

backstory



NANCY TRAVERSY took on the big chain-store dragons to rule her own realm of children's books.

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CAMBRIDGE, MASS.

Here, amid the strollers and nannies and crawling babies, a giant coat tree with tiny coats, and one little boy howling that he won't, he *refuses*, to leave, two woolly sheep sit quietly alongside a warren of bunnies. Across the room, there's a donkey, a scarlet macaw, several princes and princesses, a dinosaur herd, and a small schooner's worth

and her determination to share them – has been lifelong, she says. And like all plucky heroines, she's nurtured a profound wanderlust – and had more than her share of global misadventures.

Born in Canada, Traversy headed to London in 1985, after college, to work as an accountant in a big firm. But “women could only go so far, and I was fairly ambitious,” she says. After that, she worked at two London design firms and traveled to Asia on business. At meetings, “They'd always ask, ‘And who is your boss?’”

Gender came up in more dramatic ways, too.

While pregnant with her oldest daughter, but before she'd transitioned to maternity wear, Traversy was pitching a £300,000 office-furniture system outside Seoul and drinking green tea throughout the meeting. Looking for relief, she loosened the ties on her skirt. It fell to the floor the instant she stood. “Well, do I get the job?” she asked her shocked audience. “I never heard from them again,” she says

Cambridge store in November 2001.

“She has the sense [that] if she continues to carry forth her ideas and vision she'll be successful,” says Dan Storper, founder of Putumayo World Music, which sells children's music through Barefoot. “That takes guts, especially if you're independent.”

Traversy asserted Barefoot Books' independence in 2005, a clash heard round the children's publishing kingdom. She broke away from the big-box book chains. Their marketing and return policies were inefficient, Traversy says; they were unlikely to expose readers to the entire Barefoot collection. So she pulled her books from their shelves. Other publishers “think you're crazy,” to leave the chain stores, she says. But Traversy balked at the bookstores' tendency to display only part of the Barefoot collection and was frustrated at having to pay thousands of dollars to get her books front and center in the stores, only to have half of them returned when they didn't sell.

Today, Traversy and her staff of 30 produce 15 books a year and sell from the Cambridge store, online, and through gift and specialty



MARY KNOX MERRILL/STAFF

LIVING BAREFOOT: Barefoot Books founder Nancy Traversy pairs vivid art with high-quality multicultural children's stories from the Nile to the Amazon, Shakespeare to mythology.

of pirates, their hair tied neatly in matching kerchiefs. They're puppets, of course, the quietest residents of an enchanted land with crayons, blocks, puzzles ... and hundreds and hundreds of books. This small children's kingdom – this corner bookstore and benevolent barnyard/zoo/prehistoric plain – is, after all, in the business of marvels and dreams.

But look between the covers of Barefoot Books – turn the pages slowly – and there's another story. Alongside those dinosaurs and the pirates, one cofounder of this bookstore and publishing company has her own fantastical tale. In an era when conventional wisdom in publishing holds that tots want nothing but Disney, and that independent bookstores are being vanquished by the big, bad book chains, Nancy Traversy has so far been victorious. In 2007, her company made Inc. magazine's list of the fastest-growing businesses.

“You cannot underestimate the stamina of the girl and the persistence,” says Ms. Traversy's husband, Martin Lueck. The publishing company, which Traversy and Tessa Strickland launched from Traversy's London home in 1993, doubled, then tripled profits before expanding to the US in 2001, eventually becoming an \$8 million company. And despite the dismal economy and a slowdown in British sales and trade, Barefoot's North American website and store sales grew nearly 40 percent in 2008.

The Cambridge store, about a mile north of Harvard Square, sells only books published by Barefoot – bright, bold, multicultural offerings. There's “The Barefoot Book of Princesses,” sure, and one about knights, but there's a rhyming trip through the Galápagos, and titles like “We're Sailing Down the Nile” and “Catch that Goat! A Market Day in Nigeria.”

Traversy's fascination with other cultures –



A bookseller stars in her own fairy tale

stores and other independent booksellers. Currently, they have more than 300 titles in print. And then there's the stallholder program, a merry band of more than 1,000 people (mostly mothers) who sell books online and at parties, fundraisers, and elsewhere. They account for 20 percent of Barefoot sales.

“Other publishers don't understand why we do stallholder... It doesn't fit their paradigm,” says Melise Schulman, Barefoot's sales and marketing director and a former stallholder who sold \$16,000 worth of Barefoot products in her first three months. Barefoot has “always been about marketing friend-to-friend using social networking,” she says.

Traversy is convinced that books can be beautiful – not mass market or cartoony – and she requires international tales be written by experts on each country. She gets stories from oral traditions, and uses regional artists to illustrate tales such as those of Babushka, a Russian homemaker so busy cleaning that she misses the beauty around her, or of a group of Masai children traipsing across Tanzanian grasslands.

That determination to present other cultures in engaging but nonstereotypical ways has become increasingly valuable in the years since 9/11, Traversy says: Americans are now more attuned to “values, family, and the value of a story. To understand other cultures and other points of view – more people get it.”

Including, apparently, the holy grail of toy stores, FAO Schwarz: Last fall, Traversy got her own mini shop in the flagship Manhattan store.

But like any tireless heroine serving the needs of her kingdom, Traversy has swiftly moved forward, from past triumphs to the challenges ahead. She's revamped the website and deepened her work with social networks, and is exploring digital options for selling, publishing, and distribution.

“You've got to jump in and try it,” she says of new business tactics. “Otherwise, you can analyze it to death.”

now. “It's what not to do in a meeting.”

Still, her trips deepened her interest in the cultures and colors of the world – something she and Mr. Lueck, with whom she'd fallen in love while mountain climbing in Africa, wanted to make a part of their children's lives. So they planned a family vacation to Kenya in 2000. En route, a man charged into the cockpit of their airliner and attacked the pilots, causing the plane to freefall before a basketball player saved the day – four seconds, Traversy says, before a crash would have been unavoidable.

Traversy still fears flying, but she and her family take at least one international trip a year – to remote villages in China, the Egyptian desert, and, last summer, Peru, where she compared a manuscript to the facts of Incan history and felt rejuvenated by the colors of markets.

Falling skirts and planes – events every bit as strange as gingerbread houses, as scary as evil stepmothers – taught Traversy how to “blunder [her] way through,” a quality essential when she moved Barefoot's main office to the US.

First her British warehouse went bankrupt. She lost thousands of pounds, but got her books back. Then, in 2001, the week Barefoot mailed its first US catalog, mail phobia swept the nation when anthrax-laced envelopes were sent to Congress and news outlets. Traversy hesitated only long enough to ask: “Do I stop everything? Eight years of my life. I decided that train had already left the station.” She opened her