



Books Are Magic

Author and native New Yorker Emma Straub shares her favorite Brooklyn finds and how she selects books for her Cobble Hill bookstore.

BY TOMMIE ETHINGTON

When did you open *Books Are Magic* (<https://www.booksaremagic.net/>)? What neighborhood is it in?

Our soft opening was Independent Bookstore Day on April 29, 2017, but I think our official opening date was May 1. The shop is located in Cobble Hill, which has beautiful brownstone-lined streets and leafy trees. What I really like about our neighborhood is it has a low profile—most buildings are only a few stories high, so it feels like a small town.

What's the story behind the name?

We had lists of names that were all so boring, like “The Cobble Hill Bookshop.” That could have been anyone’s bookstore. Then, for a little while, we were thinking about having it just be a children’s bookstore, and I said, “We can call it ‘Books Are Magic.’” Even after we decided it would be for all ages, we still liked the name so much

and, conversely, were so attached to it that we got offended when anyone didn't like it. We were meeting with investors and this tech guy said, "The name is a deal breaker. No one serious will walk into a bookstore called Books Are Magic." And I thought, *You don't get it. Everybody deserves magic.* If you can't even be just a little whimsical, then I can't help you [laughs]. The name made us happy and it got across our message: Books are magic. You can't boil it down more than that. It's sort of my life philosophy.

Tell me about the space. What's the vibe?

It's on a corner and has exposed brick and beams and feels really lived in. We didn't want our shop to be a place where people come in, get a book, and get out. We wanted people to linger, and I think people linger more in warmer spaces and places that feel like a home. Our space definitely feels that way. I would guess our building was built in the '30s or before then. One of our booksellers found an old picture from the 1940s and you can see our shop was a grocery store. There was an ad for roast chicken and a big mural on the side, just like we have now. And that is what I love about New York City: It's a place that is used by different people for different purposes. As a native New Yorker, if I'm trying to give directions to an old friend or my parents, I'll say, "It's where the shoe store was," or "It's above that diner we used to go to," and I like thinking of our bookstore as a piece of that. It's a part of people's memories now in this little corner of Brooklyn.

How often are you at the shop?

When we opened, I was there every day for the first six months, and then I became very behind on writing. Now, I'm in about two days a week during regular hours and often there at night for events. Then, I'm there on Saturdays and Sundays with my kids, just hanging out.

Your kids must love the store. Do they have any input on the books you carry?

My little one is 2 years old, and he is a complete terror and just pulls books off the shelves. I'm hoping he grows out of that. The big one—he's 5—and he's a little more calm and taught himself to read when he was 4. We walk in, and I lose him immediately because he knows where the books are that he's interested in. He grabs a stack, finds a place, and settles in. I was talking to him the other day about how I think he should have a reading series where we just pick books and authors that he likes. So, yeah, when I'm ordering books, I certainly think about my children and their obsessions and interests.

How do you choose books for the rest of the store?

We're lucky because we're in New York City and within spitting distance of all the major publishers. We have sales reps come, and I meet with them once a season to go through all their catalogs for the books they have coming out in the next six months, and I'll say, "Oh I need six of those," or "Oh, I need 30 of those," or "I definitely don't need any of those." It's kind of like shopping sprees all of the time, which is fun. We also have extremely well-read customers, and if they want something we don't have, we'll special order it.

Is there a genre that's more popular than others?

We started out with a very big history section and a smaller memoir section. Now our memoir section is much bigger, and we have more feminist essayists than you can shake a stick at. Our poetry section is also big and vibrant. It's been fun to watch the bookstore evolve from this receptacle of my ideas to this living, breathing organism that is fueled by my taste, certainly, but by so many other people's as well. I don't want the shelf just to be a reflection of my taste—that would be weird. I want the bookstore to really speak back to the people who enjoy it.

Has being a writer helped you in owning a bookstore, and conversely, has owning a bookstore influenced your work as a writer?

I feel more and more aware of things that other writers are doing, which is totally inspiring. The bookstore has taken over a lot of my writing time, so it's definitely made my job as a writer harder logistically, but it's made my life as a reader and a person in the publishing industry so much richer that I can't complain. If I'm writing a little bit more slowly, it's all right because I know that there are a lot of good books coming out every day, every week.

You said you often attend events at the store. What kind of events does the store host?

We have events seven days a week. We've hosted some of my favorite writers of all time, absolute heroes of mine, like David Sedaris, Zadie Smith, Lorrie Moore, Meg Wolitzer. We host a lot of cookbook and food writers and we have children's events every weekend. But for readers who are not actually local to New York, we have a monthly subscription service with four categories: non-fiction, fiction, young adult, and picture books. We choose one book from each of those categories to send to subscribers every month. We try to include books that aren't already going to be huge best-sellers or authors who we think our customers might have missed. That's really the fun of being in a bookstore, rather than shopping for books online. You get to wander and touch things and talk to people about what you like and have them recommend something

that you never would have seen otherwise. Our subscriptions are our way of trying to recreate that for people who aren't our neighbors.

Do you ever lead writer's workshops?

We don't host workshops, but we do host things for emerging writers. We recently had an event with an organization called Girls Write Now. It's a mentorship program that pairs young writers in New York City high schools with professional women writers. I used to be one of the mentors and I just love the organization. I was so impressed by one of the women who read at the event that I immediately offered her a job and now she works for us. In my fantasy, someday we buy the entire building and we have more space to do things that are more directly related to writing, in addition to reading.

What are the children's events like?

They're usually a story time, or if we're hosting an illustrator, they'll come and read a book and draw pictures. I have been collecting pictures drawn by some of the most amazing people working today, like Sophie Blackall, Oliver Jeffers, Jessica Love—she's one of our locals. We feel so lucky to be surrounded by amazingly talented writers for people of all ages.

In addition to being an author and a bookstore owner, Emma is a connoisseur of Brooklyn. We asked her to share some of her favorite local finds.



Hoop Earrings from Bird



Tommie Ethington is an editor of this magazine. Email her at tommie.ethington@paceco.com (<mailto:tommie.ethington@paceco.com>).

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