

books

PEOPLE ARE TALKING ABOUT...

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PARIS'S MOVABLE BRUNCH

The Village Voice bookstore is the scene of the city's love affair with contemporary American fiction. By EDMUND WHITE

Published or unpublished, old or young, male or female, American writers living in Paris (or just passing through) seek shelter at Odile Hellier's Village Voice bookshop. Hellier is a Frenchwoman who speaks our language perfectly except for the letter "R," which she pronounces as "W." "We're tewwibly twilled," she has said more than once while introducing a celebrated writer about to read in the cozy upstairs room above her Left Bank shop.

The thrill is genuine, however. In the last five years, the Voice has become a true American outpost and a center of literary activity. Visiting heavyweights like William Gaddis, Robert Coover, Raymond Carver, Richard Ford, Marilyn French, Russell Banks, Kathy Acker, and David Levitt have read there. So have local American poets Marilyn Hacker and Edouard Roditi, and young Czech poet Vladimir Soukup; when Soukup died recently of AIDS, his mother and sister gave a dignified memorial reading of his works at the Voice.

On most nights there, it's standing room only; people hold their breath and try to hear. When Raymond Carver read, Peter Taylor, who had just won the Ritz Paris Hemingway Award and the Pulitzer back home, was there; it was, as Odile would say, "tewwibly twilling" to see the two greatest living American short-story writers shake hands in Paris.

Odile didn't plan to devote her life to a bookstore. She grew up in Paris, studied Russian literature in France and Moscow, and taught and interpreted Russian before becoming a full-time interpreter. To perfect her English, she signed up for a year in the States—and stayed on for a decade, working as an assistant to the former Algerian ambassador in Washington. When Odile moved back to France in 1980, she found a corporate job, but wasn't happy with the hierarchy. "Suddenly the idea of a bookstore welled up in me. I remember that during the drought of 1976 an artesian well miraculously sprang up in my mother's village garden for no reason, and this idea of a bookstore welled up in me in the same way.

"Books were always an important if highly personal part of my life," she adds. "My father's library was burned by the Nazis during the war because it contained books by Marx. My father died during the war, but I retained an image of him as an intellectual, a reader. My only real possessions were books; when I'd move I'd pack them—that was all!"

Why the name Village Voice? "Because the newspaper is an emblem of the America I like—open, nonconformist, humorous, political, skeptical. Besides," she adds, "I usually stock the books on the Voice best-seller list and very few of the schlocky books on *The New York Times* list." (Continued on page 242)

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When she opened her store in 1982, the dollar was strong, which meant there were plenty of Americans living in Paris but American books were very expensive to buy with weak francs. Now that the dollar has collapsed, there are fewer American clients but the books are plentiful and cheap. Odile is filling the gap by cultivating a new French audience for contemporary American fiction. Typically, when translations of Alison Lurie's *Foreign Affairs* and Russell Banks's *Continental Drift* were published in France, parallel passages were read by writer and translator in both languages.

As Odile puts it, "At my store, Americans can read the French classics in translation and the French can discover American writers, even those who are little-known in the States. The French like to select their own Americans; they have deified John Fante, Charles Bukowski, William Goyen, and now W.M. Spackman, none of whom is exactly a household word back in America." But like Sylvia Beach, the legendary bookstore proprietor of Shakespeare and Company in the 1920s and '30s, Odile knows her customers not only by name but by taste. Gilles Barbedette, a young editor at Rivages, a vigorous new publisher of foreign literature in French translation, told me that Odile has put him onto several of the best titles in his collection.

Sarah Gaddis, William Gaddis' daughter, lives in Paris and is finishing her first novel. Odile is the only person who reads her chapters as they are finished. "She's frank, honest, and asks useful questions," Sarah remarks. Other young American writers based in Paris depend on Odile's taste, encouragement, and publishing know-how. They drop in to browse through *The New York Review of Books* or *The Village Voice*, to drink an espresso, to meet with other expatriates—and to speak the native language. Then back to a chilly atelier to write about that Wisconsin farm childhood. It was, after all, in Paris that Franklin wrote his *Autobiography*, Jefferson wrote *Notes on Virginia*, Benét wrote *John Brown's Body*, Hemingway wrote *The Sun Also Rises*, and Glenway Wescott wrote *Good-bye Wisconsin*. ▽