



MEGHAN DAVIDSON LADY PHOTO

The shelves of Shakespeare and Company are cluttered with books, including classics and works from independent publishers.

Cozy shop a true labour of literary love

Parisian bookstore preserves the old while nurturing the new

MEGHAN DAVIDSON LADY
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Paris—The space is cramped. A tiny room with its outer peripheries rimmed with built-in benches, and chairs squished into any remaining openings.

Books are scattered everywhere; they rise in towers from the floor and litter the window ledge. The focal point of the room is a wooden table upon which sit mismatched cups and plates piled high with *Madeleines*, sponge cakes, and water cookies.

The age of the people filling the room varies widely from 20-somethings to septuagenarians. As each person is handed a cup by the host, they are asked to introduce themselves.

Everyone speaks English, with a variety of accents. It's 4 p.m. on a Sunday and people are here to observe a long-standing tradition. Tea is being served at Paris's historic anglophone bookstore and literary hub, Shakespeare and Company.

Tucked into 37 rue de la Bucherie, on the left bank overlooking le Seine and Notre Dame, Shakespeare and Company is a bohemian outpost in a world increasingly dominated by the large chain bookstores.

The shop is a wealth of eclectic details. You may discover a cat curled up in the poetry section. Upstairs among the many books is a shrine to the memory of Anne Frank.

Paris is a city steeped in literature with roughly 900 bookshops, yet Shakespeare and Company is unique. Founded in 1913 by an American, Sylvia Beach, it was a favourite with Hemingway, James Joyce and their contemporaries.

The shop was forced to close during the German occupation of France, but reopened later, and in a new location, under the ownership of George Whitman, who retained the essence of the original store and continued to welcome writers such as Henry Miller and Anaïs Nin. George is now 95 years



PHOTO COURTESY OF SHAKESPEARE AND COMPANY

Shakespeare and Company was founded in 1913 and was a favourite spot for writers from Hemingway to Anaïs Nin. It still provides support — and accommodation — to young authors.

old and while he continues to live in an apartment above his beloved shop, his 28-year-old daughter, Sylvia, has taken over the management duties.

Sylvia is petite. She has an English accent and gestures with her hands as she speaks. Colette, the shop dog, mills around her legs.

Describing the philosophy of the bookshop, she says, "We are not interested in returning a book because it hasn't sold within three months. We're not interested in just having Dan Brown's latest book. Our priority is to have a really wide selection and we really try and support the independent publishers as well. It's really a community, there's a lot of people that consider it their second home."

Sylvia is not speaking metaphorically; the bookstore is indeed an actual second home to many writers who pass through Paris. On first inspection the shop, with its tiny ancient rooms and walls piled high with books, does not seem to have space for all of its retail, let alone beds.

Yet Shakespeare and Company, as well as selling writers' works, provides them with accommodation.

"I think the most unique thing is that we have young writers staying in the bookshop," says Sylvia. "I don't think there is any other bookshop that does that. We house young writers. That, in itself, gives it a very different atmosphere because you have them around. They're making it their home. They're reading. They're writing in the corners, so it makes it sort of a very organic feel."

Writers continue to be welcomed at the store and given a tiny bed within the shop in exchange for working a few hours each day in the store and, vitally, reading a minimum of one book a day for the duration of their stay. There are six beds and it is unusual to have a vacancy for long.

Few of Paris's many bookshops possess the mythology that surrounds Shakespeare and Company or its history.

The bookshop can't, however, rely solely on its past and the currency of its name to remain relevant. Sylvia's management strives to ensure the shop continues to

engage with modern Paris.

"I'm being very boring and trying to put a lot of organization into the shop because there really wasn't any. ... things weren't classified alphabetically. It really was a treasure trove that you had to spend hours going through, which is fine; I've tried to keep that sort of spirit, but have it so that people who are in a hurry, and they just want to get *The Great Gatsby* now, can do that."

As well as lending its space to writing workshops, the store — under Sylvia's direction — has launched a biennial literary festival and is hosting two readings for the Paris literary festival, "Paris en toutes lettres," running now throughout the city.

Sylvia's earliest memory of the bookshop is of running around the crowded store without shoes and having young writers read her fairy tales in the children's section.

As her memory references, the quiet magic of Shakespeare and Company lies in its warm unpretentiousness and in its enduring commitment to promoting writers and writing.

Meghan Davidson Lady is a Toronto-based freelance writer.

Richard Ouzanian's 36c Meals in ... column will return on the first Saturday of August

