

My French Book Tour:
“Le Marketing” from Paris to Provence
By Jonah Raskin

On a recent trip, by car and by train, across France, to promote the publication, in French, of my book, *A la Recherche de B. Traven* - originally published in English as *My Search for B. Traven* - I went to small, independent bookstores - *librairies* - from Paris to Provence. For two, intense weeks, I heard the French talk about the latest, best selling novels, how they felt about fast food, red wine, their national elections, and, of course, sex. Again and again, I heard dire predictions about the impending deluge in the literary world. Everywhere, I encountered fears about the end of book culture in France, especially from readers who grew up with Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, existentialism and the new novel, but also from teachers with students who don't read, don't want to read, and who would rather surf the Internet, and send emails, than explore a work of literature. And, in France, of course, the end of book culture means the end of civilization, at least for the generation over the age of, say, 35.

But I also saw, everywhere I went, the abiding French love, not so much for ordinary “livres” - a word that translates as “books” -but for “bouquins” that literally means “old books,” though the English words, “old books,” cannot begin to convey the emotional charge that “bouquins” conveys. Between a “livre” and a “bouquin” there's a world of difference. A “livre” you might buy in a store or study at the Sorbonne, but a “bouquin” is a pal, or an intimate friend or lover, and Frenchmen and Frenchwomen above the age 35, can't understand why anyone would not want a “bouquin” by his or her side, as a traveling companion on the Metro, or while sitting in a café, or on a park bench.

In a way, my own, little book tour played a small part in a larger culture war to preserve books, the art of translation, and the independent bookstore. I was delighted to have the opportunity to play that part; after all, I had read the work of B. Traven for the first time in Paris, in French, at the age of 24. For years, I felt that I owed the French a debt of gratitude. Now, I could pay it back, and with interest.

During my two-week tour, I discovered that French bookstore owners rely, more than ever before, on “Le Marketing,” as they call it, as though it's something foreign to them. In fact, the French are as savvy about marketing as Anglo-Americans. They have devised their own strategies, without borrowing from abroad, and they rely on their Ministry of Culture, which provides financial support for publishing, marketing and the diffusion of reading. Moreover, French booksellers employ aggressive promotional schemes, shrewd public relations ploys, and spend huge budgets on advertising campaigns.

As I learned, by walking around the Latin Quarter for a whole day - until I was ready to drop from exhaustion - many, if not most, Left Bank bookstores specialize. They carry books *only* about Poland, or *only* about film, or *just* about medieval history, and, inside stores, books are divided and sub-divided into categories, by gender, genre and geography, as well as into the ever-popular police dramas, and literary soap operas that are set in rural communities. It's

France, and so, not unexpectedly, stores pair books and beverages. They even make specific suggestions about what alcohol to consume while reading a “bouquin”: Burgundy with Balzac; Champagne with Colette, for example. Of course, money also plays a big part in Le Marketing. Publishers, like Acts de Sud – which is based in Arles, and which is helping to shift the balance of power in publishing from Paris to Provence - spend thousands of Euros to turn their prized authors into household names. All over France, I saw Paul Auster’s face plastered in train stations to promote the publication of his novel, *Dans le scriptorium*.

My own, much more modest, publishers, Les Fondateurs de Briques (The Brick Burners), is also based in Arles, the birthplace of Mistral, the Nobel Prize winning French author, and the town’s guiding literary spirit. Jean-Francois Bourdic, the thirty-something founder of Les Fondateurs de Briques, grew up, like many young Frenchmen of his generation, devoted to the novels of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler and Chester Himes – much to the dismay of his staid, classically trained professors. For years, he worked at Brentano’s - the big, Right Bank bookstore that has catered to Americans since the days of Henry James. There, he learned the tricks of the book buying trade - and that American tourists account for 40% of all books sold at Brentanos.

“Out of a love for literature, and from a desire to put good books into the hands of curious, thoughtful readers,” as he puts it, he reinvented himself as editor and publisher. He bought the French rights to my book, offered me an advance, and found a translator, Virgine Girard, who promptly put my “American English” (different, of course, from “Great Britain’s English”) into sturdy French. To promote *A la recherche de B. Traven*, Bourdic invited me to come to France for two weeks, and in stay with him and his family, in Arles, while we were on tour in Provence. He arranged for me to talk in independent bookstores, each one of them, I discovered, with the distinctive personality of its owners - in Paris, Marseille, Toulouse, Montpellier, Aix-en-Provence and Arles, his home town.

For two weeks, nearly every night of the week, I talked, in French, about the mysterious author B. Traven, whose life and work are little-known in the United States, but who is a cult writer in France - published, in fact, in a paperback series entitled “cult literature.” Traven’s fans turned out to hear me sing the praises of his life as an exile and a fugitive in Mexico, his unusual publication history – the Nazis burned his books in Berlin, just as Alfred Knopf published them in New York - and his refusal to promote his work in any way, declining opportunities for public appearances and interviews.

"The biography of a creative person is completely unimportant," he told his German publisher in the 1920s. "If the person cannot be recognized and understood in his works, then he isn't worth a damn, and neither are his works." French readers enjoyed the spectacle of an American author marketing the work of a reclusive writer who never marketed himself; that irony made *A la recherche de B. Traven* enticing, and helped boost bookstore sales.

In stores often linked with a café or a bar - like La Belle Hortense in Paris - where customers might eat, drink and converse, I greeted guests, shook their

hands, autographed books and helped to give out promotional T-shirts from Les Fondateurs de Briques. I drank wine and ate cheese – provided by the bookstore owners. Talking in French helped bridge cultural gaps, though I also read in English, from *My Search for B. Traven*, while Bourdic and Girard read from the French translation. There were always questions and discussions: about Chiapas, where many of Traven's books are set; and about the Zapatistas, who read Traven's novels, *The Rebellion of the Hanged* and *The General from the Jungle*, as practical manuals for guerrilla warfare. French supporters of the Zapatistas turned up in Toulouse, and in Paris, and talked about using Traven's work to promote literacy in jungle villages. In Marseille, I met the "errorists," a goofy anarchist group that takes Traven as its hero, and, in Aix-en-Provence, I met young students – all women - from the City of the Book, who were studying everything about books: from history to marketing, design to distribution, and who were determined to keep the book alive in France by any means necessary.

In Montpellier, I heard, more than anywhere else, the direst predictions about the death of the book, from teachers and intellectuals, in part because Tzvetan Todorov, the esteemed Bulgarian-born, French intellectual, bemoaned the death of literacy, in Montpellier, the day before I arrived. Sauramps - the second largest independent bookstore in France - sponsored my talk and came up with a creative marketing strategy. They arranged for a screening, at the new high-tech Montpellier public library, of John Huston's film, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, that was inspired by Traven's novel of the same name. Dominique Frank, the marketing director, assumed that citizens would flock to see a film, especially since there was no admission fee, and, indeed, nearly a hundred people watched the movie, and stayed for a discussion about Huston, Traven and their odd relationship on the set of the movie.

Posters with my picture helped to promote the event, and so did a posting, with a color photo of me, on the store's website. Like almost all of the stores I visited, Sauramps emphasized my American citizenship and identity. "An American author in France will almost always attract an audience, if only out of curiosity," Bourdic explained. Indeed, American authors are as popular in France now, as ever before, and they're not the same old American authors from the 1920s, like Hemingway. I saw pictures of Truman Capote and Jay McInerney on the covers of French literary magazines, photos of John Updike, Eudora Welty and Tawni O'Dell on the walls of Les Editeurs, the Latin Quarter restaurant that caters to editors, publishers and writers, and I met an independent French publisher with a passion for Herman Melville, who had just issued, in paperback, Louis Mumford's brilliant 1929 biography of the author of *Moby Dick*.

Laurent Braudry, the big, burly, Marseille bookstore owner whom I liked, perhaps, more than any other - for his *joie de vivre* - refused to call himself, or to think of himself, as a "mere seller of books." A teenager in Paris in 1968, and still aglow with memories of that tumultuous year, he took me to dinner – a gourmet feast of lamb, couscous, and rattattoul, with gallons of inexpensive, delicious red wine all from unlabelled bottles. Until, early morning, Braudry recounted tales of the revolution, and the bookseller's trade, which he felt had

much in common, including the unpredictable. He just happened to make books available to readers, he explained; he did not aim to make money in the book market. Not surprisingly, he also confessed that he was 100,000 Euros in debt, and that he would have to sell his store, Librarie Paidos.

The Village Voice - probably the best store in Paris for books in the English language - operates on sounder business practices. On the Left Bank, it has also replaced the older, legendary Shakespeare & Company, which seems rough around the edges, as the place to go for author events. Even in The Latin Quarter, which boasts dozens of up-to-date, even glamorous, bookstores, the Village Voice stands out. As clean, as well lighted and as well stocked a bookstore as you might wish for, it provides a meeting place and a culture center for expatriates – a salon for intellectuals – and, years ago, the novelist and screenwriter Barry Gifford sang its praises and helped to create a legend about it. Americans living in Paris turned out for my in-store event, and made me feel very much at home. Odile Hellier, the founder and owner - a French woman who lived in the States in the 1970s, and who knows American literary tastes - was on hand to greet me, and her customers; she's always in the store to welcome famous writers, like Peter Carey, or the not so famous, like Helene Cixous, a dedicated student of the works of Jacques Derrida, who spoke at the Village Voice about the legendary French philosopher and literary critic.

Joan Schenkar, a friend I had not seen in more than a decade, attended my talk at the Village Voice. The author of *Truly Wilde* - a biography of Oscar Wilde's niece, Dolly - now finishing a biography of the best-selling American author, Patricia Highsmith, Schenkar lives in the shadow of St. Sulpice, the church where scenes from *The Da Vinci Code* were filmed, and that is now, more than ever before, a destination for tourists.

"Odile is our Sylvia Beach," Schenkar told me, over a glass of wine and a \$40 hamburger at Les Editeurs, on a Saturday night when the restaurant was packed. "What Beach did in the 1920s for the Lost Generation, she does for our generation. In Paris, where people love books, and where writing is still an honorable profession, her store makes books into the centerpiece of the society." Indeed, in a city in which Metro stations, like Victor Hugo and Alexander Dumas, are named after writers, and in which authors, like Sartre and de Beauvoir, Charles Baudelaire and Susan Sontag – are buried in hallowed ground at Montparnasse Cemetery – readers and writers, alike, still feel that books matter, and that writers, whether French or American, count as cultural heroes.

"It's no crime to be an intellectual in France," Laurent Braudry explained at the end of our dinner in Marseille. "Of course, the current generation doesn't believe in intellectuals, or in bookstores, the way their parents did. Fifty years from now, there might not be small independent bookstores in France. You might as well enjoy them while they're still here."