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Yewell: Legendary bookstore owner left indelible mark

By John Yewell

Posted December 17, 2011 at 3 p.m.

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PHOTO BY REMY DE LA MAUVINIÈRE, ASSOCIATED PRESS FILE

This photo shows the Shakespeare & Co., bookstore founded by George Whitman, who died Wednesday. Nestled on the left bank of the Seine River in Paris, Shakespeare & Co., is a veritable warren of books, stacked with volumes from floor to ceiling. It has long been known as a haven for writers and would-be writers.

George Whitman is dead.

The proprietor of arguably the world's most famous bookstore, Paris's Shakespeare & Co., was 98 Wednesday when he finally "shuffled off this mortal coil" in his apartment above the store.

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He was a spry 38 when he started the venture in 1951 under a different name. Some years later, with the blessing of Sylvia Beach — who ran the original Shakespeare & Co., between the wars and did so much to advance the careers of James Joyce and others — George adopted the name he now leaves behind.

It didn't take long for history to develop the hiccups. George was in the vanguard of a new expatriate movement, and soon included among his friends a Who's Who of postwar literary giants, including Allen Ginsberg, Anais Nin, Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Samuel Beckett.

Over the years, he turned the former grocery at 37 Rue de la Bûcherie, across the Seine from Notre Dame, into a combination bookstore, youth hostel, performance venue and tea house. Thousands, mostly young people, made the reborn Shakespeare & Co., the first stop on their European tour.

In the summer of 1977, I had just graduated from college, and like many fit my life into a backpack and headed off to Paris. His raspy voice welcomes my memory to what he called the Tumbleweed Hotel. In exchange for an hour of work and a weak promise to read a book a day, you were allowed to share the couches and beds upstairs with the generations of bedbugs that preceded you.

You were also asked to write a short autobiography for his collection. We mostly twenty-somethings did our writer-wannabe best to infuse our brief lives with meaning. It was what you did there.

George was, by turns, generous and ornery, but always serious about encouraging us to write. There were poetry readings on Monday nights and occasional visits from high-profile writers.

He rolled out the heavy literary artillery to build a sense of community. "Be not inhospitable to strangers," said one quote from Yeats on the wall, "Lest they be angels in disguise."

Angels would have surprised no one. Shakespeare & Co., was a crossroads where magical encounters took place. At one reading that summer, I ran into another Venturan, Ed Titus (Buena High, class of '71), with whom I had worked on our high school literary magazine, "Pawprint."

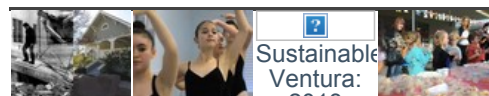
Imagine. Buena High once had money for a literary magazine.

Marriage to a French woman kept me coming back for the next two decades.

George never seemed to get older because he was always old and his literary habits were constant and colorful. He kept a series of dogs, each named Baskerville.

He loved to claim, wryly, to be the bastard great grandson of Walt Whitman. He named his only child, who now runs the store, Sylvia Beach Whitman — whose mother, Felicity Leng, was a friend of mine before she married George.

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As the way we buy and read books changed, George's devotion to literature never wavered. In 2006, his contributions to the literary community earned him France's Order of the Arts and Letters.

Eventually, George's island of Anglophone Bohemia on the Left Bank receded in my rearview mirror, and his status became a kind of parlor game among friends who'd known him. Was he still alive? Yes, and still working. Goodness, he must be 98, we'd say jokingly. We'd never known his precise age.

And he was, just two days past that birthday, when he finally succumbed to the depredations of a stroke suffered two months earlier.

George is to be buried in Paris's renowned Père Lachaise cemetery, the final resting place of many great artists and writers. Not bad for a guy born in East Orange, N.J. And entirely appropriate.

John Yewell is a freelance writer and 1972 graduate of Buena High School. He is completing a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing at San Francisco State University.

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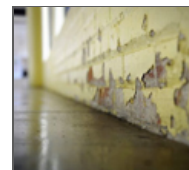
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