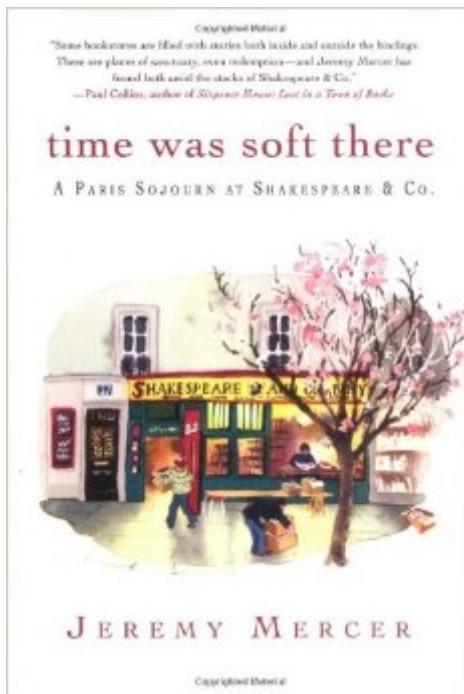


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# Time Was Soft There: A Paris Sojourn At Shakespeare & Co.



## Synopsis

"Some bookstores are filled with stories both inside and outside the bindings. These are places of sanctuary, even redemption---and Jeremy Mercer has found both amid the stacks of Shakespeare & Co."---Paul Collins, author of *Sixpence House: Lost in a Town of Books* In a small square on the left bank of the Seine, the door to a green-fronted bookshop beckoned. . . .With gangsters on his tail and his meager savings in hand, crime reporter Jeremy Mercer fled Canada in 1999 and ended up in Paris. Broke and almost homeless, he found himself invited to a tea party amongst the riffraff of the timeless Left Bank fantasy known as Shakespeare & Co. In its present incarnation, Shakespeare & Co. has become a destination for writers and readers the world over, trying to reclaim the lost world of literary Paris in the 1920s. Having been inspired by Sylvia Beach's original store, the present owner, George Whitman, invites writers who are down and out in Paris to live and dream amid the bookshelves in return for work. Jeremy Mercer tumbled into this literary rabbit hole and found a life of camaraderie with the other eccentric residents, and became, for a time, George Whitman's confidante and right-hand man. *Time Was Soft* There is one of the great stories of bohemian Paris and recalls the work of many writers who were bewitched by the City of Light in their youth. Jeremy's comrades include Simon, the eccentric British poet who refuses to give up his bed in the antiquarian book room, beautiful blonde Pia, who contributes the elegant spirit of Parisian couture to the store, the handsome American Kurt, who flirts with beautiful women looking for copies of *Tropic of Cancer*, and George himself, the man who holds the key to it all. As *Time Was Soft* There winds in and around the streets of Paris, the staff fall in and out of love, straighten bookshelves, host tea parties, drink in the more down-at-the-heels cafÃ©s, sell a few books, and help George find a way to keep his endangered bookstore open. Spend a few days with Jeremy Mercer at 37 Rue de la Bucherie, and discover the bohemian world of Paris that still bustles in the shadow of Notre Dame. "Jeremy Mercer has captured Shakespeare & Co. and its complicated owner, George Whitman, with remarkable insight. *Time Was Soft* There is a charming memoir about living in Whitman's Shakespeare & Co. and the strange, broken, lost, and occasionally talented, eccentrics and residents of this Tumblewood Hotel."---Noel Riley Fitch, author of *Sylvia Beach and the Lost Generation: A History of Literary Paris in the Twenties & Thirties* "There does seem to be something about the odd ducks that work at bookstores. Jeremy Mercer has captured the story of a wonderful, unique store that could only be born out of a love for books and the written word."--- Liz Schlegel, the Book Revue bookshop, Huntington, New York

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Jeremy Mercer's biographical description of Paris's Shakespeare & Company offers an amazing insight into the bookstore which accepts struggling travelers (who have a knack for writing... or at least try) by offering them a place to stay for as long as necessary (5 years for one visitor). But perhaps the most interesting aspect of this bookstore is its eccentric owner George Whitman, a man who regards money with disdain, sets fire to his hair in order to give it a trim, and decrees the bookstore's motto to be 'Be kind to strangers, lest they're angels in disguise'. Shakespeare & Company was originally a bookstore owned by Sylvia Beach, running from 1919 to 1941, attracting such literary heavyweights like Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce and F. Scott Fitzgerald. After being closed (with one rumor being that it was shut down when Ms Beach refused to sell the last copy of 'Finnegan's Wake' to an occupying Nazi officer), a decade later George Whitman opened his own, similar bookstore in Paris under the name 'Le Minstal'. It would eventually adopt the Shakespeare & Co. name, and would become renowned for its open door policy to visitors; its deep rooted communist ideals; its run-ins with the government; its cluttered yet enchanting makeup; and its undeniable charm and allure that has attracted so many thousands of visitors. Into this world enters Jeremy Mercer, a Canadian crime-writer whose open honesty about his true character in the opening chapters immediately alienates the reader, who is likely to be somewhat put off by Mercer's admitted taste for the violence he witnesses whilst reporting.

"Hard Time" is common slang for a prison spell in a maximum-security facility or otherwise highly restrictive conditions. "Soft time" is incarceration in a country club prison. In 2000, author Jeremy

Mercer spent four months living at Shakespeare and Company, a legendary bookstore in Paris, on the Left Bank with a view of Notre Dame. He writes, "Time at Shakespeare & Co. was as soft as anything I'd ever felt." Sylvia Beach owned the original Shakespeare and Company, famous for publishing Joyce's "Ulysses" and as a between-the-World-Wars mecca for "Lost Generation" writers. In 1951, George Whitman, another American, opened a reincarnation of sorts of Sylvia Beach's bookstore, as it too became a mecca for au courant literary types, many of whom by then were members of the Beat Generation. After Beach died, and with her permission, Whitman renamed his store "Shakespeare and Company", and his iteration has become almost as famous as the original. As special a bookstore as his establishment was (and continues to be), what most distinguished it was that Whitman operated it as a sanctuary for down-on-their-luck writers. Whitman was a communist -- a major reason why he left the United States -- and he liked to think of Shakespeare and Company as "a socialist utopia that masquerades as a bookstore." There are five principal strands to TIME WAS SOFT THERE. One of course concerns the bookstore itself, as well as the "socialist utopia" where over the decades as many as 40,000 souls were given overnight shelter. In the book world, there is a sub-sub-genre of "books about bookstores"; I have read at least a dozen of them over the years and TIME WAS SOFT THERE is somewhere in the middle of the pack.

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