



There's a New Cat in Town

By Chris Lavin



Ginger, adopted by Orinda Books

Photo Tod Fierner

For 16 years, Orinda Books – one of the few independent book sellers still operating today – had a store cat. “Fish” was a fixture who lived at the store full-time, purring to old customers and winning over new ones with her mild-mannered felineness. She died of old age last year.

For months, customers asked, “When are you going to get a new cat?” said Kathy Coad (pronounced Co-add), who besides selling books is the official cat administrator at Orinda Books. But plans were not firm. How, after all, could they ever replace Fish?

Then, one night last fall, as

the bookstore’s CD buyer Dennis Forfa made his way through the BART parking lot in Orinda, he heard a tiny mew. Then another mew. Focusing in on the trouble, Forfa scaled a fence to find a tiny, wailing, scrawny kitten with a collar. She was part tortoise-shell, part calico ... and well, part other stuff. No one knows for sure. He cupped her up, tucked her in and took her to the store.

“That’s when the search for her home started,” said Coad. The staff put signs at the BART station and in nearby neighborhoods. They put an ad in local newspapers trying to find the kitten’s owners. They called all

the veterinarians in the area. They had her scanned for a microchip that might have identified her, but no microchip. They sent an e-mail to all of their customers, asking for help to find the kitten’s owners.

Nothing happened.

“We tried for more than a month,” Coad said. “We really tried everything.”

In the meantime, the wayward kitten harbored her own plan, and began winning over customers, old and new. The staff exhausted all their known options. So they did the only thing left to do: They adopted her.

The first mission was to find her a title. She became the meeter-greeter, public relations czar, and all-around roaming ambassador from the children’s books to the new fiction and elsewhere. The next mission was to find her a name, so another e-mail went out: What did customers think Orinda Books should name the new cat?

“We got more than 300 e-mails back, and at least 150 different names,” Coad said. “Because the old cat was Fish, some people thought she should be Fish II, or some variation of that. But nothing really resonated.” Lots of customers voted for Ginger, Coad said, and lots

voted for Virginia, after the writer Virginia Wolfe. Ginger – or Ginga’ for Wolfe fans – stuck.

Now, Ginger never leaves the store. Her litter box is upstairs, and on the rare day that the store is closed, a staff member comes in to feed her. Ginger’s current favorite activity seems to be spending much of her day on a rolling office chair with her good friend Gunnar, bookseller Sandy Barnett’s terrier, attached to it with his leash. If he feels like going somewhere he pulls her along. If she doesn’t feel like going anywhere, she bats him with her paw from above to tell him to knock it off.

“They’re great together,” said Coad. “And the customers love her.”

Staff members taped signs to the store’s door, both inside and out, warning customers not to let the cat out. So far, Ginger has remained put, without a single escape or whim for the great wild world of the Bank of America parking lot. After all, she has seen the BART parking lot, and she’s not stupid. She now has all her shots and was recently spayed.

“We like to say that she’s the only employee who has health insurance,” Coad said, with a smile, and a hug to the policy recipient.