

## Indie View: Max Minerva's

Sam Taylor

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*Max Minerva's co-founder Sam Taylor: 'We're a haven for the eccentric, a wonderland for the curious and a safe space for all'*



A sign in an empty shop window, a hastily scribbled note and an equally hasty confession are the origin of Max Minerva's, our bookshop in Westbury Park, a neighbourhood in north Bristol.

We moved to the area in 2016 and soon discovered Durdham Downs Books, an institution which had been open for 40 years. It was the typical old bookshop, a small space stacked to the rafters with as many books as you could possibly fit while allowing for customers to breathe, if not move past each other. However, soon after we found it, the owners both passed away and the shop closed.

In January 2018, I was walking past it on the way home from work when I saw a sign in the window - "Shop for let, rent proportional to brilliance of idea." I scabbled around in my bag for a scrap of paper and a pen, scrawled a note saying, "We'd like to reopen the bookshop", and headed home to confess to Jessica (my wife) what I'd done. (I should point out that Jessica had often talked of her teenage dream to open a bookshop - inspired, like many, by the Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan movie *You've Got Mail* - so the idea wasn't completely out of nowhere.)

A month or so later I got a phone call from the landlords. They'd had lots of notes through the door, the majority saying, "I don't want to do it, but can you please reopen the bookshop?" So we did, in September 2018, seven months after the birth of our second daughter.



The new bright yellow frontage caught people's attention, and before we even opened our doors we'd had letters through the postbox thanking us for bringing their beloved bookshop back to life. That support has continued throughout our first three years, and has grown during the trials and tribulations of the pandemic. Our community is a mix of retirees and families, which I think means they are particularly appreciative of having a bookshop they can walk to.

We're split roughly 60/40 between adult and children's titles, with anything reviewed on Radio 4 or in the broadsheets being our biggest sellers. Our biggest challenge is that many of our customers know more than us. From ex-English professors to 8-year-old literary critics, to devourers of translated texts; their breadth and depth of reading are extraordinary. The upside of this is they're always keen to be challenged and open to new writers - we just need to stay on top of what is coming out, as they'll have read every review of a book before it gets to our shelves.

This year, the books flying off those shelves have been *Hamnet* by Maggie O'Farrell, *Where the crawdads sing* by Delia Owens, *Klara and the Sun* by Kazuo Ishiguro, and the entire *Murder most unladylike series* from Robin Stevens. But at least those are easy to get hold of. We have a few customers who delight in challenging us. One comes in weekly with increasingly obscure requests for books on the War of the Roses, Cromwell or a particular week in Henry V's reign. Another seems to be building the most extensive collection of US cookery books outside the Smithsonian. And our favourite, a lady who walks in, slaps a list on the counter and walks off, who seems to be building a library of obscure English writers from 1970-1990 and the latest crime fiction.

But that's the beauty of a bookshop. We're a haven for the eccentric, a wonderland for the curious and a safe space for all. In what other job would you find yourself discussing Japanese local slang, the wonder of fungi, methods for murder, and what time the vacuum shop opens, all within one hour?

*Max Minerva's is based at 39 North View, Westbury Park, Bristol BS6 7PY, and its website can be found [here](#).*

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