

What people are saying about Treasure Trove

Free-lance Journalist Paris Gourtsoyannis visits the shop and writes:

If the current preoccupation in retail with provenance is anything to go by, then Treasure Trove, Brussels' newest independent English-language children's bookshop, has a glittering future; after all, how many booksellers can boast its own in-house author, and no less than two librarians, for good measure?

Opened under new ownership in December, Treasure Trove is now fully stocked, and reaching out to the Anglophone community in its local Tervuren area and across Brussels, whether native-speakers or the aspiring.

Brainchild of Dutch expat Friso Coppes, the Treasure Trove re-launch arrives as options for English book-lovers in Brussels have become increasingly limited; the closure of Strathmore's in Woluwe some years ago was followed in 2008 by the previous owners' decision to abandon the business after nearly three decades. With only one independent English-language book store left fighting to survive under Waterstone's shadow, Coppes – whose years of experience in retail was matched with a relative ignorance of the literary industry – knew a different strategy would be needed.

The secret weapon in that strategy was to recruit long-time friend Kimete Basha, whose years as librarian at the International School of Brussels have seen her guide the literary growth of generations of expat children. Herself originally from Albania, Basha has intimate knowledge of the particular needs of expats, and the comfort they can take from finding a setting like Treasure Trove: "When people arrive in a new place, they like to find something that is familiar; some connection with where they have come from. From this *something* familiar grows a feeling of being connected and from this, a sense of community."

Familiarity abounds for those browsing nostalgically for childhood favourites of yesteryear; Treasure Trove may be new, but not new enough to have left behind a certain *Very Hungry Caterpillar*, or Babar. There's also room for a 'classics' section where the building blocks of children's literature – original texts of *Peter Pan* and *The Secret Garden* – sit alongside works that provide a link with modern tastes, such as F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*.

Treasure Trove is undeniably a shop for today's youngsters, however – which is where Leila Rasheed comes in. One of the first members of the team that Coppes and Basha put together, the young Englishwoman with ties to Belgium and Bangladesh and Libya is the author of *Socks, Shocks and Secrets*, the second installment in the "diary-style" story of Bathsheba Clarice de Trop. Rasheed describes her books as being "like *Angus, Thongs and Perfect Snogging*, without the snogging," although she admits her work was best summarised by 10-year-old boy quoted in an publisher's magazine, who said: "I thought it was really good, for a book about a girl. I learnt all about girls from this book."

Rasheed's knowledge and experience at the crest of the wave of interest in children's literature since Harry Potter is encyclopedic, and she is on hand guide customers along the shelves stuffed with Jacqueline Wilson and Anthony Horowitz. "I think what Harry Potter did was show that what people really want is a good story," she tells me. "Whether it's children's fiction or Tolstoy, it's the books with really good stories that are the most successful and popular."

Success and popularity are not guaranteed for Treasure Trove in the current economic climate, but the team are working hard to earn it. The rich blue storefront set off by a humbug-striped awning draws passers-by into an environment that is bright and clean, but unashamedly child-friendly – right down to the sales counter, which Friso insisted featured a segment just a couple of feet off the ground, for smallest members of the shop's target market. The back of store has a reading area with couch of similar modest proportions, surrounded by lush displays of picture books and translated works from around Europe – "We don't just want to stock the biggest titles from the UK and US," explains Basha. The arrangement of the store bears the unmistakable touch of a librarian accustomed to drawing in and engaging young people.

Indeed, so successful is the store's projection of character that even adults are drawn in – local author and member of the Brussels Author's Circle, Tim Roux drops in for his first visit while I'm there. Despite appearances to the contrary, it isn't a put-up job: "I was just walking by, and noticed that all the books in the window were English!" Yet despite his lack of foreknowledge, Roux hangs about to swap stories about

the legal wranglings over the Saint-Exupéry estate and the dismal showing of his hometown football team, Hull FC; before leaving, he swaps details with Basha and Rasheed and makes plans for a future public reading.

“We want to try support local authors,” says Basha afterwards; it’s a policy which already seems to be paying off, with a display featuring the breakthrough success of Brussels-based Helen Grant’s novel *The Vanishing of Katharina Linden* drawing in curious shoppers. “I was at Waterstone’s on Oxford Street yesterday, and they’re sold out,” says one woman; she too, doesn’t leave empty handed, as Basha makes arrangements to lend some materials left by the author after a book-signing at Treasure Trove to the woman’s reading group.

Community links such as these will prove important, but the success of any English-language bookshop in Brussels, let alone one for children, hinges on its relationship with the numerous international, British and American schools in the city. The proximity of BSB is useful in this respect, but staff is also keen to tap into the growing desire amongst Belgian students to improve their English. The shop’s other librarian-in-residence, US-raised Dutchwoman Joanneke Elliott reckons Treasure Trove is doing well in this respect despite well-publicised tensions in majority-Flemish communes like Tervuren, where the incursion of English is frowned upon by officialdom. “We get local high school students coming in looking for books on their syllabus,” she says.

Coppes and Elliott say they’ve had nothing but support from local merchants and an enthusiastic reception from the local clientele. A Flemish-speaking grandmother hunting for a birthday gift is served by Coppes, and as Basha wraps the books and takes care to attach a party balloon to the package for the lucky recipient, it is clear that the gesture-language of childhood is internationally recognised.