

As The Age Of The Physical Book Retreats, The Cult Of The Physical Book Advances

The idiot is missing. Or rather, a hundred “Idiots” have failed to arrive. And as Paris awakes on the shortest day of the year, there is grave concern at Shakespeare and Company at 37 rue de la Bûcherie. Dostoyevsky’s novel was supposed to be handed out to congregants at tomorrow’s funeral of the bookstore’s American founder, George Whitman, who passed away on December 14, three days after his 98th birthday. As an Irish bookseller explains to me, between patient calls to the distributor, “George felt as if it was written about him.”

Though Whitman may well have been as naïve as Dostoyevsky’s protagonist, Prince Myshkin – and, from the testimony of Anaïs Nin, as saintly – his fate was not that of the insane asylum, though bookselling might be thought of as a particular form of madness. Instead, the storefront pays *homage* to a man who used an odd educational provision in the G.I. Bill to stock his store and lending library (whose lease he purchased in 1951 with an inheritance of \$500) and lived to see it become, inarguably, the most famous bookstore in the world. There are photos – in the most dashing, he is dressed in a paisley jacket and tie, looking, for all the world like a psychedelic Leon Trotsky or a malnourished and goateed Sean Penn – and there are lengthy obituaries from the *New York Times* and the French newspaper, *Liberation*, pasted to the windows.

A young woman, in a tight fitting red hat that looks like an upturned crocus, stops with her blue suitcase and patiently reads through them in the rain. She becomes a flood as the morning wanes and tourism waxes. There are votive candles and flowers and a poem, now sodden, paying tribute to George’s “lamplighter spirit;” there are many more tributes on

a large poster board inside. There will be champagne tomorrow night at the store for anyone who wants to drop by.

Shakespeare and Co. would have enjoyed a solid footnote in literary history for the writers who gathered for literary conversation not just *before* they were famous, but *after*: Samuel Beckett, Henry Miller, an ungracious Allen Ginsberg. And it evolved into literature's Santiago de Compostela not only for the quality of its literary pilgrims, but for the quantity that took alms and shelter under its eaves. Some 50,000 "tumbleweeds" – drifters, grifters, aspirant writers and common readers – slept above the store during Whitman's reign in exchange for a little time working in the shop and a lot more time spent reading (slacking in the latter task would wear your welcome thin).

And then, of course, there is the name, a *ménage à trois* of literary bloodlines. Whitman's store was first called le Mistral before Sylvia Beach declared, at a reading in 1958, that she was passing the name and the spirit of, her former and famed bookstore, Shakespeare and Co., to him.

Beach had seen her little bookstore and lending library turn into a salon for a generation of American writers who made a home in Paris in the 1920s and 30s: Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ezra Pound – all showed up to chat, borrow books and mix with the local literary and artistic talent. Hemingway devotes a chapter to the store in his work "A Moveable Feast," noting of Beach, not only her implacable generosity, but that "no one that I ever knew was nicer to me."

But above all, and what would seal her place in literature's pantheon, Beach became a veritable obstetrician to the birth of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, stepping in to become publisher after a New York judge declared an early extract, published in *The Little Review*, obscene and American and English printers balked. In a long-drawn out stroke of genius, she figured that French typesetters wouldn't understand English and therefore miss all the naughty bits. Out of such ignorance came the most influential novel of the 20th century.

Beach shuttered her store with the arrival of the Second World War, and though Hemingway officially liberated it with his company of soldiers (before liberating the wine cellar at the Ritz), it never officially opened again. George named his daughter – and the present proprietor – Sylvia Beach Whitman in her honor.

Writing in the Guardian, the British novelist Jeanette Winterson said that Whitman “was an affront to modern capitalism, because he ran a successful business that put people, culture and books before money;” but that’s just the kind of silly thing writers say when they are being sentimental. Bookselling can be many things, but it is always, in the end, about balancing the books. And while Shakespeare and Co.’s fortunes sometimes courted misfortune, the fact is the shop now trades on the kind of association commerce can only dream of: Genius met here. It is as much a portal to the past as its grander neighbor, the great cathedral of Notre Dame.

But what is remarkable beyond the store’s unique literary genealogy is that, at a time when digital publishing is undoing and repackaging so much of literary culture, its nature as a store is generalizable to small bookstores everywhere. It is intimate and surprising, serious and fun. It is a curated space which is a source for curating one’s sense of the world and of self.

Indeed, if the idea of curating is one of the most significant cultural forms of the 21st century (and I believe it is, given the volume of cultural material available to us at this moment in history), the small, well-curated bookstore will not simply thrive as a commercial enterprise, it will be culturally indispensable.

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As the age of the physical book retreats, the cult of the physical book will advance. E books are much like canned food in the 1950s, new, convenient – and excitingly so. But as with food, taste and desire changes. There will be a point when how literature is produced and distributed and consumed becomes much more important to a great

many people than simple convenience. In one sense, the point is already here: small bookstores *are* surviving where their big box rivals now fall like dinosaurs. What they have to offer the marketplace will only become more obvious as that market seems to shift further in the direction of digitization.

Soon – or already, in the case of the superlative small bookstore chain in the UK, Daunt Books – agile booksellers will return to their origins and become book publishers. Their offerings may never have the reach and profit of the mass-market ebook, but as the digital market expands the quiddities of the physical book will become more and more compelling to more and more people. Hand set, hand bound, rag paper editions will suddenly feel novel.

Small bookstores will be the new monasteries for the printed word in a flat-screen backlit age. And then, somewhere, perhaps, some Sylvia Beach-like devotee of the cult of the book will set up shop and...

“What date is it?” asks a bookseller,.

“The twenty first,” replies a second. “It is the winter equinox.”

“And then tomorrow, light starts to come back into the world,” says a third,

And in the gloom of morning Paris, as I scribble the exchange into my notebook, I think, where else but the most famous bookstore on earth does one get a more perfect ending? And yes, in case you are wondering, the Idiots all showed up in time too.