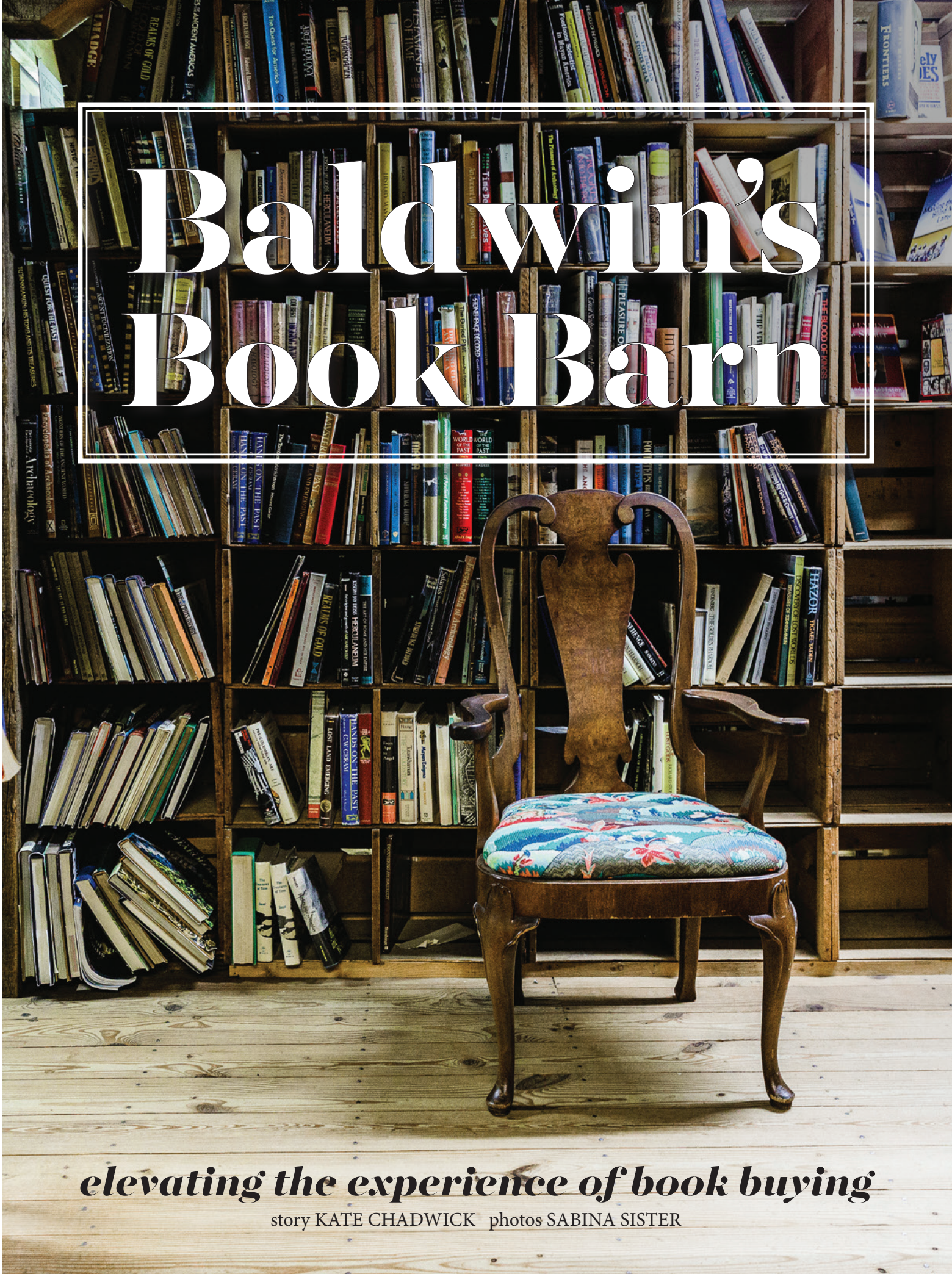




Baldwins Book Barn

elevating the experience of book buying

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How many books did you read last year? A Gallup poll some 40 years ago found that 42% of American adults had read 11 books in the previous year; by 2014, that number had dropped to 28%. The distraction provided by shiny, internet-connected, handheld devices, and the explosion in the number of television channels is the obvious suspect here. But technology eventually even crept directly into book territory with the advent of the Kindle, which, when it was released in late November 2007, promptly sold out in less than six hours and was out of stock until the following spring. Magazines and newspapers were also tossed onto the funeral pyre and eulogized, with dire “print is dead” warnings being whispered as the industry scrambled to adapt to a fickle audience.

But for those who never took to electronic tomes (ahem)—and even for those who did—physical books never really went away, and in fact are experiencing a renaissance. According to a CNN report this past April, e-book sales plunged 18.7% in the first nine months

of 2016, while paperback and hardback books saw upticks of 7.5% and 4.1%, respectively. For many book lovers, the bells and whistles of e-books never managed to outshine the sensory experiences provided by physical books: the feel of the paper, the smell of books, both old and new, the weight of it in your hand, perhaps even the absence of a sense of terror that it would be ruined beyond redemption if dropped in a bubble-filled bathtub (ahem, also). And, for many readers, that most singular delight that only comes from whiling away an afternoon in a bookstore. Indeed if browsing is your mission, Baldwin’s Book Barn is your mothership.

Baldwin’s Books was established in



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1946 by Lilla and William Baldwin in a vast stone barn that had stood vacant for the previous 10 years. The barn was originally part of a dairy farm built in 1822 by Brinton and Sarah Darlington. Today, it remains largely the same as it was, set back slightly from the road



and sitting on six acres. A massive tree stands guard over a picnic table (feel free to pack a lunch), not far from a trio of Adirondack chairs just past the parking lot. The stones crunch under your car tires as you pull into the parking lot, and on a recent visit, the smell of smoke from the barn's wood stove permeated the cold December air as it curled up out of the chimney.

That gravel apparently crunched under the tires of cars from Ohio, Delaware, and Florida, according to the license plates we saw in the lot. Indeed, according to manager Carol Rauch, Baldwin's has customers from all over the country, and in some cases from around the world, many of them book dealers. This is not surprising, given that the 10,000 square foot barn is packed with more than 300,000 books, some new, most used, and in some cases, very rare. The Barn also has letters, photos, maps, manuscripts, antiques, fine art, and prints, but we'll just stick to books for our purposes here.

The wood for the stove is piled by the door as you enter the barn, and that stepping-back-in-time sense is immediate and warmly comforting as soon as you cross the threshold, where an old-fashioned bell chimes your arrival. And, it's chilly—the aforementioned wood burning stove only heats one particular room, so keep your coat on if you visit in the winter; on the flip side, the stone structure stays fairly cool in the summer months.

The front room of the barn is where

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you'll find some of the rarer books, some shelved in sets that run around half the perimeter of the room on shelving up near the ceiling. It's also where you'll find at least one of the three employees who keep the place open every day but Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New

Year's Day: Carol Rauch, Fred Danaway, and Joe Scott. Carol, a former realtor, has been running the Barn for the past seven years; Fred is a retired English teacher and has been with Baldwin's for 16 years, and Joe is retired from Scott Paper and has the daunting task of shelving all those books. In fact, to the left of the front door there were a dozen or so empty, handled, brown-paper bags, lined up like soldiers along the wall. Carol explained that when books come in, they are sorted into the bags according to what floor they're heading to. Then Joe loads them up and takes them around back and gets to work.

Oh, right—there are several floors of books to be found here—five of them, to be exact, and they're packed with labyrinthian rooms and corridors and snug nooks everywhere you turn. This is why part of your greeting when you arrive at Baldwin's will be an inquiry as to whether you've visited before. If you answer in the negative, you'll be promptly handed a map. Yes, a map. Folded like a bro-



chure, it outlines just where you'll find books in every category you can imagine (and some you probably can't), from children's books to modern literature (alphabetized), to history, to hobbies and games, to religion, to self-help, to cookbooks, to pets, to art. The map orients you with notations for the windows, emergency exits, and with "front of the barn" notations where applicable. These are more useful than you'd think, given that wandering, lingering, and daydreaming are all hazards of a protracted visit to Baldwin's, and it can become easy to forget where you are.

Other useful tools for a few hours of purposeful browsing come in the form of antique chairs sprinkled at var-

"The doorways are arched, curved into the stone in Hobbit-like fashion; the old wood floors creak softly beneath your feet."

ious locations throughout the building, should you feel the need to sit down and get to know a book better before taking it home. Speaking of taking books home, here's a fast fact: you can even rent books here. Baldwin's has rented sets of uniformly bound books to theaters and sets for films, for staging and props.

If the prospect of wandering aimlessly through floor-to-ceiling shelves

of books isn't tempting enough for you, the environment, both inside and out, is peaceful in every sense. The doorways are arched, curved into the stone in Hobbit-like fashion; the old wood floors creak softly beneath your feet. There is no piped-in music, no flat screens flashing, only the low chatter of other bibliophiles. Or not, as the case may be. We saw a pair of gentlemen—clearly there together, present when we arrived and still there when we left—and we never heard either of them utter a word. Instead they just walked up to one another randomly and pointed out passages in open books they were perusing.

In terms of customers, you'll find all sorts at the Barn. Men, women, and chil-



dren, young and old, alone or in pairs; at one point during one of our visits, an hour before closing, a group of four twenty-somethings piled in, followed shortly by a group of five sixty-somethings. It's the kind of place you can go to either get away from everyone, or to share with a friend or two. It's even the kind of place, according to Carol, to host a wedding or stage a photoshoot. She did note that not as many children are coming in as in years past, and said that sometimes if they do, the adult with them doesn't always buy them a book. In that case, Carol will give them one. "I've done it often—it's good to get them started on learning."

The books at the Barn are either bought or donated, and they are sold to regular customers and book dealers from near and far. Unpacking those books is Carol's favorite part of the job. "To find that special treasure that someone was about to discard: a first edition Mark Twain, a 1700's medical book, that *Great Gatsby*..." Carol is referring to a first

edition copy of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, valued at \$50,000, that languished in a box at the Barn back in 2005 for several months until Fred discovered it. First editions always cause a stir; Carol had just purchased a first edition Harry Potter book for the Barn. She got it the very morning of our visit at a flea market for one dollar.

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"A first edition of Stephen King's *Carrie*, which was his first novel, would get about \$15,000," Fred told me. This was right after I'd mentioned that I'd been looking in the writing section for a copy of King's *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*, which I've somehow managed to not read after a decade of writing professionally. "You wouldn't find it there

anyway; it would be in the Stephen King section," Fred said. "Which is pretty much always empty—we can't keep his stuff in here. It flies right out the door. Young people especially love him." As someone whose love of reading was cemented forever at the age of 15 after reading *The Shining* in two days, I can relate.

Speaking of things flying out, one of the joys of picking up a used book is finding something left behind by the previous owner, whether it's an endearing inscription or a forgotten lottery ticket or play program. People use some interesting things as bookmarks, and they also use books as a hiding place for cash. "We do come across money once in a while—and photos, too, especially in the older books," Carol said. "We have a box full of them, but usually if I find something in a book, I just leave it there."

There are a few rooms in the Barn that are off limits to the general public, including a room upstairs with a collection of exceedingly rare and therefore



“For now, though, the only overnight residents at Baldwin’s are the three ghosts alleged to inhabit the premises, one of them purported to be a female Darlington.”

fragile books. There is also a beautiful (and warm!) office area, which is also pressed into service as a book-signing room, Carol said. On the day of our visit, there was a stack of rare 1940’s Frank Lloyd Wright prints on the book signing table.

The upstairs on the right side of the barn also has living quarters, most

of your senses with the look, the smell of the woodstove when it’s going all winter; the smell of the books, the old barn, getting lost and needing a map to find your way to your favorite book,” Carol said. “People come in here and they don’t want to leave—many have asked to stay overnight. It’s true!”

For now, though, the only overnight

recently used by the current owner, Tom Baldwin, who is now retired. Given that he has permanently relocated to Florida, there has been talk in recent years of selling the Book Barn. Even if that ever happened, Carol said, “They would only sell it to a book person, someone who would keep it as it is.” It seems they could probably find a worthy candidate among their many loyal fans.

“I feel that people love the barn because it activates most

residents at Baldwin’s are the three ghosts alleged to inhabit the premises, one of them purported to be a female Darlington. Carol also relayed the story of Fred telling a customer that he was getting ready to close; the customer said, “Okay, but I’m not the last one here—there’s a guy upstairs reading in a rocking chair.” When Fred went to move the lingerer along, there was no one there. The employees take it all in stride. “I’m here at night a lot, alone, in the dark,” Carol said. “And I’ve never felt scared, never gotten a creepy feeling, never had the hair on the back of my neck stand up or anything.” So these are benevolent spirits, then? “Of course they are!” Carol said. “Who could be upset in this place?”

Indeed. The next time you want to get away from it all and still have the world at your fingertips, alone or with some fellow bookworms, carve out an afternoon and plan a browsing trip to Baldwin’s Book Barn.

The longitude and latitude is on their website—just don’t forget your map. 