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Like a kid running a candy store of literature

By Amanda Katz, Globe Correspondent | August 1, 2010

Since 1977, the Children's Book Shop in Brookline has been a beacon for young readers (and their teachers and parents). Bright, cheerful, and packed to the gills with new releases and classics, the store is owned and operated by Terri Schmitz, who bought it from founder Rusty Browder in 1985.

With an encyclopedic knowledge of children's books and nearly equal acquaintance with Boston's junior literati, Schmitz is a warm, opinionated, and enthusiastic presence on the floor. She spoke to us about keeping up with the burgeoning children's book market, whether she reads books for adults, and her picks for fall.

Did you grow up as a reader of children's books?

Oh, yes. A completely voracious one. To the neglect of my social life.

What books did you love when you were a little kid?

Some all-time favorites include the Betsy-Tacy books, "The Witch of Blackbird Pond," and Eleanor Cameron's "The Wonderful Flight to the Mushroom Planet." What a book!

When you bought the store, was there a learning curve in getting to know the books?

There was almost nothing in the store when I bought it — so I was essentially starting a brand new store. At first, I just wanted to carry all my favorite books, and I couldn't understand why people weren't flocking to buy them!

Most of the books here I love. And then there are things that I just have to have — let's say, the Berenstain Bear series. People want them, and they allow me to carry a lot of other things.

Have you read everything in the store?

Well, I haven't read all the Berenstain Bears! Or every nonfiction book. But fiction, I've read 80 percent.

How many kids' chapter books do you read a week?

Five or six a week — about one a day. And when you find, say, "The Giver," by Lois Lowry — you're just breathless. It might be every 20th, 30th or 50th book. But then you say, "Oh, this is why I do this."

What have you noticed changing recently about children's publishing?

Picture books are very weak right now. The focus is on publishing for kids in middle school and older. There's some stunning art; they're finding wonderful illustrators. But if the story's not there, kids don't want to hear the book read again.

Do you find time to read adult books?

When I can't stand reading another children's book, I go on binges of adult reading. I'm always two or three years behind. I just finished Elinor Lipman's newest novel, which I adored. But that came out last year, of course.

I would read anything by Jasper Fforde. I turn to P.G. Wodehouse when I need a break. And I'll read big doorstopper books, like "The Historian" or "Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell." Right now I'm plunging into A. S. Byatt's "The Children's Book."

Are you excited about any children's books coming out this fall?

Jennifer Donnelly has a new novel called "Revolution" that's terrific. And I'm in the middle of the last Tiffany Aching book by Terry Pratchett. I don't want to finish it because I love it so much — and there will be no more. It's the fourth and last in the series. I'm treasuring every word.

Now that there are so many other distractions, do you see the same kind of fervor about books among kids?

The true readers have not changed. They are just as excited and nerdy and wonderful. It gives me great hope, that kids can be so excited about books, and that they come in and tell each other about what they're reading. It's just wonderful to eavesdrop.

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