



# [The Paris bookseller]

By Kerri Maher

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## Genre and Subject

*Beach, Sylvia -- Fiction*

*Shakespeare and Company (Paris, France) -- Fiction*

*Booksellers and bookselling -- France -- Paris -- Fiction*

*Paris (France) -- History -- 20th century -- Fiction*

*Biographical fiction*

*Historical fiction*

## Synopsis

When bookish young American Sylvia Beach opens Shakespeare and Company on a quiet street in Paris in 1919, she has no idea that she and her new bookstore will change the course of literature itself.

Shakespeare and Company is more than a bookstore and lending library: Many of the prominent writers of the Lost Generation, like Ernest Hemingway, consider it a second home. It's where some of the most important literary friendships of the twentieth century are forged--none more so than the one between Irish writer James Joyce and Sylvia herself. When Joyce's controversial novel *Ulysses* is banned, Beach takes a massive risk and publishes it under the auspices of Shakespeare and Company.

But the success and notoriety of publishing the most infamous and influential book of the century comes with steep costs. The future of her beloved store itself is threatened when *Ulysses'* success brings other publishers to woo Joyce away. Her most cherished relationships are put to the test as Paris is plunged deeper into the Depression and many expatriate friends return to America. As she faces painful personal and financial crises, Sylvia--a woman who has made it her mission to honor the life-changing impact of books--must decide what Shakespeare and Company truly means to her.

## Author Biography

KERRI MAHER is the national bestselling author of *The Girl in White Gloves*, *The Kennedy Debutante*, and, under the name Kerri Majors, *This Is Not a Writing Manual: Notes for the Young Writer in the Real World*. She holds an MFA from Columbia University and lives with her daughter and dog in a leafy suburb west of Boston, Massachusetts.

## Discussion Starters

1. Sylvia and Adrienne are devoted readers. How does reading shape their lives? How has reading shaped your life?
2. At first Sylvia is stymied by all the famous writers in Adrienne's store, but she goes on to open her own store and befriend the most famous writers of her day without being self-conscious about it. What do you think enabled her to call Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, and the others her friends?
3. Adrienne and Sylvia disagree about how much time and energy Sylvia devotes to James Joyce. Why does Sylvia give so much of herself to the writer? Why does Adrienne disagree? How does this difference alter their relationship?
4. Sylvia risks her finances, her store, and her reputation to publish *Ulysses* because it's a book and a cause she believes in. Have you ever taken an enormous risk for something you believed in?
5. This novel is full of real-life strong women making history. Were any of their actions surprising to you, given the time period? Do you think there was something special about Paris at this particular time that made their actions possible?
6. Sylvia ruminates on the term lost generation on pages 237–38 and wonders if it applies to her. Do you think it does? What about to Adrienne, Joyce, or any of the other characters?
7. Sylvia calls her shop Shakespeare and Company. Discuss the second part of that name, and Company, and the way it arises as a theme throughout the book.
8. *The Paris Bookseller* takes place from 1917 to 1936, from the end of the First World War into the Depression, and it's being published one hundred years later. Did you detect any resonance with the twenty-first century as you read about the lives of these characters living a century ago? How are attitudes, laws, censorship, and art the same? How are they different?
9. *Ulysses* was an enormous achievement when it was published and continues to be one of the most celebrated books of English literature, though it's still considered a very difficult book to read. Have you read it? Did having read it—or not—alter your appreciation of what Sylvia and James Joyce went through in order to bring it out into the world?
10. Because of its difficulty, *Ulysses* is also one of those novels that people often “fake” having read or keep on their TBR lists forever. We all have books like this! What books have you pretended to read? What books seem to be stuck forever on your TBR list?
11. The original epic poem *The Odyssey*, by Homer—on which Joyce based his novel *Ulysses*—is about Odysseus trying to get home to Ithaca after the Trojan War so that he could be reunited with his wife, Penelope. In what ways do the themes of home and reunion pop up throughout *The Paris Bookseller*?
12. Many of us dream of owning a bookstore. If you owned one, what three authors—past or present—would you invite to read at your store?

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