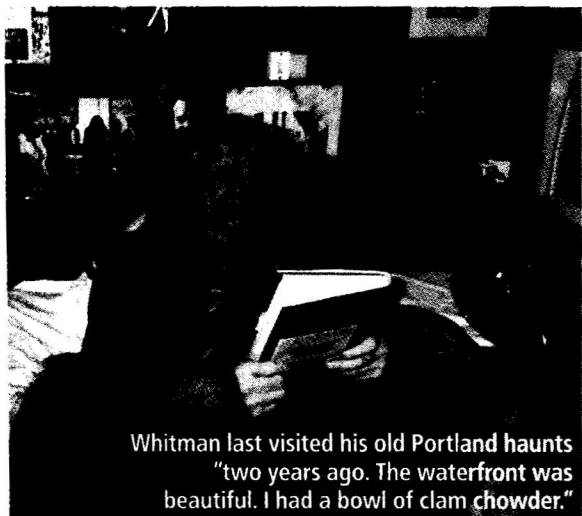




The Don Quixote of Paris?

Summers in Maine formed the star chart that young George Whitman followed to the City of Lights.

BY COLIN SARGENT



Whitman last visited his old Portland haunts "two years ago. The waterfront was beautiful. I had a bowl of clam chowder."

Maybe you can't keep them down on the farm once they've seen Páree. But Maine ex-pat George Whitman has done okay for himself in the City of Lights.

Since 1951 he has owned Shakespeare & Co., the most famous bookstore in the world, on the Left Bank in Paris, directly across the Seine River from Notre Dame.

Location, location, location, right?

Founded by Sylvia Beach in the 1920s—and the bibliographical north star to literary greats from James Joyce to Ernest Hemingway, Ezra Pound, and T.S. Eliot—Shakespeare & Co. is still a nearly mystical destination for expatriate writers in search of themselves and Paris, thanks to Whitman, who is an energetic 93 years old today.

"He can see you now," Ron Bauer, a rafter/lit type who manages the bookstore, says. "He's been resting the last few minutes because he walked all over Paris with me this afternoon, but now he's awake. Come on!"

Bounding outside onto the cobblestones, Bauer ducks into a neighboring doorway and sprints up four flights of spiral stairs two steps at a time.

"He goes up all these stairs on his own?" ask of George Whitman.

"No one knows how he does it."

A door leads to a hall, a kitchen—both filled with books—and beyond it, two beautiful women, fully clothed, in repose on a bed. It's hard not to look, especially when a ginger-colored bulldog approaches my pant leg, throws her head up, and howls. One of the young women calls out "Sorry" and negotiates for the dog's retreat while Bauer says, "Just go around here," deftly sidestepping the disturbance as if it is decorative.

Darting to the left, he throws open a hallway door to another bedroom, where George Whitman, also fully clothed, lies on a bed, looking up.

"Here he is," Bauer says.

Visiting Whitman in his element is like visiting Santa Claus at the North Pole. Except it's Paris, warm and beautiful.

"Well, I mean my great uncle was the pastor of All Souls Church in Portland for a while, and president of the Westbrook Seminary [now the University of New England]," Whitman says. "I used to spend my summers in Norway, Maine, on Alpine Street, at my grandmother's house. There was no special view."

Involuntarily I look out the window at Notre Dame. This view is special. Not only does he own the original bookstore at ground level, with the famous cathedral reflecting in all its windows, he owns three apartments directly above it which he keeps for visiting writers. The apartments are worth millions upon millions.

Whitman looks like a cross between Don Quixote and Kurt Vonnegut, his hair hoary and white. He must be six foot four.

"When my great uncle died, I inherited his library," Whitman explains about the windfall that launched the 54-year adventure he has followed here.

His favorite literary overnight guests? "Laurence Durrell, Ferlinghetti, Ginsberg." Like T.S. Eliot and Hemingway, all have conducted readings in the warm air on the

cobblestones outside.

"You're only here for one day? You can't stay for the poetry reading tonight?" he asks, astonished that anyone might need to be somewhere else. "It's at 7."

"I'm sorry. I have to catch a plane."

Whitman smiles back as if he's Peter Pan and I'm missing my last chance at Neverland.

"I was actually born in Salem, Massachusetts," he says. "Maine was a summer thing. Do you know the population of Salem?"

"Forty thousand?"

"Exactly, and twice that number are writers from Salem who have turned up late on a Monday afternoon looking for a place to stay. I put up more people in my three apartments!"

In case I didn't make it clear, if you love books enough, he'll put you up for free.

His favorite place in the City of Lights?

"My bookstore is the whole world here. So many spirits. A girl wrote me a letter. She wants to work here. She's visited twice and wants to stay. You can see her letters on our Mirror of Love. I wrote her back and said why shouldn't you come? The most exquisite form of human experience is to be a young girl in Paris."

Bauer gives me a tour of the bookstore, which is full of patrons paging through gorgeous first-edition books. "This is the Wishing Well, and here is the Mirror of Love," he says, dashing up swirling staircases reminiscent of the old Levinsky's in Portland. Without a guide I'll never find my way out.

"How'd you end up here?" I ask Bauer.

"I'm from San Jose. I'd heard of this bookstore my whole life and visited Paris a few years ago with an older writer." He shrugs. "I couldn't leave." ■

