

Erica Wagner



The only trouble with Paris in August is that there's not much chance to practise your French — since all the French have shuddered on their clogs, every other shop or restaurant is firmly shut. One shop, however, that is not closed is Shakespeare and Company, the extraordinary bookshop that has been at the heart of Anglophone literary life in Paris since 1951, when George Whitman — in his nineties but still going strong — opened the place. It took its name from the original Shakespeare and Company, opened by Sylvia Beach in 1911.

Her spirit lives on in this Left Bank incarnation, now such an established part of the Paris scene that you could hardly call it new. Is it a library? Is it a shop? No matter — it is a place to browse, to devote, to sit outside soaking up the sun and the sound of the bells of Notre Dame. If you are a writer you might be allowed to stay here, in exchange for working in the shop and reading a book a day. Yes, a whole book, it's possible. Every Monday night there is a reading, and sometimes on other days too — and mine, last Friday, was terribly well attended, though I am certain that's very little to do with me and much to do with a loyal Shakespeare and Company audience... who also know they'll get a glass of crisp rosé at the end.

I was there because George's daughter Sylvia has invited the newly hatched Faber Academy to hold its writing courses there. I'd agreed to do

a three-day course in company with the illustrious Helen Dunmore, and had christened the series of workshops "Sense and Sensuality" — the aim being to look at ways a writer can use place in his or her work, and what better place to think about place than Paris? I had a dozen students from all over Europe. I set them reading Balzac and Patrick White. I gave them extracts from Sarah Waters, Joseph Mitchell and Sylvia Plath. I sent them out into the streets and told them to keep their eyes peeled, but to remember that a place can be conjured too, through its sounds and scents and tastes.

A haven like Shakespeare and Company is the perfect location for this, and to reconsider the question of whether "creative writing" can be taught. There are dissenters — and sometimes I am one. There is no magic formula for the teaching of writing, but then there's no formula for teaching people to play the violin, either. An idea lingers, however, that because writing is something we all do (a cheque, an e-mail, a note on the kitchen table), the people we call writers have some mystical access to a process that resists any kind of transmission. This, however, is not the case.

The writers who come here now are people seeking to spend time with those who care about the same things they do, who believe that it's valuable to sit around discussing how best to convey the sparks that must be made to fly from mind to page. Some students are just starting out, some are experienced writers. All are passionate about words and stories, about the ways writers can speak to each other, and their readers, across culture and time.

Shakespeare and Company began as the dream of one man, an ex-GI who loved books and made a life in Paris after the war. It lives now in the dreams of many others, visitors, readers, writers, students. Come by some time — you might find you never want to leave.

www.shakespeareandcompany.com

www.faber.co.uk/academy

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