

HOME + DESIGN / SHOPPING

How a Dallas Designer and Arts Patron Created Boston's Most Viral Bookshop

Beacon Hill Books & Café is a Fairy Tale for Fashionable Readers

BY REBECCA SHERMAN // 10.12.23

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The Aesthetics Room is painted in Farrow & Ball's Rectory Red. (Photo by Sarah Winchester)

Bookstores have always possessed such wonderful personalities — jumbled, cozy, charming. Hugh Grant's bookstore in *Notting Hill* and Meg Ryan's shop in *You've Got Mail* are cinematic avatars, embodiments of the snug and cheerful neighborhood bookshop. Now along comes Beacon Hill Books & Cafe, a smashing new addition to Boston's historic neighborhood and the first new bookshop there in decades. It's the divine creation of transplanted Dallas arts patron Melissa Fetter, with interiors by Dallas designer Cathy Kincaid.



Last September, Beacon Hill Books & Cafe opened inside an 1845 Greek Revival townhouse in Boston that had undergone several years of meticulous renovations. The first new bookstore to open in the historic Beacon Hill neighborhood in almost 30 years, it's owned by former Dallasite Melissa Fetter, a prominent civic volunteer and arts patron who moved to Boston in 2019 with her husband Trevor, a faculty member of the Harvard Business School, his alma mater. Melissa is an avid reader, and the idea to open a bookstore was born from necessity. They'd already purchased a 200-year-old townhouse in Beacon Hill — arguably the most desirable area of Boston — only to discover the neighborhood lacked a place to buy books.

“I was surprised to find that all of the bookstores on Beacon Hill had closed decades earlier,” Fetter says. “It seemed to be a glaring omission from the otherwise charming and complete offerings of Beacon Hill. I had an image in my mind of the perfect bookstore, and so I set out to bring it to life.”

Originally built as the home and workshop for preeminent 19th-century globe maker [Gilman Joslin](#) (a pair of his old globes are on display), the five-story bookstore feels a bit like stepping into the living room of a vibrant and well-read Bostonian. Fetter teamed on the interiors with [Dallas designer Cathy Kincaid](#), who had designed several of Fetter’s previous homes, including a 1930s house in Highland Park and a former ship captain’s house in Old Lyme, Connecticut. She’s currently redoing the Fetters’ Boston townhouse.



“For the bookstore, we were inspired by the rich history of the townhouses scattered throughout Beacon Hill,” Kincaid shares. “We wanted it to reflect the sense of tradition and history at play in Boston while giving it a fresh spin.”

Bookshelves are lacquered in [Farrow & Ball Light Blue](#) paint, and armchairs and banquettes are tucked into cozy reading nooks and upholstered in custom-colored fabrics by [Sister Parish](#), one of New England’s most classic design houses. The breezy, striped cotton rugs are by Connecticut-based [Elizabeth Eakins Studio](#).

Some 10,000 general interest books — including novels, nonfiction, and new releases — are spread among the four floors above the garden level, each geared for different readers.

Shelves with

books in gray bindings are from Persephone Books, which reprints books by mostly overlooked women writers from the mid-twentieth century. The children's floor is pure whimsy, with child-sized furniture and a red side door of Lilliputian scale that leads into a hallway.



The store's number-one bestseller, Paige of Beacon Hill by Sarah S. Brannen, is a children's book that Fetter commissioned about a squirrel named Paige that lives inside the bookstore. Artist Brian Lies was hired to handcraft a miniature room for Paige — it's tucked among the books on a shelf. Look closely, and you'll find a tiny replica of the still-missing Rembrandt stolen from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum (Fetter is on the museum's board) and wainscoting covered in red Sister Parish wallpaper.



The Thoughtful Design of Beacon Hill Books & Café

On another floor, the Aesthetics Room has a tented ceiling in Sister Parish’s Serendipity fabric and shelves painted in Farrow & Ball’s Rectory Red. “This is where I have fun curating our extensive collection of books on architecture, interior design, landscape design, fashion, and art,” Fetter says. Design is enthusiastically celebrated here — in June, the bookstore hosted a design week with architects, designers, and authors invited to speak. An intimate cafe, which opens onto a private garden, is run by local restaurateur and chef Colleen Suhanosky and serves breakfast, lunch, and afternoon tea. “Once a month we offer a family dinner inspired by a cookbook or region of the world,” Fetter says.

It’s not often that a bookstore can be described as a hot ticket, but Beacon Hill Books & Café is nothing short of a celebrity in the neighborhood. Within weeks of opening, entry lines started to form, many having watched for years as the building slowly transformed.

“We still have lines on a busy weekend,” Fetter says. “Soon after we opened, a video of the store posted on TikTok went viral, and suddenly we became a social media sensation.” The bookstore’s popularity continues to grow.

As of mid-July, they’ve sold more than 76,000 books, which Fetter attributes to a “diverse and original” selection of titles she and her team have pulled together. “We have tapped into a desire for a welcoming, charming space that presents books in an alluring way,” Fetter says, “and we’ve heard the store described as a place that feels like a big, warm hug.”