



Forty Years at the Forefront for the Children's Book Shop

By Alex Green | Dec 19, 2017

Over the course of the Children's Book Shop's 40 years in business, the tiny Boston-area specialty bookstore has weathered monumental changes in publishing, and had an outsized role in the world of children's books. Yet if not for a lunch meeting between two strangers more than three decades ago, much of that history would never have come to pass.

Elizabeth "Rusty" True Browder opened the bookstore in Brookline Village, at the edge of Boston, in 1977. When she met Terri Schmitz eight years later, Browder had taken on the first full-time post as executive director of the New England Booksellers Association. Doing both jobs while raising two daughters had left her scrambling and overwhelmed.

"It was very hard for me," she said, but the time had come to sell the bookstore.

For her own part, Schmitz was in desperate need of a change. Trained as a children's librarian, she was working in the English Language Acquisitions department of Harvard University's Widener Library. "It was a soul killer," said Schmitz, who was struggling to recover after the death of her husband three years earlier.

Schmitz leapt at the chance to meet with Browder when she read that the bookstore was up for sale. "It seemed like something I wanted to do," she said. "It seemed like something that would bring me back to life again."

After their meeting, Browder agreed to sell, Schmitz agreed to buy, and the future of the 900 sq. ft. bookstore—and the 25,000 volumes it holds today—was secure.

A 'Small and Mighty' Beginning

With children's bookstores [showing renewed vibrancy](#), Browder is quick to point out that there were few such stores in the 1970s, when she was looking for books for her own children. She would regularly drive to neighboring Cambridge or farther out to the suburbs west of Boston just to find a selection that suited her tastes.

"I had to go out of my way to find those books," said Browder. "It occurred to me that we could open a specialty shop." Soon after, Browder took an apprenticeship at Millrace Books in Farmington, Conn., and attended the ABA's bookseller training school. Then she opened her doors.

Melissa Sweet, now a two-time Caldecott Honor recipient, came to work at the store a few years later. "I knew virtually nothing beyond Maurice Sendak," said Sweet. "I desperately wanted to publish a children's book, and I thought, 'If I'm not going to get published, at least I could work in a bookstore.'"

By that time, the store had become a hub for a new generation of children's authors. With readings every Sunday, Sweet got a master class from the store's visiting authors. During those years, Browder recalled, Arnold Lobel, James Marshall, John Bellairs, Virginia Hamilton, and Chris Van Allsburg all visited the store. "It was a laboratory," said Sweet, "and I also got to understand working with the public and what they were looking for."

What the public was looking for was new kinds of children's books, and Browder was at the forefront of championing them. At ABA conferences, she would meet in hotel lobbies with fellow children's booksellers and talk about new content that was coming into the burgeoning children's trade publishing market.

"Something I held near and dear to my heart when the bookstore opened," said Browder, "was finding books in which all children could see themselves reflected. From the beginning, we had a small and mighty section of multicultural books."

In addition to content, new formats were emerging, and not all of them had supporters. Browder remembers being on a panel in New York City with an editor, a publisher, a reviewer, and author Rosemary Wells. The subject of the panel: "Are board books legitimate books or are they just toys?"

"The reviewer said, 'These? Books?' but it was clear to me as a parent, bookseller, and book lover that these very sturdy books were very, very valuable to families," Browder said.

Along with Sweet, Ann Rider, executive editor at Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Books for Young Readers, worked at the store during Browder's tenure. She said that the store's approach to children's bookselling "cemented my desire to stay in the field. All along, I knew I wanted [to work in] editorial," Rider recounts, "but this stepping stone taught me so much about how the public views children's books."

An Era of New Ownership

When the time came for Browder to sell, she said she saw an admirable successor in Schmitz. "They're hard businesses to run," she says, "and so you need someone who has book knowledge and passion for books. To take the risk of adopting the business was wonderful."

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As she took the reins from Browder, Schmitz sought advice from booksellers who had a hand in shaping a generation of children's bookselling, including Jewell Stoddard and Helen "Greenie" Neuberger of Washington, D.C.'s *The Cheshire Cat*, and Carol Erdahl, who had just opened the Red Balloon Bookshop in Schmitz's native Twin Cities.

Most of all, however, Schmitz said that it was the staff of the Children's Book Shop who helped her transition successfully. "I had no idea what I was doing," said Schmitz. Longtime employee Jane Kilborn showed her many of the fundamentals for ordering books and running the store. "I would have just failed miserably without her," said Schmitz.

By the late 1980s, Schmitz had come into her own and the children's book industry was thriving, but changes would test the store in the ensuing years. Schmitz said she survived the box-store boom and subsequent rise of Amazon by retaining an expert staff that included children's author Leo Landry, and by focusing on being trusted advisers to young readers and their parents.

In the age of Amazon's "you may also like," recommendations, Schmitz said that it is just as important to talk readers out of buying certain books. "They trust us," she said. "They won't come back if you lead them astray."

"It's small, but it's a jewel box," said Margaret H. Willison of the bookstore. A librarian, writer, and founder of the social media newsletter *Two Bossy Dames*, Willison said, "There's nothing in there that Terri doesn't want there."

As a child growing up nearby, Willison said that Schmitz's honesty and expertise were enthralling for her as a young reader. "I didn't even know what my tastes in books were without Terri," said Willison, who rattled off a list of titles from *I Capture the Castle* by Dodi Smith to Gail Carson Levine's *Ella Enchanted* as books she was first introduced to by Schmitz. The key to gaining her trust, said Willison, was simple. "She never condescended to me."

Willison said that Schmitz's success stems from being "one of the least sentimental, most refined, and razor-sharp" readers she has ever known. It also comes from shrewd business decisions. For instance, when presented with the opportunity to buy her location in 1995, Schmitz found a way, despite the fact that it caused great hardship. It is a decision she credits to this day with saving the store. "They would have sold it out from under me," she said.

Thirty-two years of successful stewardship allows Schmitz a certain measure of humor and confidence as she looks back, whether she is celebrating a favorite middle-grade reader, recounting an evening spent helping J.K. Rowling buy chinos in the late 1990s, or opining on the state of young adult literature today—"It's written by 20-somethings for 20-somethings."

Reflecting on her experience, Schmitz said, "I have loved almost every moment of it."

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