

LIVES & LETTERS

For half a century, a crowded bookshop on the Left Bank has offered food and a bed to penniless authors – the only rule is that they read a book a day. **Jeanette Winterson** revisits Shakespeare and Company

Shakespeare and Company in Paris

First met George Whitman in 2007 when he hit me over the head with a book. I was in Paris, standing on the pavement outside the English-language bookshop Shakespeare and Company, talking to George's daughter Sylvia, when a copy of Orwell's *Dunes and Out in Paris* and London walked down from the third floor of the building. Direct hit – but intended for Sylvia, not me.

"What does a man have to do to get some attention around here?" I looked up, and there was George, 85, leaning out of the window in his pyjamas, talking with another visitor.

"Occasionally [the idiot] hit you," Sylvia took my arm and checked my head. "Do you want to come up and meet him?"

We pushed our way through the crowded shop, Sylvia stopping every two seconds to answer a question or help a customer. The books are piled over two floors – the ground floor deep and open, stacked with new and important titles, the upper floor a warren of second-hand volumes, anything from Gibbon to Hemingway. There's a literary space for sitting and reading because this shop isn't a pay-as-you-go Anglo-Saxon bookstore, it's a place for the browser and the flâneur. You won't see the rise here, in the company of books.

Perched above all this, like an old monk, is George Whitman. He used to sleep on a mattress in among the books, but along the way he managed to buy the apartment upstairs, and now he lives his book-loved life with a bed, a sink, a bath, a table and an ancient stove, the stovekeeping cleaning up the windows and tugging the wires across to Michel Dime. George likes cooking for his family – he has only one daughter, and a big, beautiful son, but he's cooking for himself and that's what's been since 1950, when the dishevelled GI who had chosen Paris as his home, decided to open a bookshop.

"When the war was over, I was living in a hotel on the Seine, very cheap in those days, and the landlord wanted to get as out as he could make more money – he burnt all the books on the doors. But I figured this was a good thing, because anyone could come and go, in and out of my room, and borrow books. I always had a pile of books, and I would bring them on my errands and my room would be full of people I didn't know, reading my books."

George's first bookshop was on a barge, but the books got damp. Then, with an inheritance of \$100, he was able to buy the boarded-up grocery store that became the first part of the jigsaw of buildings that is now Shakespeare and Company.

For 30 years the shop was called La Minéral. George has always loved the taste of people browsing in his shop, the smell of the world, people, ideas, energy, excitement. George believes in lending and borrowing books, not just selling them. He told me his best rule: "Why don't you stay in the writers' room and write another book? You know how we do things here?"

I began to feel that. In 1975, the original Shakespeare and Company was opened by a young American called Sylvia Beach. Her shop in rue de l'Odéon soon became the place for the first French-speaking writers in Paris. Her lover, Adrienne Monnier, owned the French bookshop across the street, and Beach sat back and forth, finding patronise writers a place to stay, lending their books, arranging loans, taking their mail, sending their work to small magazines and, most spectacularly, publishing James Joyce's *Ulysses* in 1922 when no one else would touch it.



Hemingway was a regular at the shop, and wrote about it in his memoir *A Moveable Feast*. His open, emotional prose makes a poignant story of those early days, when material things weren't so important, and if you could get time to read and write, and live on cheap-stops and coarse bread and sleep by a stove somewhere, then you were happy.

It was Hemingway, as a major in the US army, who at the liberation of Paris in 1944 drove his tank straight to the shuttered Shakespeare and Company and personally showed Sylvia Beach. "He said that I ever knew was nice to see," he said later, rich, dour and with a Nobel prize.

But after the war, Beach was older and tired. She didn't require the shop that had been forced into closure by the occupation. It was George Whitman who took over the spirit of what she had made, but not the name – until 1965, when Beach attended a reading by Lawrence Sanders at the bookstore and they all agreed that it should be renamed Shakespeare and Company. George took in the best poets

Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso. Henry Miller ate from the stovepot, but was too tired to sleep in the tiny writers' room. Again his left leg fell about George's bed. There are signed photos from Jack Kerouac and Jack Kerouac, signed copies of Jack Kerouac and William S. Burroughs. George opened his door readily to midnight, and the best then in the best shop, sleep in the shop, on tiny beds along the bookshelves, but for two hours a day helping out with the running of the place, and, crucially, read a book a day, whenever you like, but all the way through, unless maybe a War and Peace, which case you can take two days.

George still reads a book a day, and gets very cross if he hasn't that night. He was waiting his time. You can be leaved out of Shakespeare and Company just as suddenly as you are invited in. The spirit of the place has to be honoured, and there are no exceptions.

At any time there are six or more young people from the campus of the world, reading, talking, thinking, looking up at the books, reading, eating, cracking, cracking, cracking, and all in a spirit of energy and excitement that is not to be found in any other bookshop. They stay for two weeks or two months, and some just sleep outside on a bench until their room is made.

If you are a published writer, then you might be able to stay in the tiny pod of the writers' room, and back to an ancient pipe in radiator and not worry too much if the electricity goes down and you have to abandon your laptop for a notepad. "There was no running water, no electricity when we started," George says. "It didn't matter. That staff doesn't matter. Books, people, ideas, that what matters." The shop has been open for 80 years, through his down, sleep in his shop, even at his table, and many of these still write in his room, or return. There's nothing constant or permanent about Shakespeare and Company. The values, the ethos and hospitality don't change, but the shop goes forward with the

The literary festival now runs bi-annually and the publishing company will begin later this year. Sylvia is buying another bit of the figure ion, so that the shop can open a call next door. It will mean borrowing money, and looking for new investors, but she is unromantic about what it will take to stay in business. "In present, small bookshops in France can thrive because the chains aren't allowed to undercut the core price of any title by more than 10%. But Sarkozy doesn't like that, and if he changes the rules, we'll be in the same position as all these independent stores in England. So we need to diversify now."

It will be depressing if the Mid Atlantic "midnight" of the "New" market manages to do in France what it has done in the UK – that is, close two-thirds of independent bookshops. Anyone can buy cheaply online if they wish, but consumer evidence in France is that people prefer small stores and personalise them enough to keep them open. If the market is allowed to distort this preference, in one way but the anonymous bulk of the black bookshelves with their bored customers and bestsellers. Writing a writer's bestseller because you're committed to it is a thing of the past, except in independent stores committed to the idea of books, rather than just selling books.

Very Monday night at Shakespeare and Company, there's a reading by a published writer, while writers-in-progress, as George calls young hopefuls, can visit the library to read their work. Patrick Leigh from Peter UK has got together with his wife to do creative writing weekends at the bookshop, and there are heavily subsidised courses. While there are plenty of readers who are not writers, there are no writers who are not readers, and one of the great gifts of this extraordinary library is to keep writers and readers on the same creative continuum. Writers are not constrained to small time serial collections and readers are not patronised as customers. As Sylvia says, "We sell books for a living, but it's the books that are our life."

So far, books have been in great demand. George says, on 11th March at Shakespeare and Company, there were 100 books in the library and 100 books in the shop. It was a record. If you are 1200 or 1300, you can get a book. www.shakespeareandcompany.com

The Saturday poem

by Diana Hendry

Reading in Bed

Best bones of the solitary life, late hours, the stack beside the bed as good as a new lover any night. But now there's all the constraints to do, of bed, of light and sex and sleep and what's the best to shut up shop. Tonight it's me. Now thrillers, or Florida, clearly it's a struggle in the night, that you're in a close fit miles away (in Florida, so be precise). I lie and listen as the rain pours down time. The book beside you, that's the rub makes it like the best of times that tells me to, tucked up all night, on night watch, hours watching, why and where and what's told by