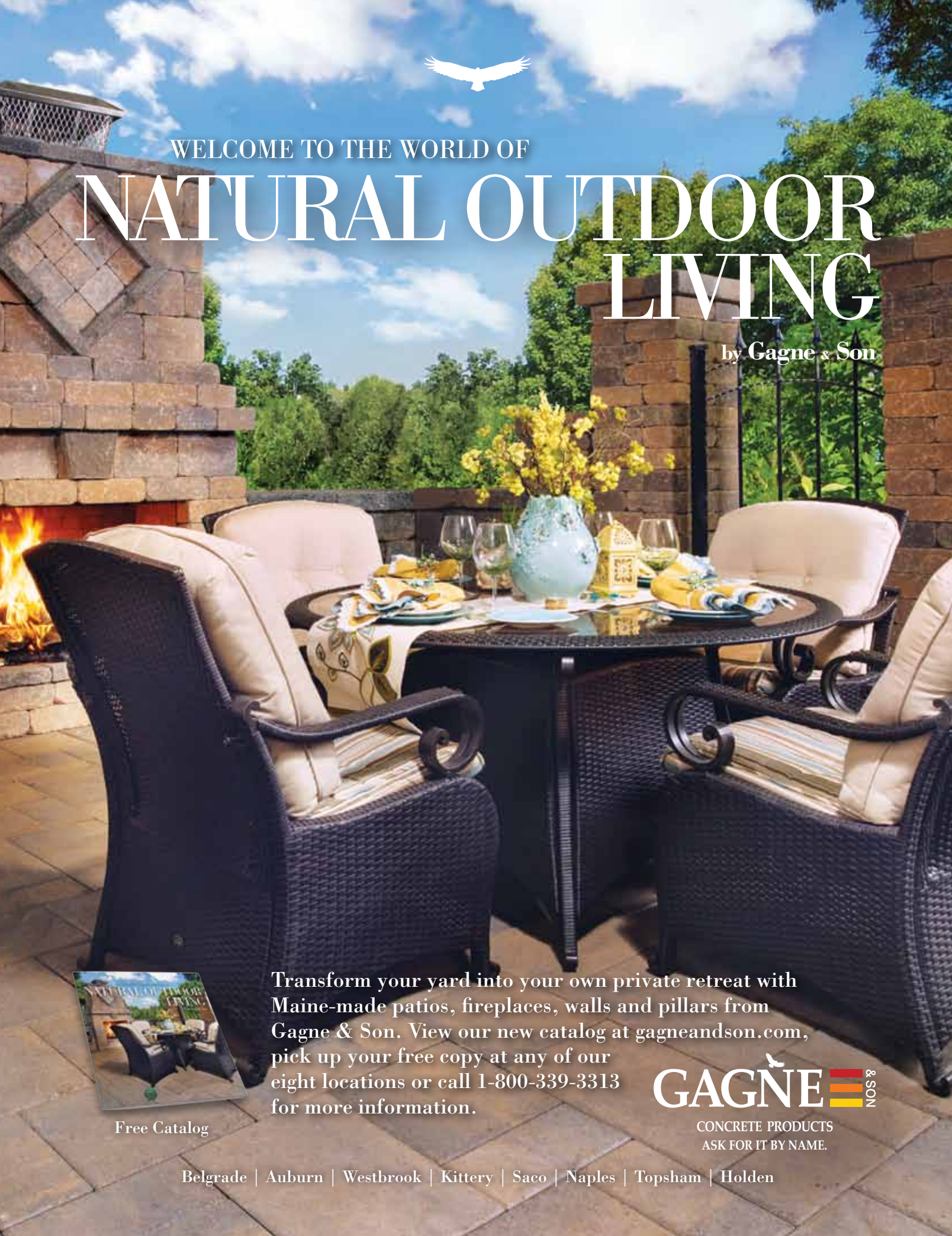




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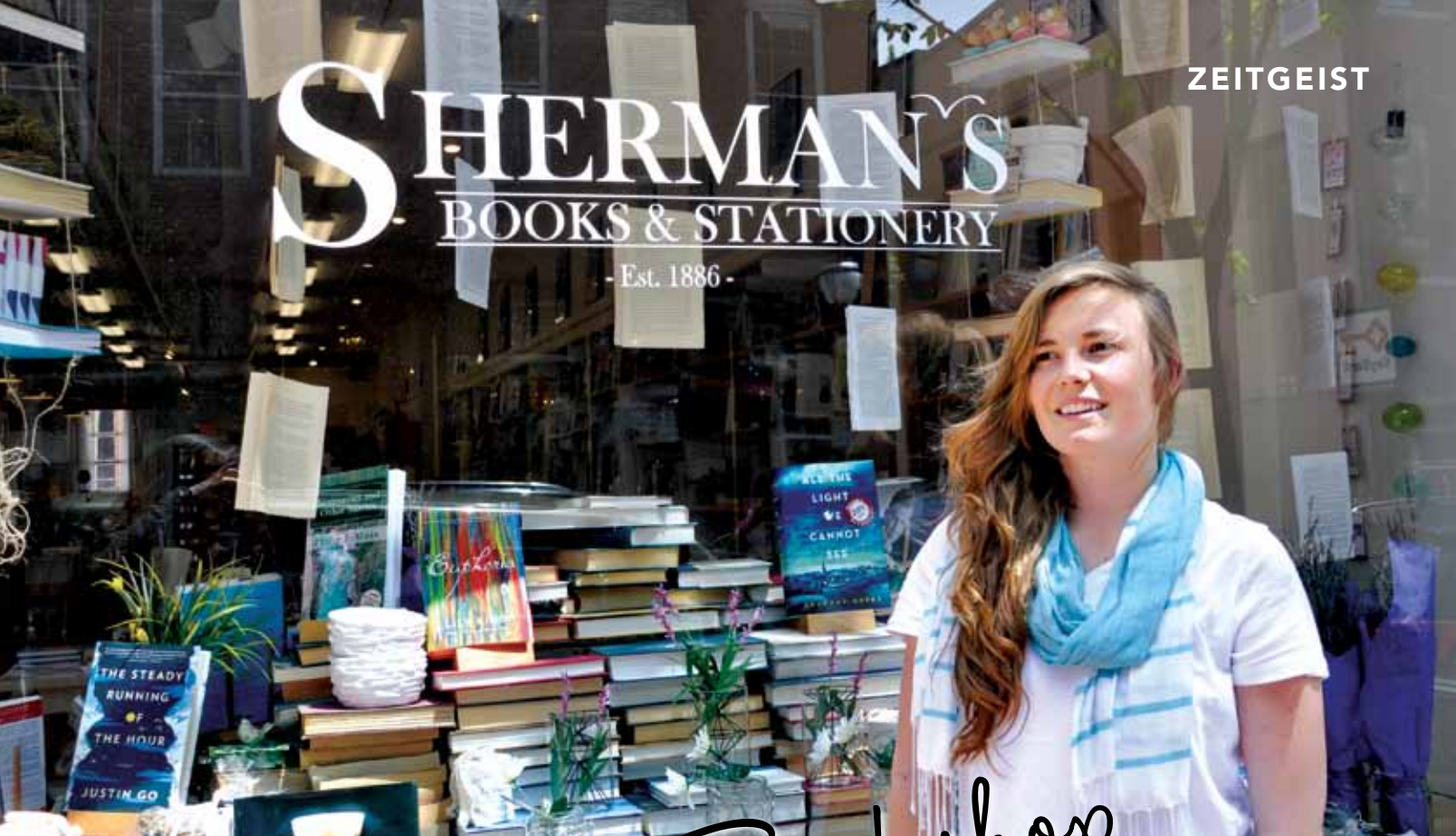
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# SHERMAN'S

## BOOKS & STATIONERY

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## Return of the Bookshop Around the Corner

These days, Portland's all about independent booksellers. **BY JIM BAUMER**

**I**n Portland, books and bookstores are deeply embedded in our city's cultural history and fabric. The city of Longfellow has had a local bookstore dating back to 1829, when Samuel Colesworthy opened his store devoted to the printed word at 92 Exchange Street. The space remained a bookstore well into the 20th century, when it was the A.J. Huston Book Store, Maine's oldest bookstore at the time and the second-oldest one in New England. Bookstores serve as a barometer for places valuing art and culture. In a city like Portland—possessing the positive qualities that make it a popular destination for visitors and a place for creative types to put down roots—losing bookstores served as a red flag.

Portland once had multiple bookstores, but these bookselling mainstays have been

disappearing. Bookland—a chain that had stores all over the state including a location in the city—went out of business in 2002. The Old Port lost Books, Etc. on Exchange Street in 2009.

When news began leaking out in January that Sherman's Books & Stationery was considering locating a new store in the Old Port, it created a buzz. That a new bookstore would be anticipated and become a topic of conversation was a positive sign; Portland is still a place that cares about books and values bookstores.

### FIERCELY INDIE

While other bookstores have been closing, Longfellow Books has been at the forefront of the city's Buy Local movement. The store's passion for books and its affection for writing and local writers is why Longfellow has earned its reputation as Portland's booksel-



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## ZEITGEIST

ling hub. It's the place where any writer with a new book out wants to read.

Chris Bowe, Longfellow's co-owner, sums up the city and the store's approach to books and bookselling that has won over the hearts of writers and fans of books.

"Portland is still the kind of place—an intimate place—where you feel like you can make a difference in a writer's life as a bookstore owner," says Bowe. "It's a nurturing, reciprocal kind of relationship you don't find in a lot of other places."

Even though Portland is a city, it often feels like one big small town, especially to its community of writers.

"Portland is a very supportive place for writers," says Monica Wood. "I think it's in large part because of places like Longfellow Books and Nonesuch in South Portland."

Wood has lived in Portland since 1976 and is the author of six books, including her latest, *When We Were the Kennedys: A Memoir from Mexico, Maine*. She has read numerous times in and around Portland, as well as across the country.

"Those stores are so good about keeping my books in front of readers," she says. "As you know, I take a while between books, and they always have my books out there and are recommending them to readers; I especially love Chris and Stuart at Longfellow," says Wood. "They are terrific and always make me (and every writer) feel special."

**I**n an age of corporate takeovers and big-box retailing, it might be forgiven if some view local bookstores as a quaint nod to nostalgia, or even a cultural anachronism. However, for writers and independent book publishers, buying books from a locally owned bookseller matters. Economically speaking, every dollar spent on a book from a local retailer, while supporting the writer and publishing in general, also allows a greater percentage to ripple through and multiply its effect in a community that cares about its local economy. This is one solid reason why Portland has managed to weather economic downturns.

Susan Conley, the author of the 2013 novel *Paris Was the Place* and one of the founding writers of The Telling Room, a nonprofit writing center focused on supporting young writers ages 6 to 18, recognizes how important bookstores are and why Portland is a great place to be a writer.

"Because the city has had a dearth of independent, local stores, Longfellow has be-



**Mystic Connection:** Chris Bowe grew up with pal Dennis Lehane in Dorchester, MA. Lehane frequently reads from his bestsellers at Longfellow Books in Monument Square, where Bowe is a co-owner.

come *the* place to read in the city. I think it's much more than just there being only one place, too," says Conley.

"Both Chris and Stuart—it's in their tagline, 'fiercely independent'—foster a populist approach to books and how they treat writers. It doesn't matter if you're a cookbook author from Lubec or a bestselling author like Richard Russo. Longfellow is committed to promoting their author events and making the writer feel appreciated. I think writers also really appreciate them back."

### RIDING THE TIDE

Sherman's Books & Stationery is Maine's largest bookselling chain, with branches in Bar Harbor, Camden, Boothbay Harbor, Freeport, and now Portland. At the same time, it remains committed to the values that independent booksellers espouse. Like Longfellow, Sherman's is a member of the New England Independent Booksellers Association (NEIBA), a nonprofit trade group.

While chains have been closing in Maine, with Mr. Paperback shuttering its 11 stores in 2011, Sherman's owner, Jeff Curtis, doesn't buy all the doom and gloom about bookstores.

"We haven't experienced a decreased trend in selling books," says Curtis. "While we've had some years that were down, overall we've remained steady. There are still a lot of people who love books and read them—our challenge as bookstore owners is connecting with readers."

Knowing that Portland is Maine's literary hub, and prompted by his daughter, Tori, pictured on page 145, Curtis felt Portland

From 1951 to 2011, Maine expat **George Whitman** ran the world famous Shakespeare & Co. Bookstore on the left bank in Paris (see our interview, Summerguide 2005). In his footsteps, poet Gary Lawless and his wife Beth run Gulf of Maine Books, central to Brunswick's cultural landscape. In Damariscotta, don't miss Maine Coast Bookshop for the same friendly feeling. The Children's Book Cellar in Waterville recently received a \$5,000 grant for support of youth reading from thriller writer James Patterson's Saving Bookstores, Saving Lives \$1-million fund. Percy's Burrow in Topsham is Maine's other Patterson fund recipient to date. For a list of Maine's independent bookstores, visit: [newenglandbooks.org](http://newenglandbooks.org)

was under-served in relation to bookstores.

The model for Sherman's differs slightly from that at Longfellow Books: "It's not a zero-sum game (in relation to e-books and other developments with books) for booksellers," says Curtis. "We are committed to books and supporting writers—we also carry other items besides books."

Sherman's opened its doors on Exchange Street in April. The response from the community seems to validate what Curtis believed in expanding into Portland—that the city, especially the Old Port—benefited from another independent bookstore.

"People have been coming in" with warm welcomes and appreciation for their venture, says Curtis.

While the Sherman's opening has gotten the lion's share of attention, another small, independent bookseller set up shop last year, serving North Deering, on Portland's outskirts.

Letterpress Books opened its doors at Portland's Northgate Plaza in October. It's a family-run enterprise, with owners John Paul and Karen Bakshoian, along with daughter Katherine Osborne, usually in the store. Their passion for books is obvious, and they've created a space that makes visitors feel at home. Letterpress is also the first bookstore this neighborhood's had since Bookland closed in 2002.

"Kath's managed bookstores for nearly 25 years," says her mother. "We felt it was time she had her own store."

The Bakshoians report that not only are shoppers coming in from Portland but from Windham, Falmouth, Cumberland, and Yarmouth.

### CULTURE CLUB

While food, art, and music are important, so are books and the literary aspirations of a place. Maybe the writing life illustrates this best and encapsulates the qualities of place that Portland has in abundance.

Morgan Callan Rogers, who released her

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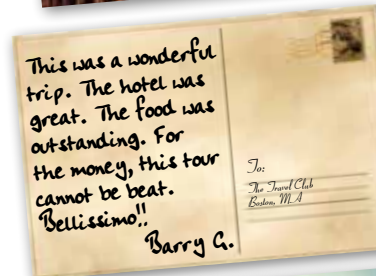
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## ZEITGEIST

critically acclaimed debut novel, *Red Ruby Heart in a Cold Blue Sea*, in 2012 at age 60, captures the essence of Portland for writers. Rogers, who now spends part of her year in South Dakota, wrote her book while living in the city's East Bayside section.

"I loved writing all day and then getting up and taking a walk with my dog and walking down to the beach," says Rogers. "Maybe what attracts writers to the city is that mix of grittiness Portland still has, with the beauty of the ocean and Casco Bay—I think it's what attracts writerly minds to the place," she says. "There's that quality of the history of writers and then, walking around and sensing you're surrounded by people who love writing and support writing—it's a wonderful place for writers to be."

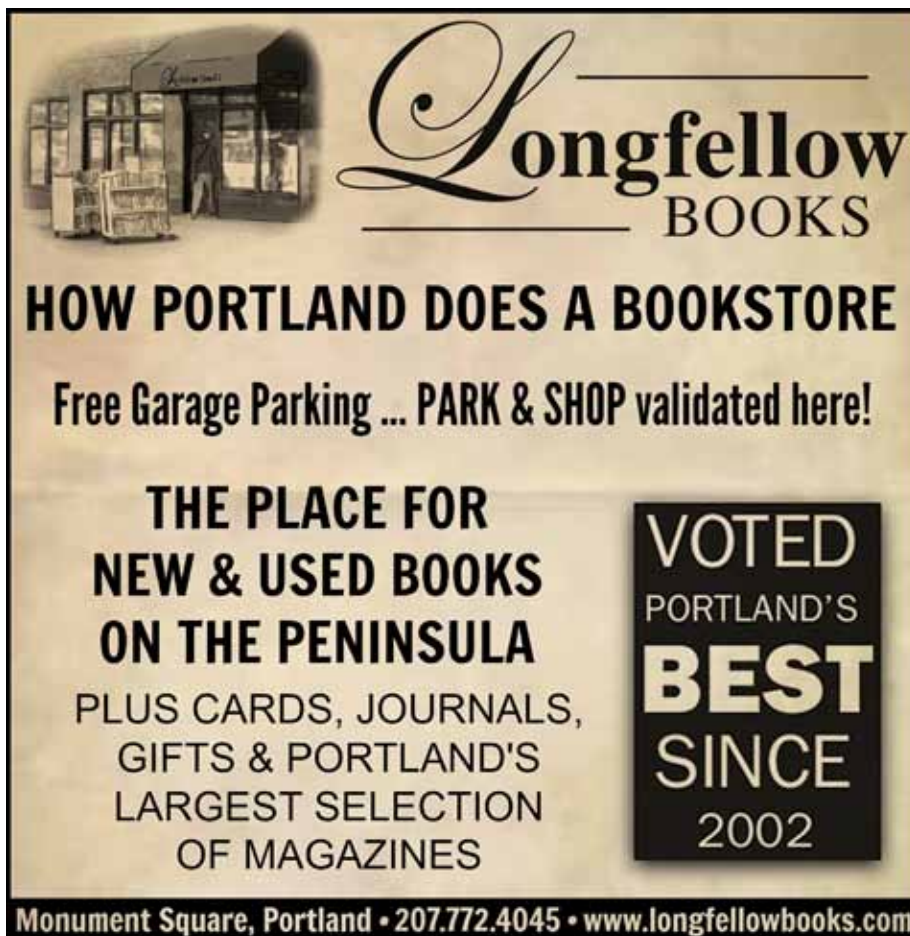
**R**on Currie, Jr., is a writer who grew up in Waterville, 90 minutes north. He still maintains an apartment there while also spending considerable time at his residence in Portland. Currie's latest novel, *Flimsy Little Plastic Miracles*, came out in 2013.

Portland is a unique city in many ways, not just around books and bookstores. People don't have the same attachment to businesses they did 50 years ago," says Currie. "But with a place like Longfellow Books, you see people who connect with the store in a way that's really special. What's really cool is that when they had the flooding of the store, the community demonstrated how much their store means to the city." [A window blown in by the February blizzard of 2013 caused pipes to freeze and burst in the building, flooding the store. Community help drying, cleaning, repairing, and re-opening the store was overwhelming.]

The city's culture and the emphasis on local commerce and supporting businesses all play an important part in fostering a unique literary environment. Size also matters when it comes to Portland, which is something Monica Wood recognizes.

"I think part of it [the city's charm] is that Portland is small enough and intimate enough that all the writers know one another," Wood says. "In fact, Portland's a very warm community of writers—there's no 'writer's hierarchy' in Portland." ■

Jim Baumer is a Maine-based free-lance writer and the author of books about town team baseball and Moxie. His book, *The Perfect Number: Essays & Stories, Vol. 1*, is due out this summer.



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