

A woman with short, wavy blonde hair is seated at a dark wooden table. She is wearing a black blazer over a black top with a subtle pattern. In the foreground, a clear glass vase holds several vibrant pink lilies with green leaves. Behind her, a mirror reflects her image. The background features a wall with a colorful, intricate paisley pattern and a window that looks out onto a cityscape with multi-story buildings.

SYLVIA

BEACH

WHITMAN

INTERVIEW

Kingston Trinder

PHOTOGRAPHY

Gael Trupo

Garlanded by golden touselles, wreathed about by incandescent Parisian dusk, Sylvia Beach Whitman is the sylvan proprietress of *Shakespeare & Company*, that wondrous catacomb of a bookstore found at 37 rue de la Bûcherie, Paris. A labyrinthine assembly of tumbledown chambers and labouring tumbleweeds, ramshackle shelves of every imaginable construction, house tomes of every believable character, all the way up to the much fabled eaves. Here, as one wanders amidst the pantheon of Hemingway, Miller, Kerouac and Fitzgerald, one encounters not an orthodox bookstore, but rather, an enchanted wonderland, a citadel of memory, dream and narrative, where fictions remain forever a fact. And fact serves as a mere barley to fiction's mill. Joyous Sylvia reigns sage and benevolent over her paper kingdom, attended by various vagabond writers and wistful daydreamers, frères lampiers equally entranced by the endless majesty of letters, words, and tales whispered near and far.

A grandmother who was interviewed here observed, "This is the time that we need to go out; this is the time that we need to read Hemingway's, *A Moveable Feast*." And it took everyone by complete surprise, because the fact was, she had gone and bought so many copies of *A Moveable Feast* that now we're out of stock in France. *A Moveable Feast* is such a celebration of that wonderfully enlightened Paris, where artists and writers are together, all night, at the terraces of cafés, drinking and exchanging ideas, being out and about.



Has Shakespeare & Company become then, synonymous with a celebration of that past, in spite of all these latest adversities? Does that suggest too, the age of innocence for Paris is no more? We're all still in shock. The targets of attack are so unspecific. And that we are all

the targets of such, I think has deeply troubled people. I still find it very hard to put anything into words about it, because there are layers upon layers of confusion. Not only are we apparently against a group that sees this as a historical movement progressing toward the apocalypse, but there's also the fact that it reveals so much about society here. The fact that most of the attackers came from here, literally upon our doorsteps, reveals problems within Paris. And now there truly is an emergency. I'm finding it very comforting just to read as much, and to watch as many documentaries about the subject; knowledge seems to help the shock in a peculiar way, because you can begin to understand much more. Otherwise, it's been very nice being here in the bookshop; the bookshop is such a nice time travel escape where it's so comforting just to be physically around books, around all these stories and other people that adore books. It feels like a safe haven, even though I'm quite sure we're just as much as a target as anyone else here in Paris. But you do still somehow feel more psychologically safe.

Would you say that the bookstore might also be seen as a wanted repository of other narratives and memories about a Paris that is now under siege? Obviously I have a very familiar, personal story with the bookshop, but I'm also very aware and struck by the fact that many other people also feel like they have an equally personal relationship with the bookshop. My father used to say he wanted people to walk up to the first floor and feel as if they had inherited their own personal book department upon the River Seine. I believe that it does, that he did achieve that in the way that it feels so welcoming and intimate. And then, combined with being an environment so full of all these stories and imagination, certainly has an impact.



*There's a tendency to suggest that there's a nostalgic romanticism attached to the potentially anachronistic nature of bookstores. What would you say, is that enduring attraction to continuity with the past? I witness nostalgia all the time in the bookshop. But I don't know whether that's about being in a bookshop, but specifically a bookshop in the shadow of Notre Dame. Or our historical connection with the very first Shakespeare and Co., which has occurred from the fifties. There's so much nostalgia for the 'Lost Generation'. And because that era is something that's so relevant and talked about with us, I see nostalgia a great deal. Having also our young writers in residence, *The Tumbleweeds*, they are, in themselves, very nostalgic as a collection. But I really enjoy that, because actually they're often in their early twenties, and there's something about being at that age and not quite having yet found your path in life and wanting, dreaming about a certain creativity, but not having achieved it yet. But being around that, actually brings a certain magic. So you can say that in just that very nostalgia, there is actually nourishment of that well-known imagination and magic of Paris that is very romantic.*

Could Shakespeare & Company ever be viewed as a protagonist itself, long mythologised as this bookstore, by both visitors and writers? I think



the bookshop absolutely can. For me, it already feels like a character in so many people's lives and imaginations. And that in a sense is what's quite hard sometimes to engage with, because people often arrive with significant expectations of being absorbed into this well of ideas and history. I know I certainly miss it when I'm not near the bookshop, which is rather a strange experience to miss a place, rather than a person. There's a very strong energy here. I do believe that part of it comes from being so close to the Seine and Notre Dame, which are both highly magnetic sites in Paris. I remember I was at the register once, and two French geologists came into the bookshop. They stopped immediately as soon as they arrived. "Ah! Do you feel that?" one said to the other. And the other said, "Yes, I do! That's incredibly powerful." As if they were totally mad. But it turned out they were talking about a very strong current of water that was flowing directly underneath the bookshop. And they were right. I thought that was amazing, wow, this is getting rather mystical. But I did figure that explains a great deal. This bookstore has become sort of a magnet, particularly to people who are somewhat lost, or they're not sure of what path they're upon in life, or lost in the sense of feeling lost within a foreign country.



Do you ever experience a sense of custodianship or responsibility to enact some of those

narratives in a way that's best for their authors, given the fact that visitors are often superimposing narratives and experiences upon your environment? No, I had to learn quite quickly that I shouldn't be territorial about this space. Obviously, at the age of twenty-one, I went through a couple of years of being, "This is mine - no, you're not allowed to do that - no, no, no," and trying - I guess that was just the process of trying to find the limits and how to imagine this space and my own feelings about it. But, no, I had to come quite quickly to realising that that's actually the beauty of this place, the sharing aspect, and that it's alright for other people to feel territorial about it. I know it's what my father would've wanted; he always talked about it as his socialist utopia masquerading as a bookstore. I love that. I think it's actually a strange socialist utopian experiment that's still ongoing. And I think that's really extraordinary, that it can still survive in the context of the modern day world.

When visiting the bookstore, one sees immediately, that the relationship is far more symbiotic between patrons, readers, writers and everyone else; it's never a purely commercial exchange. No, thank heavens. That's the thing that I think is so very different. The fact that we're selling books already lays down this very particular exchange and business model. But then on top of that is that the symbiotic relationship is very much honed by the fact that we have a very organic cycle whereby you have aspiring writers sleeping upstairs, tapping away on old typewriter machines that barely work and then coming and helping with the selling of books by published writers downstairs or hosting readings with published writers. So there's this very kind of nice, organic cycle that's occurring. My father George was so utterly inspired, as I think that we all are here, by Sylvia Beach. And for her, it was always much more important to lend books



than to sell them. Her priority was to exchange books, to lend books, to have this free exchange of French and Anglophone culture. And so we've tried to continue that idea, and especially the main way we've tried to do it is have this first floor as a reading room. The idea is we're trying to make it clear to people that if you come here, you don't have to buy something. There's no obligation. If you want, you can just sit upstairs and read until eleven at night. And it's quite rare. You don't find that in shops in general, in commercial shops. I love the fact that there's just this whole different idea about time in a space, almost. You can be slow. There's no obligation to buy something. Books are slow to write, they're slow to read. You can also be slow to sit, think about buying them, and think about just being around them. Mythology is part of this place. And it's wonderful that it's a place that actually inspires people to tell stories.

City Lights publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti once wonderfully described Shakespeare & Company as "a literary octopus with an insatiable appetite for print, taking over the beat-up building room-by-room, floor-by-floor, a veritable nest of books." Is that true still for you? I would really hope that Lawrence Ferlinghetti, in the thirties, would come and give me that very same description. I would really hope so, because I love that description. It's wacky, and

it's wonderful. Part of the reason I love it is because it's so true. That's what I recognise, and it's so well worded. We've done a great deal of cleaning up, but we've gotten to that stage where we've gone through everything. We've gone through every book and found every stash of Francs that George left behind. We've done all of those things, but now, and in a way it was sort of necessary, it was the right moment, we've physically touched every corner of the bookshop, both because a lot of things needed renovating, but also because it was a different generation for the bookshop. I think, in a way, I needed to feel like I had really understood every corner. The diversity of books that are here are wonderful. Just being able to put your hand on every single one, it felt like something that actually was an essential process, without even being conscious of that being the process. But now I've almost done it all, and that was wholly necessary. But no, I certainly hope someone would describe the bookshop still like that today.



And is the bookstore for you still 'a socialist utopia masquerading as a bookstore'? Oh absolutely, wild and bohemian. Just that juxtaposition of having people sleeping for free, and often they don't have a lot of money whilst staying here. It's become such an integral part of the bookshop and something that I'm actually valuing more and more. Because the bookshop has expanded



The diversity of books that are here are wonderful.

Just being able to put your hand on every single one, it felt like something that actually was an essential process, without even being conscious of that being the process.

and I've really had to immerse myself within all the figures and administration that utopianism gives to everyone's story, which is the most important part.



Finally, after leading the bookstore for over a decade now, do you believe you've fulfilled your father's bequeathing analogy of a frère lampier, or medieval monastery's lamplighter? And is there an obligation or expectation to continue effecting such? Fortunately, I don't spend too much time thinking about that. Because otherwise, I think I wouldn't be able to do anything.

I needed to do these different projects like the café and other events to really make the bookshop more of my own. When my father was still around, I did such things in a different way: I put up a tent in the park next door, and I created

a festival with lots of events and readings and George, he said, "Now why don't you do it in the bookshop?" And I was often, "But, Dad, you're in the bookshop, and I can't do it the way I want to do it in the bookshop, because you keep locking all the authors in and telling them they can't stay at the hotel on the corner. They should be staying with us", and it's just very awkward." You know, we had this kind of unusual dynamic, two very different ways of looking at the world. And so, I created those occurrences externally then, but now I've been creating them within. I don't know. It's such a big question. I feel like now it's the moment where the bookshop's expanded, and it very much feels like I'm creating that with a wonderful group of people, because I'm obviously not doing it alone. And I've built a collection of people that I absolutely love, and who are incredibly loyal to the bookshop. So I'd say that there's now a plural, frères lampiers. Including the dog of course, and the cat.

