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

And so, you can see, it all works out. A Merveilleux Feast. His sparse, 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 syrups 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 liberated Sylvia Beach.

"No one that I ever knew was nicer to me," he said, later, in Paris, and with a Robert Pirsig.

But after the war, Beach was older and tired. She didn't reopen the shop that had been forced into closure by the occupation. It was George Whiting, man who took over the spirit of what she had made, but not the name — until 1951, when Beach attended a reading by Lawrence Durrell 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 as he stepped, but was too grand to sleep in the tiny writers' room. Anaïs Nin left her letters under George's bed. There are signed photos from Robert Lowell and Jackie Kennedy, signed copies of Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs.

George opened his doors midfielder to midnight, and the deal then is the deal now: sleep in the shop, on tiny beds hidden among the bookshelves; work for two hours a day helping out in the running of the place; and, crucially, read a book a day, whatever you like, but all the way through, unless maybe it's War and Peace, for which you can take two days.

George needs a book a day, and gets very cross if he hears that anyone is wasting his time. You can be hauled 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 compass points of the world, reading, talking, thinking. Boiling up in the kettle, crossing the road to the public shower, staying, sleeping, stock-taking, and all in a spirit of energy and enterprise that we have not seen in any chain bookstores. They stay for two weeks or two months, and some just sleep outside on a bench until there's room inside.

If you are a published writer, then you might be able to stay in the tiny pool of their writer's room, and huddle against an ancient plug in radiator and not worry too much if the electricity goes down and you have to stay to attend your laptop for a notepad. "There was no running water, no electricity when we started," George says. "It didn't matter. That stuff doesn't matter. Books, people, ideas, that's what matters."

Thousands of people have come through his doors, slept in his shop, eaten at his table, and many of them still write to him or, return. There's nothing quaint or historical about Shakespeare and Company. The values, the ethos and hospitality don't change, but the shop goes forward with the times. In 2000, aged 50, George retired, and his daughter, named after the original Sylvia, took over. She was 25; the age difference tells you a lot about George, his appetites and his energies.

Sylvia lived in the shop until she was seven; then, after her parents' divorce, she went with her mother to be raised in England. It wasn't her intention to take over the shop, but she was drawn back to it, and she made it her life.

"When I first arrived, we didn't even have a phone and Penguin was threatening to cut us off for not paying their bills, so I had to run round in Michel looking for a pay phone and getting accounts in Paris," she adore her father, and is committed to carrying on his legacy - but in her own way. "God was furious when I took out one of the benches and installed a computer. When I told him we were going to start a literary and publishing business, he said: 'Who's gonna cook for all those extra people?'"

The literary festival now runs from bi-annually and the publishing company will begin later this year. Sylvia is buying another bit of the garage space, so that the shop can open a cafe next door with an open borrowing system, and looking for new investors, but she is unfashionable about what it will take to stay in business. At present, small bookshops in France can thrive because the chains are cut off from undercutting the cover price of any title by more than 40% and Sylvia doesn't like that, and if the changes come, we'll be in the same position as all those independent stores in England. So we need to diversify now."

It will be depressing if the Mad Hatter "windows" of the free market managers do to 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 patronise them enough to keep them open. If the market is allowed to distort this preference, no one wins but the anonymous bulked-out on the black bookstalls with their bored assistants and bookstalls. Writers suffer terribly because big bookshops don't list any more. "Browsing a writer's backlist is a thing of the past, except in independent stores committed to the idea of books, rather than in libraries," says Sylvia.

Every Monday night at Shakespeare and Company, free reading is a published writer, while writers-in-progress, as George calls young people, still read in the library to read their work. Patrick Bouchard from Oberon has got together with Sylvia to offer creative writing workshops, and these are heavily oversubscribed.

"While there are plenty of readers, there are not too many writers who are not readers, and one of the great things about a bookshop is to keep writers and readers on the same wavelength. Writers are not reduced to small-time sensibilities, but are regarded as consumers. As Sylvia says, 'We sell books for a living, but it's the books that are alive'."

The Faber Academy's next two works, starting soon, is the 15th-month at Shakespeare and Company (Copic), with the Faber Faber Shakespeare and Company, 17 rue de l’Odeon, Paris. It’s 5 (2-15) 8 a.m., seven days a week. www.shakespeareandcompany.org

The Saturday poem

Reading in Bed

by Diana Hendry

Best books of the solitary life, late hours, the thick beside the bed as good as a new lover any night. Not now there’s all the choice to do, of bedside lights and sex and sleep and whose first to shut up shop. Tonight it’s me. You thrill-or, Scorcher, clearly I. I frugate, conscious that you’re close but miles away (in Florida, to be precise), I lie and listen as the turn of pages gives down time. The lightshroud on your thumb’s rub makes it like the lap of waves that lulls me off, tucked up in self while you, my laughter, learn whodunit, why and whom and worlds by rolly.