

The Boston Globe

In Beacon Hill, a big new bookstore comes to life at last

After years of work, Beacon Hill Books and Cafe is set to open, part of a wave of new independent booksellers

By [Diti Kohli](#) Globe Staff, Updated September 14, 2022, 9:01 a.m.



The Beacon Hill Books & Cafe is set to open on multiple floors in an old building on Charles Street come late September. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

Tucked near the entrance of [Beacon Hill Books & Cafe](#) is a tiny room for the imaginary squirrel that calls the shelves home. Paige, the store's furried and four-legged mascot, has a bed, a fireplace, and a desk — one of many places where she reads books by night. On one wall of her abode: a re-creation of the Rembrandt painting [stolen](#) from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in 1990.

“It’s magical and wonderful,” said owner Melissa Fetter of the room, created by children’s author and illustrator, Brian Lies. “Everything we want Beacon Hill Books to be.”

The setup captures the whimsy of the five-story bookshop, which will open on Charles Street later this month.

It took longer than expected, thanks to the pandemic, but over the last few years Fetter has transformed the [former location of the Hungry I restaurant](#) into a bibliophile's dream, with pale blue floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, upholstered benches, and hidden reading rooms.

The store's collection covers the literary basics, as well a few specialty sections chosen by manager Irene MacDonald: "Around the World," "Food for Thought," and [Persephone Books](#), a British publisher that reprints works by women authors of the 19th and 20th century. A deep red room boasts one of the largest offerings of interior design books in New England. And a hodgepodge of children's titles — for infants to young adults — fills the fourth floor, which Fetter designed to emulate the nursery in "Mary Poppins."



A children's tea setting in the children's room. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

A cafe alongside will also serve lunch and afternoon English tea before morphing into an evening lounge with wine and snacks. ("Think of it as a kind of place for women after work, looking for a place to relax," Fetter said.) And a long table on the second floor is the backdrop for catered events, led by chef Colleen Suhanosky of [Rifrullo](#).

“I want this to be a destination for the people on the Hill, those who wear their intellect on their sleeve,” added Fetter, a member of the WBUR board of directors and the Gardner Museum’s board of trustees. “Everyone here is a reader.”

Fetter purchased the building in 2019, around a year after the storefront was [listed for \\$4 million](#), according to Boston Magazine, and gutted much of it.



A dizzying look down the staircases. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

With the help of Pauli and Uribe Architects, Fetter redid the wiring and installed an elevator, but she kept the interior layout in its original, 1800s style. Any remaining ornamental elements are her vision. Fabrics and wallpaper come courtesy of [Cathy Kincaid](#), an interior designer best known for decorating residences, including Fetter’s Beacon Hill home. Wood carvings scattered about — of pens, globes, or artists’ palettes — were done by local carver Laurent Robert. A gold leaf artist Fetter found on Instagram added shine to several store signs.

The only question now is how the store will perform in the era of online shopping, just as the neighborhood recovers from its pandemic slump.

Independent bookstores saw [a bump in interest during COVID](#), though Charles Street saw multiple closures when crowds cleared out of downtown. But there are only a handful of bookstores left in downtown Boston, and an informal survey by the Beacon Hill Civic Association recently showed that locals are eager for something to fill the area’s literary void. (The neighborhood’s commercial thoroughfare was once home to The Book Store and a Lauriat’s bookstore, but both have long since closed.)

Fetter, who moved back to Boston after 40 years in California and Texas, believes the three C's — community support, convening, and curation — will be enough to draw residents and tourists alike.

“Serendipitously finding a book is something the algorithm can't provide,” she said. “You don't always want to read books like the one you have before. You need time to browse. You need recommendations. You need us.”



Paige, the squirrel mascot, on a sign outside. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF



A view into Paige's little room on the children's floor. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF



Beacon Hill Books & Cafe is set to open on multiple floors in an old building on Charles Street in Beacon Hill. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

Diti Kohli can be reached at diti.kohli@globe.com. Follow her @ditikohli_.