

Episode 106: Black Garnet Books opens to the public

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The Minnesota Daily • November 15, 2022 • <https://mndaily.com/274573/podcasts/episode-106-black-garnet-books-opens-to-the-public/>

As one of the only Black-owned bookstores in the state, this shop offers a selection of books written by people of color.

by Hana Ikramuddin

INTRO MUSIC

HANA IKRAMUDDIN: Hey everyone, I'm Hana Ikramuddin, and welcome back to In the Know, a podcast by the Minnesota Daily.

Black Garnet Books, which opened in October is one of a handful of Black owned brick and mortar bookstores in the state.

IKRAMUDDIN: Light streams in through the large windows and the glass door. The front of the store peers out onto the Hamline light rail stop in St. Paul. Visitors peer at the selection of books lining the built-in shelves, and genres from romance and science fiction cover the walls: all written by people of color.

That isn't an accident. Dionne Sims, the owner of Black Garnet, carefully hand-selects all the books in the store. The storefront officially opened on Oct. 12, after two years of pop-up shops and online sales work.

Sims stopped to water the plants in the store before we sat down to chat.

DIONNE SIMS: People need to understand and also be aware of the lack of representation that black and brown people have in the literary community. Black Garnet Book is something that addresses that.



We really have to be intentional about what we're ordering. We really have to be intentional about making sure that we're carrying books that were done by people that look like us, sound like us and have experiences like ours.

IKRAMUDDIN: Her efforts started in 2020 after she tweeted about wanting to start the only Black-owned bookstore in Minnesota. That tweet went viral. At the time, Sims had recently graduated from the University of Minnesota and worked in tech.

SIMS: I was looking for a Black owned bookstore to support and couldn't find one in Minnesota, and the closest one was in Chicago. So I just ended up tweeting like "there's no Black-owned bookstores in Minnesota, that's my new dream." Everyone was kind of completely behind it. I was thinking that's my new dream for when I'm 60 and retired, and everyone was like "no, now." And I was like "okay sick."

IKRAMUDDIN: After she garnered over 700 retweets and tens of thousands of likes, Sims began collecting over one hundred thousand dollars through community fundraising on GoFundMe. She received a \$100,000 Neighborhood Sales Tax Revitalization grant from the city of St. Paul. That helped pay for shelves, a backroom, and additional renovations.

SIMS: I feel like more than anything, the support made it more real to me. It feels really good to have people believe in you. I wasn't even – at first – thinking of doing a gofundme, but it was the people who were replying to the tweet who were like 'start a gofundme now. I want to support this.' That gofundme was huge in making sure I could run the bookstore for the last two years through pop-ups and online, and yeah really made it possible for me to quit my job and do this full time.

IKRAMUDDIN: After two years as a one-woman show, Sims saved enough money through sales to hire five staff members. She said that has helped her balance the workload of a new business.

Miya Che, a second-year student at the University joined Black Garnet Books in around mid-October as a staff member. She helps stock books and ring up customers. She saw the job posting on Instagram.

MIYA CHE: To see a place where BIPOC voices are actually, the authors are front and center of the bookstore, as compared to bigger corporations where you don't get to see these books, unless they're popularized on something like TikTok, you don't get to see these authors front and center as soon as you walk in ...

It wasn't until I got here that I'm like, I didn't realized I feel safe, and I feel comfort in being surrounded by books that are either a reflection of who I am or just some sort of reflection of – I mean, there's some relatability on the very like grand scheme of things in these books.

IKRAMUDDIN: Sims says that not all responses have been good. She has to keep herself from reading hate comments online about the shop.

SIMS: There has been pushback from white people who are like “why does it matter that she’s Black? Why does it matter that this bookstore only sells books by people of color?”

I just need people to be more, more invested, and not just monetarily, but invested emotionally and communally with Black-owned spaces in general.

IKRAMUDDIN: She also mentioned that she has had to deal with an overexaggerated sense of urgency from customers when it came to opening the storefront and sending out orders.

SIMS: People were like “you need to be on the same speed as Amazon,” even though I was running everything by myself.

I don’t want Black Garnet Books to be the only one because Black people are not a monolith. I’m not going to carry every single book that Black people are interested in buying. It’s impossible. I don’t have the space for it.

IKRAMUDDIN: Mary Taris runs another Black-owned bookstore in the state called Strive Bookstore. The physical space is in the IDS Center. It used to run as Strive Community Publishing.

MARY TARIS: What inspired me to start that was years of teaching, and not finding books for my elementary and middle school students that they could relate to. So, after years of searching and searching for books I just decided, you know, someone’s got to get more books by and about black people, more contemporary books into the hands of children.

IKRAMUDDIN: Taris has run her publishing company since 2018. She launched the in-person location this summer. Both Taris and Sims agreed on one particular barrier to opening Black-owned shops.

TARIS: Money

SIMS: Money. I think it’s mostly money.

TARIS: Go to Black-owned bookstores and buy books from them, and also attend any literary events that the bookstores host.

SIMS: And yeah, We just really want to be an example of like how community-driven and based book stores should be and why like it’s more important to shop here than Amazon because we put a lot of intention into what we carry. You know, we’re the ones who will be holding events and supporting local authors and just really making sure books are made an important part of community.

Don't shop at Amazon for your books, buy your books here.

IKRAMUDDIN: This episode of In The Know was written by Hana Ikramuddin. It was produced by Abbey Machtig and Alberto Gomez. For questions, comments, concerns, make sure to email us at podcast@mndaily.com.

Thank you for listening. We're glad you're tuning in this fall. Don't forget to like and rate us wherever you get your podcasts.

I'm Hana Ikramuddin, and this is In The Know.