

# Nancy Traversy

Born 1960. Children's book publisher.

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# 1. The Story of Barefoot Books

*The following chapter was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Inc website at [www.inc.com](http://www.inc.com). The article, by Leigh Buchanan, was published in November 2006.*

Kids are really smart, says the owner of Barefoot Books. And big bookstore chains are stupid. After 13 years in independent publishing, Nancy Traversy definitely has some stories.



*Nancy Traversy in the Barefoot Books store in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She recently told the chain stores to take a hike.*

Barefoot Books is what entrepreneurial moms want their businesses to be when they grow up. The \$6.5 million company, founded by Nancy Traversy and Tessa Strickland in 1993, commissions and publishes children's books that are profound and imaginative enough to make librarians' hearts go pitter-pat, and visually stunning enough to win over design-centric retailers like museum shops. With seven children between them, the two women built the company from their respective homes in England, pulling off a work-life balancing act of Ringling Brothers proficiency. To date, Barefoot has released more than 400 books--almost all of them still in print--and ancillary products that include puppets, puzzles, and CDs. Traversy, who runs the business side of Barefoot while Strickland handles the editorial, operates out of a Crayola-colored office in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She says:

I was born in Canada to a family of artists. I studied business, which made me the black sheep. After college I worked for the banking division of Pricewaterhouse in London. One day I was wearing a suit. One of the

partners said to me, "Women don't wear trousers" and sent me home to change. It was a formative experience.

I spent the next few years as managing director for a small London design company called FM Design. Those were the heady days when British Telecom was spending a million pounds on its logo. We designed luggage for Samsonite and did electronics for Sanyo.

I had my first child in 1992 and decided I no longer wanted to work for other people. So when my baby was two weeks old I started a management consultancy for small creative businesses. I helped one entrepreneur launch a board game meant to help train executives. I helped an opera singer start her own recording studio.



*Nancy Traversy and Tessa Strickland.*

In 1992 I met Tessa Strickland. Tessa had worked at Penguin and run the mind-body-spirit list for Random House. She was very interested in Jungian analysis, fairy tales, and Eastern religion. She had an idea for a company that would bring multicultural stories with art-quality illustrations to children. The name Barefoot Books came to her in a dream.

At that time, the big thing in children's publishing was licensed characters. Maisy. Where's Waldo. There were also a lot of gimmicky pop-ups: pink fairy books where the child was supposed to tear out all the little parts and the whole thing was in pieces on the back seat before you got it home. The books that were educational had great content but looked boring.

"People undersell kids all the time. Children can appreciate a very high level of sophistication in art."





*From the Birds who Flew Beyond Time.*

We launched our first list in 1993. It was three books: *The Myth of Isis and Osiris*, *The Outlandish Adventures of Orpheus in the Underworld*, and *The Birds Who Flew Beyond Time*, which is a Sufi myth about a bird that saves the world from the seven human frailties. We were perhaps a little too esoteric for our own good. Realistically, you're not going to sell that many copies of *Orpheus*.

Typically, we bring groups of people together for a book. For the anthologies, Tessa and I decide on a theme and then find an author to compile it and retell it in the right voice. Then we find an artist who fits the subject matter. The art has to match the sophistication of the text. People undersell kids all the time by giving them cartoony rubbish. Children can appreciate a very high level of sophistication in art at a very young age.

For the first seven years we both worked from our homes. Tessa had three children and lived in an old farmhouse in the countryside outside Bath. My husband and I lived in London. I had my second child in '93, my third in '95, and my fourth in '97. I never stopped working full-time. I was also travelling to book fairs in places like Frankfurt and Bologna, and to New York twice a year because we were selling American rights to all the major U.S. houses. I was breastfeeding, so I normally had a baby with me. There's no maternity leave when it's your own business.

By 1996 we were doing about \$2 million in sales with practically no overhead--just one or two employees. We went on the Web--we were probably the first British publisher with a website.

In 1998 we decided that if we were really going to grow the business we had to be in America, so we opened an office in Manhattan. I was commuting from London every three weeks with four kids under the age of 6. I realized it was no good trying to run the company from England, so in

2000 we sold the house, closed down the London office, closed the New York office--which was too expensive--and relocated to Cambridge, Massachusetts. Tessa stayed in Bath.

Around that time my husband surprised us by arranging to bring the whole family to Kenya to celebrate my 40th birthday and our 10th wedding anniversary. We were on a British Airways (NYSE:BAW) flight and suddenly this six-foot-four Kenyan guy comes up from the back of the plane and breaks into the cockpit. The plane went into free fall: It fell between 12,000 and 15,000 feet. All four engines were stalled. An American basketball player climbed into the cockpit and pulled the guy out. Afterward the pilot came on and said four more seconds and it would have been irretrievable.

I got back from that trip and found two letters waiting for me. One was from British Airways saying, "It's not our fault." The other was from my U.K. warehouse. It said, "We've gone bankrupt and we've got all your books and all your money and you're not getting any of it back." I lost hundreds of thousands of pounds--all my Christmas sales from the U.K. I did get the books back.

At the same time my right-hand person in New York said she wasn't coming to Boston, so I had no one selling in the U.S. Then we sent out our first direct-mail campaign--100,000 catalogs--the week of the anthrax scare. No one opened anything. I remember sitting with my husband and saying, "What is this telling me? Am I supposed to stop?" Obviously I chose not to.

We opened a store near Harvard Square in November 2001. It's a place to get feedback and test products. We let customers read manuscripts before they're published; we ask people which jacket cover they like better, which illustrator.

Our books don't sell in the chains. If you go into a Barnes & Noble or a Borders, no one tells you what's a great book. You buy what your kid pulls off the shelf--usually whatever is face out or on the table. That means someone's paid a lot of money to get that real estate; it doesn't mean it's the best book. The whole chain model is a nightmare: 60 percent or 70 percent returns and you don't get paid. So at the beginning of the year I said to the Barnes & Noble and the Borders buyers, "I really can't sell to you anymore." They said, "Fine, we'll put our money behind other publishers." And they cleared their shelves. One buyer took it particularly badly. She told me she'd read every single Barefoot cover to cover. I said, "That's wonderful, but it's not the point."

We've had to sell through an awful lot of channels just to keep going. The business through our catalog and over the Web is about 18 percent of sales.



*The Barefoot Books store in Harvard Square, Cambridge USA.*

We sell to schools and libraries, also to independent bookstores, children's boutiques, gift stores, museum shops. Our export market is really taking off. China has a burgeoning middle class that wants its kids to speak English. Foreign language rights are 10 or 12 percent of our business.

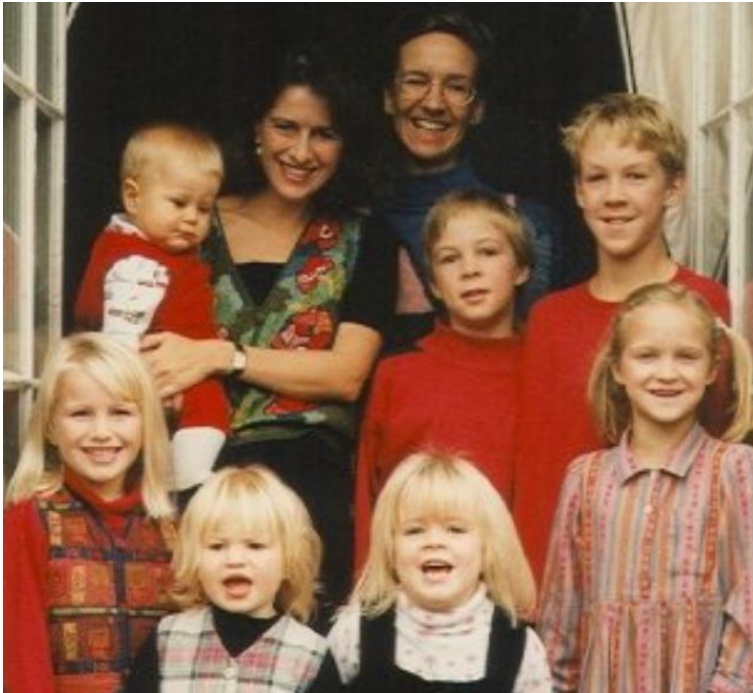
One of our best moves was to launch home-selling in 2003. It's like Tupperware (NYSE:TUP). We have about 650 people--women mainly, some men--in what we call the Stallholder program, named for those Parisian bookstalls you see along the River Seine. They have Barefoot parties in their homes or sell the books at schools or offices as fundraisers. Last year it grew 90 percent in the U.S.

My kids grew up with Barefoot. They've always read manuscripts and looked at samples from different illustrators. They help out with data entry, stuffing catalogs, work in the store. They came up with the idea for Animal Boogie, which is our best-selling book. I know it's hard when mummy has her own business. But now they feel anchored by it. They understand hard work.

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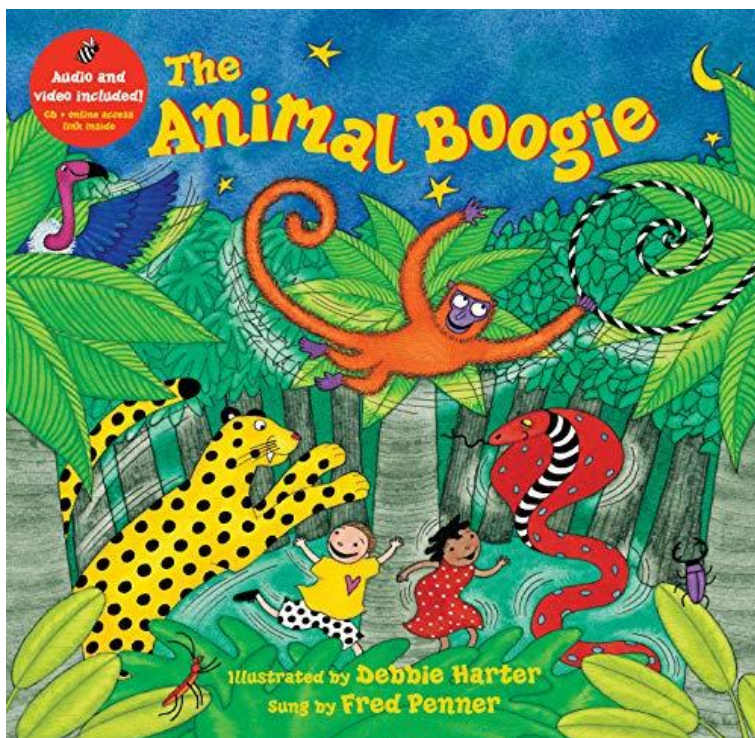


## 2. Animal Boogie



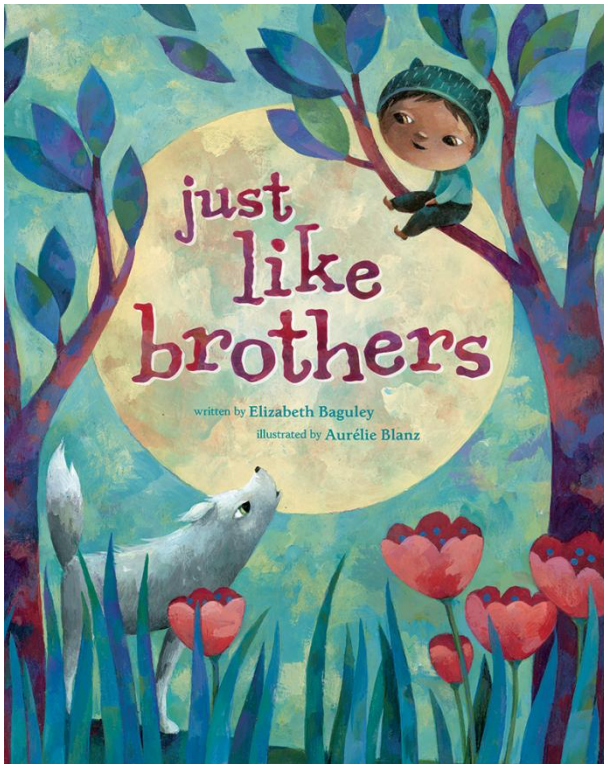
*The idea for Animal Boogie came from the founders' children. It is Barefoot's best selling book. It is described below.*

Can you boogie? Down in the Indian jungle, the children and animals are learning about actions like leaping, stomping, shaking and flapping while meeting different jungle creatures. The accompanying enhanced animated singalong CD continues the interactive fun!

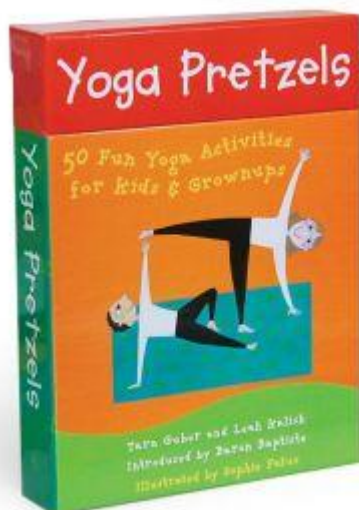


### 3. More Books

*Just a few more examples of Barefoot Books.*



**Just Like Brothers.** A heartwarming fable for our time! A human mother tells her small son to watch out for wolves, and a wolf mother tells her cub to fear men — but their children don't listen. What will happen when the boy and the cub cross paths in the forest? This simple but profound story makes it easy to start conversations about prejudice, empathy and trust.



**Yoga Pretzels.** Calm the mind and body, improve patience and boost confidence with yoga! These cards include forward bends, back bends, partner poses and balance poses.





**Family Reunion.** In this contemporary tale, a boy is reluctant to go to his family reunion, which he's sure will be boring. Vivid, poetic language and rich illustrations bring readers along for the boy's emotional journey, as he ultimately finds himself enjoying the large and joyous gathering in spite of himself. This modern kid's-eye view depiction of a Black American extended family celebrates the importance of kinship and intergenerational ties.



**The Last Hazelnut.** When two woodland friends have a misunderstanding over who ate the last hazelnut, they eventually find that holding a grudge is a lot less rewarding than mending their relationship. Chic illustrations and punchy text make for a relatable and humorous conflict resolution story.



**Barefoot Book Boxes.** The Barefoot Book Box is a one-of-a-kind subscription designed to help you raise caring, problem-solving, global citizens! Your 3-5 year-old will delight in a monthly delivery of beautifully crafted, themed books and gifts.

Each box also includes a collectible artist's print featuring illustrators from around the world, as well as expert tips for fostering literacy and overall wellness.

September: The More We Get Together

October: Eco-Kids

November: For the Love of Food

Open your child's heart, mind and world -- and ensure that their home library grows with them!

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## 4. Social Impact

*The following chapter describing the social impact activities of Barefoot Books was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Barefoot Books website at [www.barefootbooks.com](http://www.barefootbooks.com).*

### **Giving Back in Our Communities**

At Barefoot, we are committed to living out the kindness and compassion we celebrate in our books. All across the world, our community of parents, educators, librarians, booksellers, storytellers and artists are making a difference in their own communities, in their own ways.



### **Raising A Reader**

Home literacy routines promote healthy brain development, family bonding and increased literacy skills — all proven elements for lifetime success! That's why we have partnered with Raising A Reader, a national leader in early literacy and family engagement, to donate one book for every order



placed on our website, now through September 3, 2020 . Help us put **25,000 books** into children's hands!

### **Books For Africa**

Supporting literacy programs has always been a very important part of our mission at Barefoot Books. In 2019, it was our privilege and an honor to partner with Books For Africa and COVida to distribute **300,000 books** into the hands of orphans and vulnerable children affected by AIDS in Mozambique. Read more about the partnership [here](#).



*Photo credit FHI360 COVida*



## **BookTrust**

In January 2020, we partnered with BookTrust to bring **600,000 copies of *Baby Play*** to every baby in England and Wales via the program's annual Bookstart Baby packs. Bookstart is the world's first national bookgifting program and has been supporting a love of reading and the development of a reading habit from an early age for over 25 years.

## **Building Impact Volunteer Initiatives**

Barefoot Books partners with Building Impact to bring in-office and virtual volunteer opportunities to our team members. Volunteer sessions are always different and they help support the local community. A few we've recently been able to help out in:

- Making Bare Necessities Bundles for students experiencing economic hardship during COVID-19 with the help of Catie's Closet.
- Assembling Valentine's Day Card Making Kits for children and adolescents cared for by Franciscan Children's mental health programs.



- Creating kits to help families prepare their children to enter kindergarten ready to succeed with the help of Countdown to Kindergarten.



### **Read to a Child**

Several of Barefoot Books Home Office team members volunteer their time to Read to a Child. The program pairs adult mentors with elementary school students for one-on-one read-aloud sessions during the students' lunchtime one day a week throughout the school year. This simple act of being read to by a mentor helps the students improve their literacy skills, build their self-confidence and foster enthusiasm towards reading. It's so rewarding to see firsthand the positive impact that children's books have!



## Donations

We donate to the First Book National Book Bank in support of literacy organizations throughout the US.

## Our Commitment to Sustainability

From sustainably sourced paper to carbon offsetting, the materials that make up our books are ones that you can feel good about having in your classroom or home, and our manufacturing partnerships and methods contribute to a fairer and more sustainable future.

## Paper

We want to protect the world's remaining ancient forests and ensure that the forestry and paper manufacture undertaken on behalf of Barefoot Books is ethical and legal. The welfare of the people involved in and affected by the supply of paper to Barefoot Books is also of paramount importance to us.

Our printers only use paper that contains pulp from legal and sustainable sources in the manufacture of our books.





## Manufacturing and Social Standards

Barefoot Books supports internationally recognized environmental management and social accountability standards such as ISO 14001, SMETA and the ICTI Ethical Toy Program in the manufacture of our books. These promote manufacturing efficiency, good working conditions, worker health and safety, fair remuneration and the prohibition of child and forced labor.

## **Recycling and Reduced Use of Plastic**

Our printers are working towards removing plastic from their supply chains. The packaging they use is made from recycled material and can be recycled again after use. We buy recycled material where possible and recycle as much as we can in our own offices. We do our best to avoid plastic in our warehousing and marketing operations.

## **Carbon Offsetting**

In 2021 we started a process to measure and offset the carbon emissions generated in the process of making our books. From the manufacture and delivery of raw materials, through printing and then transport by sea, rail and road to our warehouses, we collect data from our suppliers and then calculate the amount of carbon that has been generated by this activity.

We've also started to measure the carbon emissions generated by our office space and home workers, general operations and business travel.

We're building partnerships with carbon offsetting projects with a goal of planting enough trees each year to absorb our annual carbon load. We're learning and improving as we go and this will be an ongoing process for us – measuring, reducing where possible, and offsetting the rest.

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## 5. Beiung Hijacked



*The following chapter was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Guardian website at [www.guardian.com](http://www.guardian.com). The article was published in October 2013.*

It was my 40th birthday, and as a surprise present my husband had arranged a holiday to Kenya. We were six hours into the flight and drowsing, my four children draped around me, when there was a loud grinding sound and the plane shuddered violently.

We all sprang awake, sat bolt upright and looked around us. This wasn't turbulence; it was like nothing I'd experienced before. I fastened everyone's seatbelts. Then it happened twice more. We started to climb steeply, then went into freefall.

My daughter Kristen had a window seat and could see the plane turning upside down. The ground was visible above us.

The oxygen masks dropped down and my heart went into my stomach. We were dropping out of the sky. All around us people were screaming, crying and praying; everything in the cabin was flying around.

So many thoughts were crowding in my mind. I said to my husband, "I think we're going to crash!"

I turned to my young son, sitting across the aisle. My instinct was to hold him, but was he safer strapped in his seat? "Life doesn't always begin at 40" popped into my head. Level-headed Kristen announced it was time to put on our life jackets. I was whispering goodbye to my husband, feeling weirdly calm though I was sure we were going to die, when suddenly the plane levelled off. Seconds later, the breathless voice of the captain came

over the speaker: "A madman has tried to kill us all, but we're going to be OK."

Relief flooded through me and then the captain's voice came back on, much more composed this time: "A deranged man broke into the cockpit and tried to kill himself and all 400 people on board. He's now in a passenger restraint kit in the galley and we'll be landing 10 minutes behind schedule." It was wonderfully British; I half expected him to wish us a pleasant flight.

The atmosphere was buzzing: everyone was talking and hugging. A steward announced that breakfast was cancelled because it was all over the cabin. My main concern was just getting off that plane.

When we landed at Nairobi airport and started to disembark, a crowd of people came rushing up, but to my surprise it felt as if they were concerned only about the crew, who were swiftly wrapped in blankets. The passengers were totally ignored, so we stumbled to baggage reclaim, bewildered and shell-shocked.

It was 24 hours before my husband and I felt ready to talk about what had happened. It was hard to comprehend that we had nearly died.

We later learned that a 6ft 5in man had gone into the cockpit and attacked the pilot, trying to wrestle the controls off him. During the fight, the autopilot was disengaged and the plane started to climb so steeply that the engines stalled. This caused the noises we heard. It then tipped upside down and plummeted 12,000ft. If the plane had fallen for four seconds longer, the pilot would not have been able to save us.

Luckily, a basketball player in business class managed to crawl to the cockpit and restrain the attacker, which allowed the pilot to restart the engines and level the plane, despite having had half his ear bitten off.

No charges were laid against the attacker, who was found to have mental health problems.

Our holiday in Kenya was subdued. I looked into every conceivable way of getting home without flying, but it wasn't possible. Fortunately, the journey back was uneventful.

At home, there was a letter from the airline waiting for us, saying that it was in no way liable for what had happened but we could have a free flight anywhere. It was small comfort.

The whole experience left me reeling. I learned that our pilot never flew again, which didn't surprise me. I found myself questioning my decisions in life. I was about to move to the US to expand my publishing business, but was this a sign that I shouldn't?

In the end, we did make the move to New York – just weeks before 9/11. I watched the footage of the planes involved in the attacks time and again, feeling so lucky to be alive, unlike those poor souls. In a way it brought closure. I was able to draw a line under our ordeal and get on with life.

I still fly regularly for work, but wouldn't describe myself as relaxed. That one flight will remain etched in my memory for ever.



*The British Airways Boeing 747 involved in the December 2000 incident.*

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