

# ONE FOR THE BOOKS

AN AMERICAN BIBLIOPHILE CREATED PARIS' BEST-KNOWN BOOKSHOP

An interview by **Adam Biles** Photography by **Daniel Mordzinski**

All roads lead to **George Whitman**. Or rather, to his English bookshop and library, Shakespeare & Company, which is located at Kilometre Zero in Paris – the official start of all French trunk roads. George arrived in Paris from the US shortly after the Second World War, and opened his bookshop in 1951. Since then he has been providing free lodging to wandering writers and students who sleep scattered about the shop in exchange for an hour's work per day. He also asks them to write a biography each. Thus, at the age of 93, he has accumulated not only about 50,000 books, but also 100,000 or so biographies. A few years ago, his daughter Sylvia Beach Whitman took over the running of the shop from her father.





**What was this neighbourhood like when you moved in?**

**George:** It was very run down. This was the heart of Paris and it looked like a slum! But it has become nicer every year. You see the little garden next door to us? It was part of this street. They cut this street into two. They cut out about twelve houses. The shop was a bankrupt Arab grocery store. I bought it for 500 dollars. Now it's worth five million, but I would never sell it. I'd rather give it away. My neighbours were all French people. They'd been in business then they retired, and as they died off I bought up their property from them. I bought three apartments and three stores and combined them into this one place.

**The history of Shakespeare & Co. didn't begin at Kilometer Zero, did it?**

**George:** No, it was founded by Sylvia Beach [at 12 rue de l'Odéon] in 1919 and we took over the name later on. She didn't know anything about us. We waited until she was dead, because if I'd asked her and she'd said no, even though she was dead, I just couldn't have taken the name. I think she would have said yes, though. Anyway, now there's my daughter named after her, so I don't think we've done too badly.

**What was it that made you open a bookstore?**

**George:** Well, no one wanted to employ me. So I employed myself. When I got out of university I thought that was not the end of my education. It was just beginning. So I spent seven years walking around the world on foot. Then I opened the bookstore to continue my education.

**What motivates you to open your lives to a procession of travelling writers?**

**George:** Everywhere I went on my travels on foot people welcomed me. I was sick in Guadalajara, Mexico, with a fever. I met a man on the street and he took me to his house until I was cured. When I got to Mexico City I stayed with a family. They moved out of the best room in the house and gave it to me for a whole month. I was so welcomed. I try to do the same thing. I hope my daughter will continue that.

**Sylvia:** Partly because I spent my first six years here it is really engraved into my personality. But having been in England for so long, then coming back, I went through a very cynical six months. Now I have really found a happy medium. It's all based on trust. Of course it's true that there are one or two a year that do abuse it and make you question whether to carry on having that system. But for those one or two you have hundreds who are really inspired by the idea of the place, and they leave feeling a little more positive about humankind and generosity. It's great to be able to help people.

**Why does Paris attract so many artists and writers?**

**George:** Of course French people aren't quite as nice as the Italians, but still they're very cultivated. They're interested in books. They're interested in the arts. They're more cerebral than many other people. I think that's the nice thing about them.

**How many people can you accommodate here at once?**

**George:** At one time I said "everyone who comes in can stay." There were 25 people. It was terrible! God, it was hell! You were walking, stumbling over people. But about half a dozen is okay. Writers just

make their beds. Students can help us out if they want to, but I never ask for more than an hour's help. I've given the bookstore to my daughter and she's doing things I don't approve of – she's trying to get people to work two hours a day! That's not welcoming, not nice. We have put up so many people from so many countries. About a hundred thousand people have lived in this house. Each one of them writes a biography for me which I've kept. One hundred thousand of them.

**Have you seen many of your guests go on to become recognised writers?**

**George:** Well, we became connected with the Beat generation. Ferlinghetti [an American poet and co-owner of the City Lights bookshop and publishing company] is my oldest friend. He still has a bookstore in San Francisco. He was here last week to visit me. He's painting more than writing now. He still goes swimming to keep healthy. He advises me to drink a lot of water. Allen Ginsberg [another famous American poet] came often too.

**Is it true that you insist people read one book a day while they're staying here?**

**George:** The main idea with this is that they catch up with their reading. When I opened this place in 1951 it was full of university students. They didn't have classrooms, they didn't have enough libraries. It was students living here all the time. Now there are not enough people reading.

**Why is the first floor lending library such an important part of the store?**

**George:** In the middle ages bookstores were often libraries. People would come into a bookstore, they would read a book for an hour or two, they'd pay a few centimes and leave the book there and come back the next day. Now it's dying out, so I lend books free to all my friends, and they often forget to return them. All my favourite books I loan to people.

**Sylvia:** I really appreciate having a place in the centre of the city that is a meeting point for lots of people and where you really are free just to sit and read and put your feet up for a few hours. It's funny; it was only about a year ago that I realised that business-wise, is a complete loss. It is tempting to take more space from the library, but actually there is no way we would change that. That is what is so endearing. It's the first floor that really makes it a community, because people are welcome to sit and read for twelve hours a day, and discuss, and have their writer's workshops two or three times a week. I think it's really important.

**What do you consider some of the gems in the library's collection?**

**George:** There's this guy Paul Johnson [he indicates a book by this author with the title "Intellectuals"]. When he graduated from Oxford he came to Paris as a young writer and he was immediately appointed English editor of a French magazine called *Realité*. He came into my bookstore, and he liked it and he gave a series of three talks about French civilisation. Later on he invited his friends to a party at his house. And I was so impressed! All of us people were getting drunk and

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gossiping and he had his nose in a book all that time. I'll never forget that. Paul Johnson.

**How many books can you stock in the store?**

**George:** We don't consider it a real bookstore unless there's a hundred thousand. We just have about half of that now. We are hoping to open the cellars and have a hundred thousand books.

**What are you reading at the moment?**

**George:** I'm reading a book called *The War of the World* by – what's his name? – Niall Ferguson. [He stands up and disappears into the crannies of his apartment from where banging and rustling noises can be heard for about five minutes. He returns empty handed.] I can't find it. It's a thousand-page book. It takes more than one day to read it. It's really brilliant. We've published several books. Stories written by some of the guests who lived in my house. Everything we publish we sell out of. Sylvia Beach first published *Ulysses* [by James Joyce]. We want to publish more.

**Have you written much yourself?**

**George:** Well, I built my bookstore like each room was a chapter in a novel. That's the way I went about it. I've written a few poems that have been published. I studied journalism at school. While I was a student they sent me to work on a little country newspaper and after I graduated they wanted to keep me on. I had several job opportunities, but I refused all those things to become a tramp, and I've been a tramp ever since.



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***Sylvia, have you inherited your father's love of reading?***

**Sylvia:** I didn't see my father for ten years and I think it was a form of rebellion, because I didn't read a lot as a teenager. So I feel like I missed out on a whole lot of literature that I'm desperately trying to catch up with. When I came back here, I suddenly grasped that passion for literature and ever since I've had this huge appetite for it.

***Can you think of one or two books that you consider essential reading?***

**Sylvia:** I think I still find that really hard to answer because there are so many that I still have to read. It also depends what kind of mood I'm in. Tender is the Night, by F. Scott Fitzgerald. That was one of the greatest novels I'd read for a long time.

**George:** Just one. The Idiot by Dostoyevsky. The story of my life.

***How do you think the shop will change in the future?***

**George:** This is a traditional bookstore but the police want to make it look like Chicago. They're making a lot of trouble for us. They've made me build these huge long stairs there now, they ruin the room. No one ever fell down in 50 years. People liked it. It was right for Paris. Maybe it's not right for Chicago. But is the whole world going to look like Chicago? I hope not. But you'll have to talk with my daughter, she owns it now.

**Sylvia:** There are always health and safety issues, even in France. With so many tourists in the city they have to take it seriously. We were told we'd be closed down if we didn't change the stairs. But otherwise

I see no reason to change the store. There are so many people who are in love with it as it is. There are so many places where you can buy books in Paris and on the Internet, but there are certain reasons why people come here and I think it's important to keep those. On the other hand we are computerising everything. There wasn't even a phone in the shop until two and a half years ago. We were really in the medieval ages. Now we are slowly catching up with the website and everything. Hopefully the computer system won't take anything away from the spirit of the place. My father and I very much try and keep it so that we work together. He still gives us a lot of advice. I think to be a really good bookseller you have to have years of experience. I only have three!

**George:** Bookstores are disappearing, but we're going to disappear like a bolt of thunder! People are buying books from the internet, it's very convenient. It's a good thing. But here we cannot fail. My daughter cannot fail, with this location. We call ourselves booksellers to the world. We're very well known in Paris. President Chirac came here with his wife, to visit the library upstairs. He complimented us on our hospitality. We have many friends. I hope my daughter doesn't try to make too much money, that's all. Just try to keep it a friendly place. I hope she'll be happy here. I think she will.

***If you'd like to visit George and Sylvia, or need a place to sleep, or simply want to buy a book, go to Shakespeare & Company, 37 rue de la Bûcherie, Paris. Tel. +33 (0)143254093***