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Jerry Seinfeld says, "A bookstore is one of the only pieces of evidence we have that people are still thinking."

The Kate Tempest poetry reading I recently attended at the Shakespeare and Company bookstore in Paris supports this position. The bookshop was jam-packed with people who seemed utterly consumed by thought. Outside, a speaker amplified the young British poet's voice. It was full of resonance. A group of us stood silently still, listening carefully as Tempest declared:

*"Look, we're not flesh,
We're all energy
I care about genius
I don't care about celebrity
We only build them up
To burn their effigies
And there's more
And I can feel it so raw
And it's calling me back to before."*

In the '60s, at this very same location, Allen Ginsberg had recited his infamous poem *Howl*. I imagined the audience then, I wondered if they too had felt like privileged witnesses, as I did now? I noticed the blooming cherry blossom tree in front of the shop was already losing its petals. "Wait," I told the tree. Behind it, just across the river, the Notre Dame Cathedral towered as Tempest's voice continued to provoke:

*"...I don't care about the surface
I care about the infinite
I carve a niche
And I hide within it
I lay down in the garden of your spirit
Asking pardon from the elders
They tell me, Kate,
Every minute is the minute to begin it..."*

Shakespeare and Company was opened in 1951 by an American, George Whitman, but originally under a different name: *Le Mistral*. Le mistral is a French regional wind but the bookstore was in fact named after Whitman's first French love. A conversation with Lawrence Ferlinghetti about the importance of free-thinking bookshops and a 500 dollar inheritance prompted Whitman, who was studying in Paris thanks to the GI Bill, to buy a bankrupt grocery on the Left Bank at 37 rue de la Bucherie, meters away from kilometer zero, the official center of Paris. As Whitman explained: "Like many of my compatriots I am something of a tumbleweed drifting in the wind. I drifted into bookselling for no better reason than a passion for books except for the classical reason of all booksellers who are self employed because they doubt if anyone else would employ them." Very quickly, the English language bookstore became the nucleus for Anglophone literary culture in bohemian Paris, attracting many expat writers from Henry Miller to James Baldwin to the Beat Generation writers, Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, and William S. Burroughs. As Anaïs Nin recorded in her Paris diaries of the 1950s: "And there by the Seine was the bookshop... an Utrillo house, not too steady on its foundations, small windows, wrinkled shutters. And there was George Whitman, undernourished, bearded,

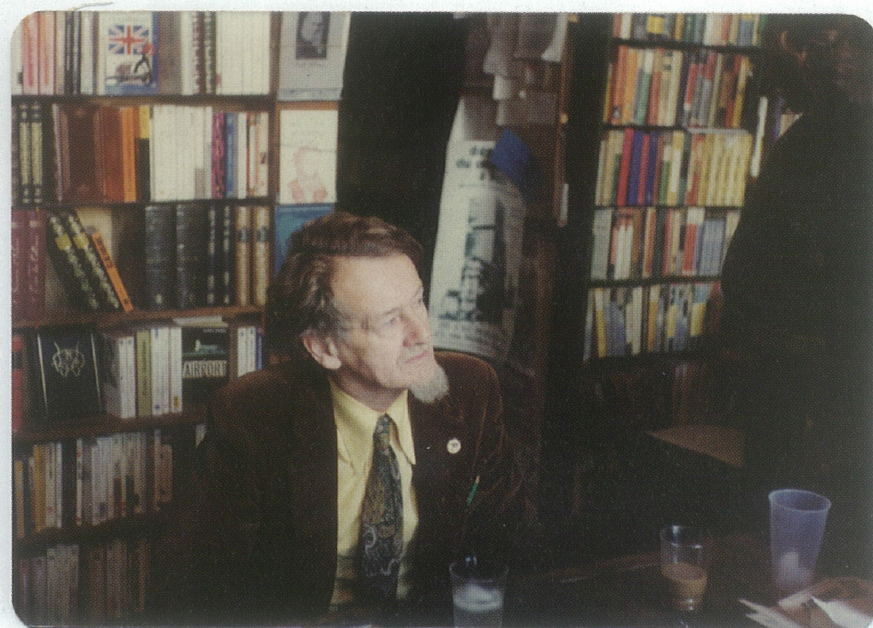
a saint among his books, lending them, housing penniless friends upstairs, not eager to sell, in the back of the store, in a small overcrowded room, with a desk, a small stove. All those who come for books remain to talk, while George tries to write letters, to open his mail, order books. A tiny, unbelievable staircase, circular, leads to his bedroom, or the communal bedroom, where he expected Henry Miller and other visitors to stay."

Readings and meetings would take place regularly in the back room of the store. Legend has it that it was at Le Mistral that William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* was "written," sourcing material from Whitman's personal library. It was also where the book was first read in public. From its inception and still to this day, the bookshop has hosted countless readings, courses and debates. Back in the day, these were often followed by a communal meal prepared by Whitman himself.

In 1964, Whitman renamed the bookshop Shakespeare and Company, in celebration of Sylvia Beach's legendary bookstore and lending library with the same name. Beach, an expatriate from New Jersey, had befriended, guided, supported, and lent books to the first generation of expat writers, among them Ernest Hemingway, Ezra Pound, and James Joyce. She famously published Joyce's *Ulysses* in 1922, when no one else would. Her store became the home of literary culture and modernism in Paris. These writers, also known as the "Lost Generation," had come to Paris in search of beauty, culture and permissive attitudes and had found refuge at Beach's Shakespeare and Company. When the Second World War hit Paris, Beach was forced to close down, and despite the rumor that Hemingway had "liberated" the bookstore at the end of the war, she never reopened.

Beach's literary oasis was the inspiration and model to Whitman's "rag and bone shop of the heart" as he called it, and so when she died, he renamed the bookstore after hers. Whitman would later describe the bookstore's name as "a novel in three words." I always liked the sound of that.





The bookstore is of course many novels in 3 words. The shop's walls are entirely covered from floor to ceiling in books. Downstairs, on the main floor, you have all the new and used books that are for sale. Science, French history, philosophy, fiction, non fiction, art, cooking, science fiction, mysteries, world history, biography and all the way in the back, next to the music and cinema section, in it's very own room, lies the poetry section. A wooden staircase leads up to the children's section and 2 more rooms, filled with books that are not for sale, but for reading. The library is a collection of Whitman's books. Many are first editions, many of them are signed, and all of them are interesting. A typewriter hidden in a small alcove invites visitors to write, and leave a poem. A piano in the other room wishes for nothing more than to be played by all, regardless of talent, but most of all, upstairs in the library rooms, you find readers browsing, reading and writing.

Beyond just selling books, the bookstore's history is punctuated with publications. The first was an avant-garde literary magazine called *Merlin* that published 7 issues, between 1952 and 1954. *Merlin* was the first to bring light to Samuel Beckett's writing. The second, the *Paris Magazine*, which Whitman dubbed "The Poor Man's Paris Review", was first published in 1967 when the bookshop was closed down by the French authorities because the store's papers were not in order. The first issue included works by Laurence Durrell, Allen Ginsberg, Jean Paul Sartre, an interview with Marguerite Duras and pictures of Vietnam at war. Only 3 issues were to see the light under his direction. As Whitman remarked "I am ready to admit I may have no more vocation as an editor than as a bookseller and will gracefully resign if someone like Mary McCarty would like to be it's editor and financier." In June 2010, more than 40 years after the first issue was published, Sylvia Beach Whitman, George Whitman's daughter, and Fatema Ahmed, the former editor of *Granta* magazine, published the 4th edition. The new issue's theme is storytelling and politics, and includes works from Luc Sante, Michel Houellebecq, Rivka Galchen and many others, and is illustrated with memorabilia from the bookshop as well as drawings from Daniel Arsham, Nigel Peake and Gregory Blackstock.

Over the decades, thousands of writers have lived in the shop. As Sylvia recounts "George always welcomed traveling writers or tumbleweeds as he affectionately called them to bunk up between the rows of books." The bookstore website boasts that more than 40,000 writers have lived in the shop, some staying for just one night, others for as long 6 years, evidence gathered by the one page biographies each visitor is asked to write. On the 2d floor, if you look carefully, you'll see the writers' makeshift "beds" that double as benches during business hours. As one journalist put it, "The deal then is the deal now: sleep in the shop, on tiny beds hidden among the book stacks; work for two hours a day helping out with 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*, in which case you can take two days." To this day, the Tumbleweed Hotel's creed remains: "Give what you can, take what you need." And as the writing on the bookshop wall proclaims: "Be not inhospitable to strangers, lest they be angels in disguise."

Whitman described his bookshop as "a socialist utopia masquerading as a bookstore". On one of the walls in the bookshop, a drawing insists: "My country is the world, my religion is humanity." While Whitman often said he was a communist, in reality he was a humanist, in other words, an optimist who believed in people. On December 14th, 2011, two days after his 98th birthday, Whitman passed away at home in the

apartment above the bookshop. He had suffered a stroke two months earlier. According to the bookstore's website, he "showed incredible strength and determination up to the end, continuing to read every day in the company of his daughter, Sylvia, his friends and his cat and dog." While he is no longer seen, his spirit remains, thanks to Sylvia, who has been presiding over the bookshop since 2004. While she has brought the place some modernity, repair and polish, she has managed to do so without altering any of its charm or character. Sylvia was born in 1981 and spent her early years in the bookshop with her father. She remembers the bookstore being theatrical and the beautiful pictures of her as a child, dispersed throughout the shop, capture a time full of laughter, light and books. After university, where she studied drama, in an attempt to reconnect with her estranged father, she returned to Paris and started working beside him in the bookshop. While she had no intention to stay longer than a summer, sure enough, she fell in love with the bookstore and is now gracefully running the show. George Whitman is quoted on the outside of the shop: "In the year 1600 our whole building was a monastery called la Maison du Mustier. In medieval times each monastery had a frère lumpier whose duty was to light the lamps at nightfall. I have been doing this for fifty years now it's my daughter's turn."

She is dedicated to keeping the bookshop's philosophy intact and also importantly, to making it relevant again. Since she's taken hold of the torch, she has created a literary festival, a literary prize, all the while continuing to host Monday night readings, Wednesday night performances, Saturday workshops for writers and Sunday tea with the Mad Hatter, Pam. It's bustling more than ever and with the right kind of electricity. Shakespeare and Company is a place that reminds you of the power of dreams and generosity. People now come from around the world to bath in the Whitman family magic, leaving their mark with love notes and poems that completely cover the wall in the children's section, also known as "the mirror of love".

In 1997, the French Ministry of culture declared Shakespeare and Company as one of the historic monuments of Paris. It's not only a monument but also "a monastery of the word," as one tumbleweed poet put it. It has become, as George Whitman had always wanted, an institution. And thanks to Sylvia, the sanctuary is here to stay.

George, bless your soul. And Sylvia, thank you for hiring me when I needed work and most importantly, thank you for keeping the dream alive for all of us to experience. Shakespeare and Company is open every day of the year, even on Christmas, from 10am to 11pm on weekdays and 11am to 11pm on weekends.

"THE BOOKSTORE IN WHICH DREAMS COME TRUE."