

Bookshops: A Reader's History

BY JORGE CARRIÓN

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THE TASK OF EXPLORING the role and function of bookshops, either in a local context or in general, is a daunting one. And, given the considerable output on the topic by booksellers themselves as well as bibliophilic authors, bookshops are equally a subject of endless fascination. As many shops as there are (and were) throughout the world, there are readers who visit them and develop bonds that travel with customers back to their personal libraries. This web of relations—the store, the reader, the books and the journey—is full of potential for weaving the present with the past, the fantastic with the real.

Writers typically approach the topic either by way of a memoir or as a more distant, analytic social history. Jorge Carrión, in an astonishing display of nuanced historical research and years of fastidiously documented personal travel, has managed to do both with *Bookshops: A Reader's History*. Initially published in 2013 in Spanish by Editions Anagrama, *Bookshops* is now available in English, translated by Peter Bush and edited by Stephen Henninghan, as part of Biblioasis's International Translation series.

A novelist, curator, travel writer and educator, Carrión merges these sensibilities from the book's outset, consummating a passion cultivated over the course of two decades. Through its chapters, he demonstrates a skilful use of travel memoir, political commentary and literary criticism. The result is a labyrinth of literary references, personal anecdotes, and interconnections between the lines on the page, the roads and alleys of the world, and the rows upon rows of books awaiting a reader. Carrión remarks that unlike libraries, with their rigidity and stuffiness, bookshops are always in a state of flux and exchange, hubs with "numerous centres and infinite peripheries."

Carrión explores this constellation of ideas through a collection of essays that engage the past, present and future of bookshops, described

as a "psychogeography of bibliophilic passion." The enthusiasm of his connections and the mix of familiar names and places with unknown counterparts reflect the feeling one gets from entering into a bookstore itself. It can be vertiginous and overwhelming, but the process of reading *Bookshops* is ultimately a rewarding pursuit.

The topics Carrión confidently writes about range from the elusive notion of "the first bookshop" to the resilience of bookshops in the face of dictatorial oppression (on this topic, Carrión provides a close reading of many stores within Latin America as well as a few in Eastern Europe). He also interrogates (often passively) accepted literary myths of places associated with modern literary history. Foremost among them is the romantic image of Tangiers, as presented in the lives of Paul and Jane Bowles, Jean Genet and the Beats. In doing so, he examines how these figures might have interacted with (or avoided) the rich local culture around them, while at the same time acknowledging how these locales provided refuge. Carrión also explores the potential of bookshops to be engines of culture, such as the fruitful combination in early-20th-century Paris of La Maison des Amis des Livres (owned by Adrienne Monnier) and Sylvia Beach's Shakespeare and Company.

The above topics only scratch the surface. The breadth and depth of Carrión's efforts are, again, much like a bookshop: better felt than described. What is striking is Carrión's adeptness at demonstrating the multi-faceted nature of the written word and its proprietors: that a bookshop is at once shaped by the historical context within which it is formed but also is itself, at times, a refuge from that potentially hostile reality, a parallel world carefully crafted by the books selected and the operators who choose them. Exceptions exist, of course, such as the chilling account of bookstores receiving bomb threats following the publishing of

Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*. Cody's Books in Berkeley, California actually had a bomb explode within its walls and preserved the damage after its closure in 2008, a reminder of the risks booksellers run to make controversial titles available.

One question waits in the wings of this book, which Carrión addresses by way of a sober conclusion: "Why now?" In a world in which technology is advancing rapidly, and international economic forces fuse local and global economies in lockstep, the bookshop, especially the ones Carrión explores, is surrounded on all sides by the imminent risk of elimination. There are moments throughout *Bookshops* where the stark reality of the bookshop's precarious conditions becomes clear as he discovers (via Google, ironically) that yet another shop that left an impression on him has closed. In this final discussion, Carrión's idea of the bookshop comes into full relief as a dynamic entity that has always been a site of transition and transmission.

Much of what Carrión's explores in this book will resonate deeply with bibliophiles, leaving them emphatically nodding with every page. Subtitled *A Reader's History*, it is also a book for readers. There is plenty of room to drift in Carrión's collection of bookshops and, much like the shops visited and cities lived in during its creation, this book gains richness with each read. Carrión inspires the reader to become familiar with the vital references made within *Bookshops*, both places to visit and authors to read. He inspires a wanderlust to explore worlds within the aisles of shops (both familiar and foreign) and avenues that lead one to the essential social space of the bookshop, a space only activated by our presence within them.

~ REVIEWED BY SPENCER W. STUART



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Everyday Artist

ALTHOUGH LITTLE PERSONAL information about Franklin Bittner is readily available, his artistic works are widely distributed. The *Benezit Dictionary of Artists* says he studied with William Merritt Chase and Robert Henri, prominent American artists and art educators in New York, in the early years of the 20th century. His illustrations generally depicted American locations and architecture, including the cover and interior images for the *Book of Home Building and Decoration*, published by Doubleday in 1912, a map of New York in 1664 that included contemporary landmarks of 1927, and a series of collectible poster stamps

showcasing New York landmarks and scenes.

Bittner was also among 175 artists who entered the poster contest held to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the settlement of Newark, New Jersey, in 1916. One of several men offering opinions about the contest for the October 1915 edition of *The Poster*, a publication of the Poster Advertising Association headquartered in Chicago, Bittner wrote about his views of art and advertising. He lamented that design was typically given less consideration than the message, printing and physical product of the advertisement—in essence, the artist didn't have creative licence to lead the project. Bittner