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'A magical place'

Writer Blue Balliett finds inspiration in Three Oaks, Mich., a longtime outpost for the arts

By Rick Kogan, Tribune Reporter – August 29, 2010

— An impromptu literary salon took place one early August afternoon when Blue Balliett walked into Drier's Meat Market in Three Oaks and saw owner Caroline Drier.

"I just loved your book," said Balliett.

"And I can't wait to read yours," said Drier.

Drier's book, "Dining Designed by Drier's" is a gathering of more than 250 recipes. It has sold a few hundred copies, primarily to the customers who come to the ancient store for its meats, cheeses and shop-made baloney, once lauded in a poem by Carl Sandburg when the writer lived here decades ago.

"We've only one question

And now we will ask it.

We know cheese in a tub

And liver's not bony.

But how in the world

Do you make your baloney?"

Balliett's three previous books — "Chasing Vermeer," "The Wright 3" and "The Calder Game" — have sold millions of copies and established her as one of the leading children's book authors in the world.

Three Oaks, a tiny Southwestern Michigan village of some 2,000 permanent residents, is the setting for Balliett's new book, a compelling story titled "The Danger Box," scheduled to be released this week. It is the story of a delightfully introspective and observant if visually impaired 12-year-old boy named Zoomy who lives with his grandparents and comes into possession of a mysterious diary.

So charmingly and evocatively does Balliett render the town — a place where "everybody always says hello" — that it is likely to compel many young readers to demand that their parents take them there for a visit. They, and their parents, will find a surprisingly lively cultural community.

"It has really become a destination for people interested in the arts," says David Fink who, with partner Kim Clark, runs the town's Acorn Theater.

Since the Acorn opened in a former corset and buggy whip factory in 2001, it has been a powerful magnet for attracting audiences and artists to Three Oaks with its creative and adventurous programming, featuring many nationally known acts, and its attention to local talents such as actor/singer/impresario Bob Swan, who will be performing with Broadway star Martha Cares and the legendary Bonnie Koloc singing the songs of Jacques Brel and Kurt Weill on Sept. 11.

"It is thrilling to be part of a community of people with visions for and appreciation of the arts," says Fink, who discovered the town while visiting its Vickers Theatre, a beautifully restored movie theater brought back to vibrant life in 1996 and still going strong.

There are other delights in the town, all easily accessible. "Three Oaks has one main street. ... On either side of Elm



Blue Balliett set her new book, "The Danger Box" in Three Oaks, Mich., which has embraced the fame in its usual kindly manner.

E. Jason Wambsgans/ Tribune Photo

Street — that's the one with the stores," says Zoomy in "The Danger Box."

In this cozy clime — and you won't need a map — you will find galleries, shops, restaurants and other surprises, such as a Saturday farmers market that seems to Drier "something right out of Norman Rockwell." When you are there, you can tune in to WRHC-LP 106.7 FM, a low-power radio station with a marvelously freewheeling and provocative schedule, heavy on the arts.

This is all 69.5 miles from the handsome Hyde Park home Balliett shares with her husband, Bill Klein, one or more of their three grown kids and a cute little cat named Django to the Three Oaks Library, where a great deal of "The Danger Box" takes place.

"Our library is like a skinny person in a giant pair of pants; all the books fit on the first floor, and there is still plenty of room to spare," Zoomy says.

On the library's second floor is a museum of sorts, a gathering of many items detailing the town's history from its 1850 beginnings. This area, known as Harbor Country, has long been a popular vacation and summer-home spot for Chicagoans, but its most coveted residences were in the communities that hug the lake, and so towns such as New Buffalo, Sawyer, Lakeside, Union Pier and Harbert have gotten most of the attention and crowds. Six miles off the lake, Three Oaks has remained something of a comparative secret.

"That has been a benefit," says Drier, who has been here "forever." "There is just such a great and relaxed feel here that came about not through boom but grew organically."

Her shop, the only meat market in the country to be designated a National Historic Site, was originally a wagon repair shop taken over in 1875 by an Englishman named Alec Watson and transformed into the Union Meat Market. He hired 10-year-old Ed Drier as a delivery boy and later elevated him to clerk. In 1913, Drier bought the store. His son, Ed Jr., ran the place until his death in 1994. Caroline is his daughter and runs the place with her nephew, David Wooley.

"My father would be surprised and thrilled by what's happening here," she says.

Not all locals are, but Drier says, "The people who don't think that these new businesses are good for the town really drive me nuts."

Balliett first discovered Three Oaks a decade ago, when she and her husband were guests at a friend's nearby summer home. They needed meat for a barbecue and so drove to Drier's. She wandered the town and was bewitched. Later she and her husband rented a room (there are no hotels or motels in Three Oaks but dozens close by). And she did further research by visiting with students at the River Valley Elementary School.

"Three Oaks is a magical place," she says, sitting in Nelson's Saloon, another Elm Street oasis with fine food and great tavern atmosphere.

She dedicates her new book "To the children of Three Oaks" and will be back in Three Oaks on Sept. 9 for a series of events with some of the same kids she met.

"Blue captured Three Oaks well," says John Gunner Gooch, a local writer and photographer. "It's a place of quietly kind and good-hearted people who are neighborly in the best sense of that word."

"I also liked the way she portrayed the children hanging out at the library, because Three Oaks takes pride and pleasure in being a very kid-friendly town, and the library is one of the coolest places for them. The kids keep us young, and I think that enhances the energetic and artistic vibe that happily pervades the place."

One of Gooch's most recent stories, appearing in the Harbor Country Gazette, was about plans to build a new museum in the town. But he earlier had chronicled the town's financial troubles, which put it face to face with bankruptcy in 2008.

Though that crisis has been averted, the lousy economy has taken a toll. Gooch's own newspaper, the weekly South County Gazette, recently folded after 138 years. And the end is near for the glorious B Books, operated by artist Rick Tuttle. He moved from Chicago in 2004 with his then-wife Donna Blue Lachman, founder of the Blue Rider Theatre Company. She became head of the drama department at La Lumiere School in La Porte, Ind., and has staged and performed in some of the Acorn's most memorable productions.

You can still visit B Books and be delighted by the setting, the selection and the stunning book bindings and boxes created by Tuttle. It will be open through September. He is sure to have "The Danger Box" in stock, and Balliett would be happy to sign copies.

"Everybody who lives here loves this place," says Balliett, who has certainly done her bit in "The Danger Box" to make everybody else love it too.