curl up with a good book



Pull out your best blanky and we'll tell you where to find your next favorite read

By Kate Chadwick & Jesse Piersol

A quick survey of downtown West Chester these days reveals that the print medium is anything but dead—never mind this very magazine you're most likely holding in your actual hands. Three book purveyors dot Gay Street alone, with Baldwin's Book Barn occupying its centuries-old barn home on Lenape Road a mere five-minute drive away from downtown. And no chains here; they are all independent.

Bookmarks co-owner Lisa Strohl asserts that printed books and newspapers are, indeed, alive and well, citing the demand of her customers as testament. "I think, generally speaking, people just get tired of staring at a screen (or screens) all day and they want that hard copy book instead," she notes. "I think print books and e-books can coexist. E-books are great for travel, when you can't carry a lot with you. But print books are perfect for relaxing—the end-of-day slow-down or a quiet morning with a cup of coffee."

"The people who think that 'print is dead' clearly are not people who are into books," agrees West Chester Books owner Kevin Tupitza. "There is a whole experience you get from reading a physical book that you miss out on if you were to read from an e-book. The feel of the paper, the illustrations: these and other aspects you just don't get when reading from an e-book. Where some things like the news may be better accessed in a digital format, I will always enjoy reading from a physical book. I enjoy reading an expensive book or an antique book, and that is something the e-book marketplace simply can't provide."

Bookstore Bakery owner Jonathan Nunez points to his loyal following of readers as evidence of the enduring popularity of books. "We have a handful of regulars that purchase on average two-plus books a week," he says. "I'm not sure how they do it, but they are my vanguard. They help me stay on top of what's good and what's not."

Lisa Strohl sees plenty of opportunities for growth for books in the borough. "We believe there is enough space for everyone, and we want everyone to succeed," she says. "We believe each business—whether it's one of the many coffee shops or one of several bookstores—has something to offer the community."



BALDWIN'S BOOK BARN

865 LENAPE ROAD | BOOKBARN.COM

All the booksellers in this article are relative newcomers to West Chester save for one: the granddaddy that is Baldwin's Book Barn has been in business since 1946, housed in a rustic stone bank barn built in 1822. If the average bookstore visit is a way to kill an hour or two, a visit to Baldwin's is more like a day trip. Bucolic Chester County setting, historic building, creaky stairs, randomly placed chairs, and—this time of year at least—the smell of the wood burning stove in the front room wafting through the air. It's a living Currier and Ives tableau of a Pennsylvania barn in its second chapter.

Baldwin's Book Barn feels ripped from the pages of its own fairy tale, as though you've been whisked away to a magical land of books that's been lost to time

Carol Rauch is the longtime manager at Baldwin's, along with two other "old



timers": Fred Dannaway, who has been there since September of 2011, and Joe Scott, on staff since 2001. Rounding out the team is newcomer Lucas Ballenger, a freshman at Penn State who started at Baldwin's right out of Unionville High School. "Since we are all octogenarians—and I'm 91," says Carol, "we needed young muscle in carrying the books up three flights, and Lucas is our man."

Weekends generally see 100 plus patrons stopping by daily, and with weekday traffic just a bit lighter, at 30 to 50 bibliophiles, estimates Carol. Oh, and Instagrammers. This place is an IG dream.

WHAT SETS BALDWIN'S BOOK BARN APART?

"It is a step back in time, in that your senses are activated when you walk in with the old woodwork, the smell of the fireplace in winter, and the antiquity of the 200-year-old barn," says Carol. "It is a unique structure and business with 25,000 square feet and over 300,000 books to explore on several floors." And explore, you will. What other bookstore provides you with a map of the place when you walk in the door? This is a place to lose yourself in, and if that's what you want to do, feel free to leave the map behind.

Baldwin's Book Barn founder, William Baldwin, died in 1989 and his son, Thomas, took over until he died in June 2019. His wife, Kathleeen Baldwin, who lives in Florida, is the current Baldwin owner. Baldwin's is open every day except Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Day.

BOOKSTORE BAKERY

145 W. GAY STREET | @BOOKSTOREBAKEY

Although its snug but inviting space precludes Bookstore Bakery owners Jonathan and Jessica from having seating in their shop—either for eating/drinking or reading—their customer base of mostly zoomers and boomers tends to linger

Bookstore Bakery offers up best seller's alongside banana pudding, on the off chance that treating yourself with a new book didn't quite feel rewarding enough

anyway. It could be the excellent selection of books; it could be Jessica's baked goods; it could be the coffee. It's most likely all of the above. We popped in on a recent Saturday afternoon to find a cluster of a half-dozen customers gathered in front of the black bookcases along the soft sage-colored walls. Jonathan was in the center of the group, engaged in animated conversation with them.

"I don't want to give away any trade secrets," he teases, "but not having seating has created a space for people to actually interact with each other instead of isolating themselves in the corner of a café. Many great conversations have been had with and among complete strangers."

Another pair arrived in the form of mother and child, and another lively conversation about the boy's favorite

book ensued at the register while he rang up their purchase. The exchange ended with a fist bump between Jonathan and the boy, and the young man's assertion that he "can't wait to come back." It was objectively adorable, and a great illustration of exactly the type of enthusiasm Jonathan displays for both sides of his two-pronged business.

WHAT SETS BOOKSTORE BAKERY APART?

Bookstore Bakery is the only purveyor in town serving up food along with books, including customer favorites like egg tarts, vegan muffins, and brown butter chocolate chip cookies. "However, we are constantly rotating our selection," says Jonathan. "Jessica, our chef, will never stop experimenting." Jonathan was serving double duty that day, zipping back behind the counter from the bookcases to grab us a couple of their addictive vanilla bean lemonades and an egg tart. And possibly a crème brûlée. And also, maybe a chocolate madeleine.

Since opening last winter, business has been steadily expanding. "Maybe by this time next year, you'll be visiting us at a newer, larger location," Jonathan told us when we remarked on the bustling environment. "Our book collection has grown; our food selection has grown—and my waistline has grown."



BOOKMARKS

100 E. GAY STREET

BOOKSHOP.ORG/SHOP/BOOKMARKSWC

On a road trip in July of 2023 to visit their daughter Kaleigh at the University of South Carolina, Lisa Strohl and her husband Ty hatched the idea of opening a bookstore. "A bookstore was something I could get behind. I can't say it's always been a goal of ours," says Lisa. "But it was the right idea that came at the right time in our lives."

"Once the concept took hold, the ideas just started rolling and, before we knew it, we were well on our way," she recalls. They spoke with several other booksellers along the east coast to get advice and try to learn as much as they could about the business and the industry, joining the national American Booksellers Association and the regional New Atlantic Independent Bookseller Association along the way. Lisa also took a course through the Professional Bookseller School to become certified in Basic Bookselling.

The pair met at Penn State University when they both worked at the student newspaper, The Daily Collegian. Lisa majored in journalism and minored in political science, and then spent most of the next 30 years working at or with newspapers in Pennsylvania, primarily in graphic design, marketing, and event planning.

WHAT SETS BOOKMARKS APART?

Bookmarks features a diverse collection of newly released books and a wide variety of other retail items that may be different from what other retail shops in West Chester are offering. The Bookmarks building is on the National Historic Registry. "Since our building is historic, we have tried to arrange our store in that feel," she says. "We want to be a community space where people feel welcome and cozy; where it feels more like browsing through a home library rather than a bookstore."

Bookmarks' building is on the National Historic Registry, and the owners Lisa & Ty Sthrohl have tried to make that felt in their design for the space

The home library vibe features mantels and wingback chairs, antique doors and deep window sills, the quirky layout that only old buildings possess. In addi-

tion to their children's books, fiction, and non-fiction collections, one of their rooms is dedicated to gifts and novelties such as stuffed animals, stickers, gift bags, bookmarks, greeting cards, mugs, journals, and candles. "If someone needs a birthday, hostess, or holiday gift, we want to have options available," Lisa says. For sticker fans, there is a table filled with a fun selection, perfect for adorning laptops and water bottles.

Additionally, Bookmarks hosts a collection of books by local authors and about the Philadelphia region. "We can't keep these in stock," Ty said about their Good Night, Phillies and Good Night, Eagles children's board books. There is also space in their non-fiction room for small, local organizations, such as book clubs, to meet. "We believe bookstores play an important role in the community, not just as a local small business," says Lisa. "But in providing a carefully curated collection of books that the community finds engaging."







WEST CHESTER BOOKS

212 W. GAY STREET | WESTCHESTERBOOKS.COM

West Chester Books owner Kevin Tupitza started in the book business back in 2008 when he got a job working at Baldwin's Book Barn. "At the time, owner Tom Baldwin was having difficulties selling books online and I helped him with that problem," Kevin recalls. He found the job to be fun and intellectually stimulating. In a short amount of time, he found himself helping Baldwin with some of the more complex parts of the business and spending many hours listening to his stories. The experience inspired him to incorporate West Chester Books in 2016.

Kevin has always had a passion for books, growing up watching shows like The Reading Rainbow. But he didn't get into the more complex world of collectible works until after he worked with Tom Baldwin. "He taught me a lot about the business," he says, "and I also read many books about book collecting."

Kevin Tupiza's collection of rare and antiquarian books at West Chester Books is full of items you may literally find nowhere else in the world

Kevin enjoys reading about all types of subjects. "From rare poetry volumes to some of classic novels," he says. "One of my favorite books is Forest Gump by Winston Groom. I read the entire novel cover to cover in one night."

He finds being a rare book dealer to be a unique and enjoyable lifestyle. "I get to have amazing items, even if it is just for a short time." Born in West Chester and living in Pennsylvania his entire life, Kevin also enjoys painting. "Although I must admit I am not very good at it," he laughs. "But some of my friends have complimented my work."

WHAT SETS WEST CHESTER BOOKS APART?

West Chester Books is an independent online-only bookstore, dealing specifically in antiquarian and collectible books. "We purchase individual volumes, or entire libraries," says Kevin. "Most of the books we sell are at a higher price point than what you would expect from most bookstores."

He comes across his fair share of truly rare items. "I have and have had unique one-of-a-kind pieces, from original 15th-century manuscripts to volumes of unpublished handwritten poetry," he says. Kevin has also had a number of books that were once owned by famous or historically important people, including Mark Twain, Harry Houdini, and Ernest Hemingway. "I have the bookplate of Charles Dickens, which is on a front free endpaper that was removed from a book from Charles Dickens' personal library. It is now in a small frame."



SECOND READING BOOKS

32 N. CHURCH STREET | WCSENIORS.ORG

There is nothing like the smell of a new book. And there's nothing like the smell of old books, either. Step into the aptly named Second Reading second-hand bookstore (or its second location, Second Reading II, on High Street at the Parkway Center) and the smell of books engulfs you. All kinds of second-hand treasures await, from fiction to cookbooks to classics and collectibles—even vintage tomes. There are also throwbacks in the form of CDs, VHS, and cassettes for sale here—and they're cheap. Most items are in the $4 range. Yes, you read that right.

If you go to Second Reading with an open mind, an interest in browsing and a desire to better your community, you can't leave disappointed

Eileen Donohoe has volunteered at Second Reading Bookstore for seven years and was holding court the last time we stopped by. The place was filled with sunshine via the broad front windows, Rod Stewart's crooning version of the Billie Holiday jazz standard "Crazy He Calls Me" floated from the sound system, and several customers clutching books milled around the place, browsing the shelves. There are library-style wheeled carts on the sidewalk outside the store almost every day to tempt you inside. [*Editor's note: they work.*]

WHAT SETS SECOND READING APART?

Second Reading is a nonprofit organization, entirely volunteer run (apply online!), and it benefits the various programs at the West Chester Senior Center, which was established in 1975. "It's a sweet job," Eileen told us. "I see people walk in here and they look like they're on vacation, like they forget about their troubles for a minute, and they just go right towards a book they want to read."

This place gets a lot of foot traffic, given its location between Gay and Market Streets—and how hard it is to walk past those carts out front without something catching your eye. The demographic on our visit was all over the map, from children to elders to twentysomethings, all peacefully perusing, brought together by a shared love of the printed word.

Maybe we're biased, but whether you're looking for something specific, something hot off the press or a well-worn classic, or to while away a day browsing in a peaceful setting, it's hard to beat a bookstore.