

Rediscover Reading with Bel Canto Books

By Meghan O'Dell

Avid reader and poet Jhoanna Belfer started Bel Canto Books as a traveling pop-up book club in January 2018 while working full-time as a hotel sales executive. She hosted book club events at wine bars like District Wine in downtown Long Beach, and set up shop at street festivals and in front of local businesses. As she started to look for a new and more meaningful challenge and found there was interest in having an independent bookstore in the area, she moved into a brick-and-mortar space at The Hangout on 4th Street a few months before the pandemic hit. Luckily, Bel Canto thrived and is now operating in three locations, the newest of which is opening this month in Bixby Knolls.

"The pandemic forced everyone to re-evaluate what's most important to them, and a lot of people came back to their childhood love of reading, realizing that it's important for mental health and provides an escape; time where you can reflect on things you might not otherwise be able to," Belfer says. "We actually benefited from the shift to taking better care of ourselves and focusing more on the things that make us happier."

While Bel Canto is stocked with a range of fiction, nonfiction, and children's and YA books, Belfer stresses the importance of highlighting authors from historically marginalized backgrounds. As a Filipina-American woman, she grew up without seeing herself represented in books, movies, and television shows. "It's exciting and worthwhile to be able to do that for readers, who can walk into a bookstore and see people who look like them on the cover and read about their experiences," she says, adding that she likes to highlight women and BIPOC authors who aren't getting national attention but have just as much to contribute.

Belfer grew up in Santa Ana but went to graduate school in Long Beach and has been a resident here since 2012, moving to Bluff Heights about eight years ago. "I love Long Beach and feel so lucky to be in Bluff Heights," she says. "So much is within walking distance—the beach, restaurants, entertainment—it's a great neighborhood that feels diverse and inclusive." She adds that Bel Canto is named after a novel by one of her favorite authors, Ann Patchett, and that she was inspired to start her business after hearing Patchett speak at a conference about the positive change that bookstores bring to neighborhoods. "I wanted to reconnect with neighbors and create a safe space for people to have conversations," she explains. "Helping people who love books discover new authors has been a wonderful thing in my life."

Aside from the original location at The Hangout, you can find Bel Canto's monthly book club picks and featured books of the month inside Steel Cup Cafe near the Traffic Circle. And they're opening a second permanent location on February 1 at KUBO LB, a new collaborative, creative co-working space for Filipinx, BIPOC, and LGBTQ+ small businesses.

Their robust events schedule kicked off on January 31 with a book launch for *Reggie and Deliah's Year of Falling* by Long Beach author Elise Bryant, and there are events lined up every week in February at both The Hangout and KUBO, including a meet-and-greet with



Above: Bel Canto owner Jhoanna Belfer at the original Hangout location.

Right: Last July, Bel Canto hosted an event at The Hangout called "CelebrAsian: Laughs & Sass with 4 API Women Writers," featuring Southern California authors Suzanne Park (*So We Meet Again*), Susan Lee (*Seoulmates*), Jennifer J. Chow (*Death by Bubble Tea*), and Jayci Lee (*Booked on a Feeling*).



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Visit Bel Canto at any of their three locations or online at www.belcantobooks.net, where you can find more information about their events and sign up for their free monthly online book clubs. You can also order their books through Bookshop.org, a great alternative to Amazon where all purchases support local bookstores, and find their audio books through Libro.fm.

Meghan O'Dell is Managing Editor of *Westways* and *AAA Explorer*, and has been a Long Beach resident for 18 years. She loves reading, seeing live music, and watching too many shows, and she lives with her husband and their Calico cat in the Bluff Heights neighborhood.