

PARENTING UNFILTERED

# In West Concord, Barefoot Books celebrates 30 years of diversity, inclusion, and fearless reading for kids

‘I think every child should be able to see themselves in books,’ says cofounder Nancy Traversy

By [Kara Baskin](#) Globe Correspondent, Updated September 9, 2022, 1 hour ago



A Barefoot Books community event. COURTESY PHOTO

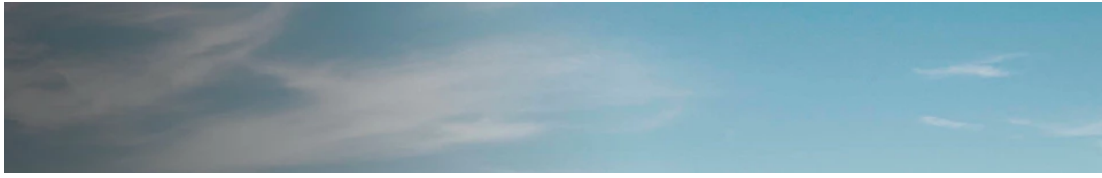
In an era of banned books and struggling indie retailers, a nod to Barefoot Books: The local children's bookseller celebrates 30 years in business this fall. Their catalog is gorgeously illustrated and thoughtfully written, highlighting diversity and inclusion. Over the years, they've existed as a bookstore, community space, and now, in a cozy corner of West Concord, a proudly independent publisher.

Cofounder Nancy Traversy started the business in 1992 in England, moving to Cambridge in 2001 and later to Concord, with a mission to spotlight boundary-crossing kids' books from an array of authors and illustrators. The name was intentional.

"You can have a lot of fun with the word 'barefoot,'" she says. "You've got the barefoot child exploring their inner self as well as the world: the freedom to explore their imaginations. There's lots of imagery that we talked about our mission in terms of crossing boundaries, and not only cultural boundaries but also geographical, generational, and different abilities in our books. ... We felt that every child should see themselves in the books that we published."

Barefoot also partners with children's literacy organizations to make sure that kids in need learn how to read. Here in Boston, they support Raising a Reader Massachusetts, an early literacy family engagement organization that helps under-resourced families develop home reading routines and gain access to books.

And while giants such as Amazon have dwarfed independent booksellers, Traversy tells a different story. She says that 2016 was a "turning point" for the brand, which focuses on original tales — not tied to TV or movies. Since 2019, sales are up 16 percent.



“Suddenly, everyone was looking at buzzwords: diversity, inclusivity, inclusion, and why it matters. There’s a concept of windows and mirrors, and I think every child should be able to see themselves in books,” she says. “I think the mainstream now wants the type of books we are publishing, and that didn’t happen quickly.”

The world has changed over 30 years: In addition to a catalog that spotlights diverse family structures, abilities, and ethnicities, Barefoot has moved into the health, wellness, and sustainability space. In 2022, they released “Count On Us! Climate Activists from One to a Billion,” a counting book for kids as young as 4 that explains environmental activism in simple steps. Another iconic title is “The Boy Who Grew Flowers,” about Rick, a shy kid who sprouts flowers from his head during full moons. He’s shunned at school until he meets a friend, Angelina, with her own unusual differences — and an empathetic friendship blooms. These books are whimsical, challenging, memorable.

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Barefoot sells directly to readers in addition to working with stores and libraries, which is an atypical model. Traversy recalls one meeting with a larger chain, where a buyer was candid: Books that weren't pink with princesses on the front just didn't sell as well.

"That's not what we do, and I feel like the world has finally caught up, whether it took an election in 2016, or whether it took George Floyd, or all the accumulation of all the things that are happening. I think COVID has played a role, too," she says.

She believes that families are now sitting down to read hand-held books with their kids more than ever.

"It's a wonderful way to [implement] routine and tradition. It's a wonderful way to open up conversations about things that may sometimes be threatening or hard to talk about. You can do it by sharing a story together. And, if you're a child who hasn't ever seen any diversity in your life, you can do that through looking at books with characters in them."

Traversy says she has no trouble cultivating a stable of authors and illustrators with varying perspectives and backgrounds, even though she's not a typical big-city publisher.

"I think [authors] come to us because we have an interesting multi-channel distribution model, which was necessitated by the fact that we had to get creative for so long about finding our audience. We sell to gift stores and literacy organizations, farmers' markets and book fairs. We avoid the mass market," she says. "We believe in making beautiful

books that will get handed down.”

Barefoot celebrates their anniversary with a variety of events this month, including live performances of “The Boy Who Grew Flowers” at Concord’s Umbrella Arts Center Sept. 22-24. Find their full anniversary lineup at [www.barefootbooks.com](http://www.barefootbooks.com).

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