

THE LITTLE IMPRINT THAT COULD

PULLING ITS BOOKS OFF THE SHELVES OF BARNES & NOBLE WAS JUST THE BEGINNING OF ONE PUBLISHER'S QUEST TO CREATE A BRANDED IMPRINT.

By Angela Starita

BOOK PUBLISHERS HAVE ALWAYS STRUGGLED to find a balance between art and commerce, trying to please readers and critics while turning out mass-market hits. But niche imprints, which are less dependent on the demands of a general audience, often profit by using unusual retail strategies. Barefoot Books, a children's book publisher based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, has succeeded in a new way of selling books, using direct sales, a strong web presence, a branded bookstore, and a new boutique in New York City's FAO Schwarz, to create a distinct identity.

Nancy Traversy, a graphic designer and accountant, and Tessa Strickland, a former Penguin and Random House editor, founded Barefoot in 1993. They wanted to publish beautifully illustrated stories from around the world, predicting that that philosophy would differentiate them in the market. They initially took the traditional route of working with large distributors, including Barnes & Noble, who frequently asked Barefoot to make design changes that would purportedly increase sales. But instead of changing its books, the company decided to change its distribution: Barefoot left the chains and made its titles available online and at the Metropolitan Museum of Art stores, Pottery Barn, boutique bookshops, and their own store

Top (left to right): *The Barefoot Book of Monsters*; AUTHOR: Fran Parnell; ILLUSTRATOR: Sophie Fatus. Spread from *The Beeman*; AUTHOR: Laurie Krebs;

ILLUSTRATOR: Valeria Cis. Top (far right): A sketch of the new Barefoot Books boutique, which opened in August inside New York City's FAO Schwarz;

ILLUSTRATOR: Twining Design. Bottom (left to right): *Storytime*; AUTHOR: Stella Blackstone; ILLUSTRATOR: Anne Wilson. Spread from *The Giant Turnip*; AUTHOR:

in Cambridge, Massachusetts, which opened in November 2001. The decision paid off: In 2007, the company's sales rose to \$7 million, and in 2008, sales are projected to increase to close to \$10 million.

Children's publishing has long led the way in innovative marketing: Scholastic created book clubs, Golden Books sold its titles in supermarkets, and the Stratemeyer Syndicate sold Nancy Drew mysteries through catalogs. These publishers, like Barefoot, saw that children's books needed to be sold using non-traditional methods, appealing to the customer outside of the bookstore.

"We have a grassroots philosophy for distribution and branding, a combination of making beautiful books and directly reaching the community that wants them," says Traversy. A critical part of the company's marketing plan are Stallholders, 1,500 direct sellers (mostly Barefoot-loving mothers), who offer the titles at parties or online. They account for 16 percent of the company's sales and are slated to account for 21 percent this year—generating more revenue than the few traditional bookshops that carry the line, which are expected to produce just 9 percent of Barefoot's 2008 takings.

Roger Sutton, editor in chief of *The Horn Book*, the journal of children's literature, calls Barefoot's titles "palatable. They have very



Photographs by Erin Gleeson



much the same look to them—they don't do edgy, challenging things." That familiar style has always been the company's goal. Though there is no absolute formula for a Barefoot book, Traversy describes the brand as a lifestyle supporting creativity and multiculturalism. The concept may be a cliché, but it has proven to be a successful business and design strategy. Traversy says that the books' palettes, which include funky lime greens and oranges, are "very influenced by cultures that we're trying to represent and depict in our books. The [visuals] are not cartoony." Strickland adds that she chooses illustrators "who somehow have a distinctive voice... and could never be mistaken for someone else." Still, she looks for branding elements: "Although you would see pronounced differences if you were to compare some of our illustrators one on one, there is a visual coherence in the program." As the founders had hoped, the brand has become the selling point, rather than specific authors or illustrators—a quality noted by David Niggli, president of FAO Schwarz. "Barefoot was one of the only book lines that I have seen that could stand alone as a brand," he says.

Sutton estimates that 25 years ago, 80 percent of children's book sales were made to schools and libraries. Today, he says, the figure

has reversed: While 20 percent go to schools and libraries, 80 percent are sold through retail outlets. Online, publishers can market directly to parents: "If you're publishing with an eye toward a consumer, you're going to publish differently—you have to be splashier, have higher concepts," says Sutton. Barefoot's strategy reflects this attitude, testing their manuscripts with parents—Stallholders and customers—instead of chain bookstores' buyers.

The opening of FAO Schwarz's 1,000-square-foot Barefoot Books boutique is a sign, possibly, of the future of bookselling. Barefoot follows in the footsteps of Manhattan's American Girl flagship, with its dolls and their stories, and Scholastic's headquarters, which is filled with Harry Potter paraphernalia. These series have developed immediately recognizable aesthetics, visual signatures that are as easily identifiable as a Disney Princess product.

The Barefoot books strive to present a lifestyle distant from the commercial world of Disney, instead depicting children practicing yoga with their fathers and shopping at the farmer's market with their mothers. But the very success of Barefoot shows that an aggressive marketing plan and a unifying visual identity for any brand is far from being a fairy tale. Rather, it's a profitable business. **P**

Aleksei Tolstoy; ILLUSTRATOR: Niamh Sharkey. *Tales from Old Ireland*; AUTHOR: Malachy Doyle; ILLUSTRATOR: Niamh Sharkey. *Ship Shapes*; AUTHOR: Stella Black-

stone; ILLUSTRATOR: Siobhan Bell. *The Beeman*; AUTHOR: Laurie Krebs; ILLUSTRATOR: Valeria Cis. *The Giant Turnip*; AUTHOR: Aleksei Tolstoy; ILLUSTRATOR:

Niamh Sharkey. *My Daddy Is a Pretzel*; AUTHOR: Baron Baptiste; ILLUSTRATOR: Sophie Fatus.

