



OXFORD'S SQUARE BOOKS JR.

*Essentially for children
(and some bigger kids, too)*

By Riley Manning
Photographs by Joe Worthem

It's Saturday morning in Oxford, Mississippi. Eight hours before the (then) undefeated Ole Miss Rebels kick off against the University of Tennessee, the Square is all kinds of alive. The epicenter of Oxford life teams with restaurants and boutiques. Early fans wander, yogurt or coffee in hand, in and out of shops whose proprietors have opened to greet the first truly cool day of the season.

But there's one pocket of the Square that sticks out. As the 10 o'clock hour draws near, parents funnel into Square Books Jr. for its weekly story time.

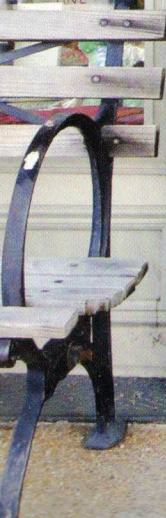
The inside of the store is a kid's dream. It is stuffed

floor to ceiling with books, stuffed animals, games, knickknacks and toys ranging from rubber lobster hands to Lego sets to marbles. One wall is made of an Essentials section – “Johnny Appleseed,” “Where the Wild Things Are,” “Corduroy” – and another of new releases like “Dragons Love Tacos.” Outside, Oxford party princess Kate Lechler has dressed up as Elsa from “Frozen” and snaps pictures with kids on a wooden bench. Square Books Jr.'s floor folks, Dillon Harris and Ginny Davis, zip here and there, attending to children and parents while the manager, Jill Moore, herds the crowd to the story area.

In 2003, the vision of Square Books Jr. sharpened into focus. The staff had kept their lips sealed about the store. Finally, the store made its move. On the eve of the release of the fifth Harry Potter book, Square Books instructed its customers to report to the Big Store at 6 a.m., promising donuts and orange juice to kids dressed in their Hogwarts finest and adults still in their pajamas. When they arrived, they were puzzled to find the store closed with only a map left behind that led them on a scavenger hunt around the square and to Square Books Jr.

SQUARE BOOKS

jr



The morning's readers are two Ole Miss alumns, Courtney Brown and Andrea Lea, reading their book, "Goodnight Ole Miss." Their Hotty Toddy rendition of "Goodnight Moon" is the pair's first effort. Lea said so far on their book tour they've visited Lemuria bookstore in Jackson and TurnRow Book Company in Greenwood as well as a few libraries and chain bookstores. But, they said, Square Books Jr. has been the highlight, and not just because they are Rebels themselves.

"Oxford is a place where people come with thoughts of writing," Brown said. "The University respects liberal arts, and the whole city feeds into that."

The actual reading is over in almost as little time as it takes for the 20 or so children to get settled. Moore has strapped on her acoustic guitar and launched into a round of "Old MacDonald," pausing to let the little ones fill in the "quack quacks" and "oink oinks."

Moore is the key to the store, Harris and Davis said, and many of the kids call her by name.

"People know her," Harris said. "If she sees a book she thinks a particular kid will like, she'll special order it for them. The kids and the parents trust her opinion."

Davis agreed. Both of them have elementary school teaching backgrounds and know as much as anyone the implications early reading can have on a child's future.

"It's really uncommon for a bookstore to have this kind of impact on a community," she said. "Kids grow up coming to this store. She knows what they've read, so she knows a perfect fit when she finds it."

Moore closes out story time with "The Little Old Lady Who Swal-

lowed a Fly," emerging flushed and slightly out of breath, but smiling. You can see her handiwork all over the shelves, especially in the young adult section.

"Fans of Percy Jackson will LOVE 'The Accidental Hero'," reads one note. "Revisit Kate DiCamillo," reads another.

"It's kind of like being a DJ," she said, music being another obsession of hers. "I really believe there is a book for everyone. The key is to listen to what they already love."

A native of Pearl, Moore graduated from The University of Mississippi with an English degree and spent a few years in North Carolina before moving back to Oxford. Upon her return, she applied to Square Books – referred to as "the Big Store" among employees – but a year passed before she heard back from them.

Meanwhile, Square Books Jr. was still only an idea, a concept of Square Books owners Richard Howorth and Lynn Roberts.

"A children's bookstore had been in their hearts since the very beginning," Moore said. "But you have to remember, children's bookstores are just now becoming kind of trendy. Back then, they were basically unheard of."

In 2003, the vision of Square Books Jr. sharpened into focus and finally into reality. Through months of stockpiling children's books, the staff had kept their lips sealed about the store. Rumors abounded about who had rented the space, a prominent piece of the Square puzzle. Finally, in mid-June, the store made its move. On the eve of the release of the fifth Harry Potter book, Square Books instructed its customers to report to the Big Store at 6 a.m., promising donuts and orange juice to

Left to right, Jill Moore is a fixture at Square Books Jr., leading story time, singing a round of "Old MacDonald" and appealing to the individual interests of young readers; Ganny's Corner is one scene among many in the cozy store, designed to accommodate excited and curious children; Oxford party princess Kate Lechler is dressed as Elsa from "Frozen" and snaps pictures with kids on a wooden bench.





Owners Richard Howorth and Lynn Roberts wanted the store to be a different environment. "We knew things would get knocked around, some things would come up missing, but the most important thing was to create a friendly, open place," says manager Jill Moore. And they did. Square Books Jr. is a place where everyone is moving.

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On that first day, only two booksellers, Katie and Yulanda Bishop, were there to work the floor. Moore came in a few weeks later and has been there ever since.

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What makes Square Books Jr. tick is the staff. Their involvement is crucial in wading through the mountains of new material to decide what will ultimately make it to the shelves. Publishing houses send Square Books Jr. advance copies, which the staff passes out amongst themselves. When they think they might have something, they test it out on their customers.

"What we end up stocking is a small, small percentage of what is published," she said. "Every member of our staff brings a different area of expertise to the table."


It's a fine mixture. Moore is challenged with balancing classics and new releases, entertaining current trends while anticipating what the next one will be. The Young Adult genre is a prime example. Since the success of Suzanne Collins' "The Hunger Games" series, dystopian fiction has erupted with similar novels like James Dashner's "Maze Runner" books. But in reaction to the sci-fi elements to such works, a counter-genre has emerged that tells stories that takes place in the real world. Novels like John Green's "The Fault In Our Stars" are gaining popularity.

"It all comes in cycles," Moore said. "And if you think about it, the classic canon of books kids are asked to read in high school are actually pretty interesting. Think about 'Lord of the Flies.'"

The store has authors visiting constantly, and Moore said she has plenty of stories about how a meeting between a reader and an author can be life-changing. She recalls a reader who met Jay Asher, author of "Thirteen Reasons Why," a book about a teen's suicide that gave that reader the hope she needed to make it through her own struggle.

Moore is no different. Her earliest memory of Square Books predates her time in Oxford by many years. It's almost prophetic to hear her tell it now.

"When I was 16, we took a field trip up to Oxford," she said. "I remember, I stood on the steps and said, 'If I could work for Square Books the rest of my life, that'd be alright.'"

So, go see her. She's got a book just for you. 

WANT TO GO?

Square Books Jr. at 160 Courthouse Square in Oxford is open Monday through Thursday from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m., Friday and Saturday from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. and Sunday from noon to 5 p.m. For specials, story time or other events, visit www.squarebooks.com/junior.