my travel to and from work and outside of work, but in work, I'm I don't get the opportunity really to read on the job. So I'd say that's that's a big misconception, and I think a lot of people feel that at all stages working in the libraries. In terms of my current job, I mean, I think it's more.

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It's not really about the job; it's about the misconception of of libraries. So I think everyone's like, oh, you know, it's just books. Like, you know, are you moving into the kind of new age?

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And I'm like, absolutely. Like, but books are still fundamental to what we offer. So, everything that we put out really is books and beyond. So, you know, the books are a core part of the offer, but we also have, you know, digital information services, business, health,

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and lots of events and activity programs to support people,

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and pulling all of those things together is much wider, really, than anyone realizes until they come and see the libraries and see the work that we're doing,

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and some of the reports and things that we put out to evidence our our impact, but it's that's probably the biggest misconception. You know what librarians are,

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what we do,

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and then yes, in in my role, it's like you know, do you just get to take part in the activities? Are you doing those things? And it's like actually, there's a lot of of work behind the scenes. You know, the finances, the governance, the the

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you know, general training programs and things that we put on to support people to deliver all of these services.

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Right, and I kind of, I know you touched on this earlier, but I think a lot of the time when people think of libraries, and

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there's a lot of discussion around a library is going to close, or are they outdated, or especially with the kind of current reading crisis that you mentioned earlier?

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What does the future of libraries look like to you personally?

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I mean, I think we've

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we've always been

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a service.

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That's evolved and adapt, and I think that's why people find it so hard to explain what libraries are and what they do. I mean, I think fundamentally, that information service and information need will always be there because I think things change so rapidly.

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People don't want to get left behind, and you know, in terms of making sure that everything is accessible for all, you know. Okay, AI might take over, you know, some search functions and things, but what about the people who don't understand how to use that? You know, what about the people who are digitally disadvantaged and don't have access to technology? Like they can come to their library and do that and be shown how

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to to use all of those technologies, I mean, I think you'll see the designs of most libraries have changed already. They are flexible spaces, so all of the shelving can be moved for large community activities. Certainly, that's what we've done in most of our libraries to make them

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available to do events. But you'll find

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that libraries will always have a place because that information service and that community aspect is needed. It's you know I think we're the third most trusted profession

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in the world after they did the Ipsos Maury survey, and for for people you know sometimes a library is a sanctuary as well. You know, just that that place. So I don't think, I think there is a strong future for libraries, but I think we are at a pivotal point about how we talk about them, how we use them, and how we work together. Because I think the you know the financial situation that everybody's in isn't just felt by libraries. You know, it's felt by publishers, it's felt by booksellers, so you start looking at okay, well, how can we maximize our impact together? And the library is a great place to do that because I think we we genuinely want the best for everyone.

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I know all services do as well, but I think it's you know even when we're looking at our kind of finances and like the charitable ethos of GLL, you know,

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reinvesting all surpluses. It's looking at things and going, you know, how can we make the most of the money that we have and the services we have, the spaces that we have.

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And I think libraries are a great opportunity for councils for other services to look together at how we're supporting wider objectives. So I think there is a strong future for public libraries, but if people use them properly,

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that is, you know, decision makers, funders, and the people working in them. You know, this is a key time to say, you know, all right, I might like doing rhyme time every day,

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but actually, is that the most valuable use of my time. Should I be doing different activities to support all different age groups? You know what is actually needed in this part of my community on a regular basis, and that's the kind of work that we do with our teams to explore, you know, the local demographics, explore all of the, you know, understanding of the

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area, you know, it's not just demographics, but like the

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makeup of communities, what exactly it is that they want, surveying them, understanding that, and then creating tailored offers to what it is that they need. And I think you need that professional team doing that work,

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but you also need stakeholders to realize actually, yeah, instead of building another kind of pop-up service two miles down the road, why don't we use the library where we've already got you know millions of people coming in,

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and that that's what we want people to really take away.

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And I mean, you sound really passionate around everything that you do. What do you is kind of the most important thing that GLL libraries provide, and and the work that you do.

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I mean, I think it's it's really interesting. I mean,

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the GLL was established in 1993 to protect the leisure services that were at risk,

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and has obviously grown into a much larger organization with 250 facilities. But I was part of the team who joined in in 2012 to set up the libraries division

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to really do the same for libraries to support public libraries that were at risk of closure,

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maintain that kind of professional service, and

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I mean it is something I'm hugely, hugely passionate about. But I think what GLL do is

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bring a different side to the work. So I think I'd always been a passionate librarian; like I knew my work had meaning,

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I knew that I made an impact. But I think with GLL, because of the experience across leisure because of generally the passion of everyone,

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it forced me to think in a different way. So when I mentioned about being, you know, librarians needing to be more entrepreneurial, understand like the business side,

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look at you know better collaboration across health. I mean, because leisure is also a.

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Public service. It's been fascinating to see what we can achieve actually working in a different environment where libraries are promoted, supported, and valued.

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And I think our teams do feel that, and we've been able to show a really clear journey. So you know, in 2012, Greenwich Libraries were the 28th

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issuing authority in London. Today, they're fifth in London, and you know, one of the most visited in the country at Woolwich Library. And that that doesn't just happen overnight. That's you know, programs. That's investment. That's supporting people to achieve their very best, and I think with GLL being a values-based organization,

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it's very different. It pulls you out of the kind of day-to-day political environments

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and allows you to just let your passion shine.

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But I think you know, obviously, with with the monitoring and support. But I think that's what you take away from it more. It's it's definitely a community of people who are passionate about supporting communities

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externally, and I think

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that's yeah. You can't really get a better working environment than that. I think if someone is channeling your passions and letting you go for it, that's that's what you want to do.

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And of course, one of the reasons that we're here

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with SYP today is that you've been shortlisted and won one of our Trailblazers awards.

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How did that feel for you, kind of being shortlisted and

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then to to be one of the winners?

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I mean, fantastic! It wasn't expected.

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It was

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so wonderful, really. I mean, I think we

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knew that what we were doing with the literary foundation was innovative. We hoped it was trailblazing,

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and to receive that recognition. I mean, on behalf of like the whole team. I think it was just, yeah,

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it was really validating for us in terms of

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of being shortlisted entirely. But then to win it was just like wow,

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it wasn't as I said expected at all. But I think it's it's wonderful recognition for everybody, and I think it's given us the opportunity to promote the Literary Foundation more,

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and to talk more about what we do because I think because it's a publishing award

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that felt really special to us because I mean books

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are so so important in terms of opening new worlds, new horizons. You know, as children's librarians in the beginning, like we

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we've always been so passionate about that and encouraging people to read. So to win a publisher award was incredible,

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and I think just strengthening those relationships with publishers as well. Like we're all in it for the same reasons, really. We want to get fantastic books into the hands of the people who are going to read them,

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and so I think it just yeah opened up other doors to talk to people to work together,

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and was just hugely exciting. I mean, at the London Book Fair, I just yeah, I think

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very very pleased to to do that, and it's a wonderful initiative. I mean, I think the other trailblazers, it's such a mix of people,

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it was fascinating to hear about their work and learn about what they do as well, and to have some of those conversations collaborating with each other, not just on the literary foundation, but on how we can work together with our public libraries, with our prison libraries.

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You know, what other things can we do and explore? And I think all of our industries are creative,

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so I think getting everyone together with something like this is a wonderful thing to

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do, because it just allows you to have that start point of like, right, wow, we've all, you know, won this award for the work we're doing now. What's next? You know, what can we do together to have even more impact and make this this wider. So I think, yeah, I mean, it meant a lot personally, obviously, but also professionally. I think it's very, very exciting, and I'm so so grateful. So yes, wonderful. And you mentioned kind of working more closely with publishers. And what kind of would you like to see in that space if you could envision a future where we're working as closely together as possible. What would that look like to you?

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I mean, I think for us, so for the Literary Foundation, publishers actually nominate authors. So we've publishers are involved in the whole process. For us,

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I mean, it's about using libraries as a test bed,

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as you know, putting books into the hands of children, as I said before, but also promoting the authors and giving them that community. And we know that publishers don't always have the resources, especially with like new authors. So it's again that kind of maximizing our impact. You know, we're running training courses. You're running training courses.

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can we look at joining those up? You know, working together a bit more on those kind of things. You know, what kind of boot camps do you do?

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Can we support that? You know, how can we support with the promotion and publicity of your authors as well? We've got a massive network across our libraries.

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You know we can reach people. So you know if you're developing posters or doing webinars or like live events,

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it's working much more closely with the libraries again as that strategic delivery partner rather than being seen as a charitable cause. Because I think some of the bigger publishers in the past have been like, oh, you know, we must support libraries, and it's like yes, we would love the support, but also we can be a strong partner for you in advertising and advocating for authors and books,

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and that's what we want to be. I think it's just joining up the network because everyone's got so busy

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that those conversations sort of stopped happening. Whereas I think now we're reigniting them

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and showing that it's working.

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Yeah, that's great.

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And kind of just to finish off, what would your advice be to those that might be interested in working in the library sector and are kind of at the beginning of their careers?

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I would say

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go in and look at the libraries. Spend a bit of time there.

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Reach out to other people who work in libraries to find out a bit more about the the role at different stages. But

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you know, when you get into the role, make it what you want to make it. I mean, I think your,

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as I said earlier, your passion for supporting communities and delivering different events, it can be anything. We've got people doing English language classes. We've got people who speak other languages doing, you know, their own rhyme times or discussion classes in their language. We've got people

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developing, creating, innovating all the time at whatever level. I mean, I think we are very much believers that you know everyone's a leader, and so I think if you've got a passion and wanting to support communities,

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a library career could be very good for you.

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And of course, if you're very passionate about books and reading,

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there's always you know a space for you there. I think come and and get involved and and help you know reach all of those children and work and understand the stock that comes in. I mean, we develop our own programs. We also buy into like partner programs to just encourage people to read across

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all areas. You know, fiction, non fiction, and all the different types of books and resources that we have and loan,

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it is fantastic. But I think, yeah, the opportunities are endless, really, for a career in libraries, whatever you're interested in, because you're dealing with such a wide range of people. You know, you're working with people from you know naught to end of life, with varying interests, but there will be key priorities in certain areas, so I mean, I think an interesting example is

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about two years ago. We had somebody who was very interested in politics and you know supporting people to understand

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how to understand a manifesto, you know, how to read it. And sessions were designed politically neutral, but it was to encourage people to understand that they had a voice, that they had a say, a vote,

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and you know, just from that project alone, I think they had about 150 people registering to vote that wouldn't have previously, and that was someone's you know passion project, and it was absolutely fantastic. Obviously, we supported, but you can see that that's inspired other places to do the same thing,

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and so it, yeah, it's creating that culture of you know inspiring people to to support people

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in better ways, and I think that would be the best advice. And I think it it's it's an open community in libraries. I think if anyone is interested in working in libraries, we're always very happy to let people shadow us or understand our job a bit more, or come to you know have a discussion and a coffee about how to get started and how to you know progress within libraries as well,

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and into what sorts of roles are available. Because as I said before, it's it's not just about the activity programming; it's monitoring data, stock, spend,

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IT. You know, there's such a range of roles that you can have. You know, very different passions and go into

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into into those in a bit more detail.

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Great, that's wonderful. Thank you so much for joining me today.

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I think again, like you sound, like you're very passionate around your work, and hopefully, it will kind of give some insight into a different sector that people might not think about

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as part of the wider kind of book and publishing

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ecosystem. But thank you so much for joining me and for taking.

35:00

The time and congrats again for the Trailblazers Award. Thank you very

35:06

much. It's been really lovely to talk to you today, and it's been lovely to work a bit closer with the Society of Young Publishers.

35:14

Thank you for listening to Inside Publishing. I've been your host, Sophie. If you enjoyed this episode, please rate and review us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen to your podcast. It really helps us to reach more people.

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See you next time.