

FineBooks & COLLECTIONS



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West, go Book Lover

BY MATTHEW JONES

San Francisco has a thriving book culture. Here's a handy guide to the best literary spots in and around town.

San Francisco is inseparable from its rustic, frontier-era past—a time of shanghaied sailors, opium dens, and gold mining—and its printing history finds origin in this same period, with such names as Edward Bosqui, Charles Murdock, and John Henry Nash. Publications like *The Californian*, a weekly literary newspaper that employed both Bret Harte and Mark Twain, and Gelett Burgess' *The Lark* sprang forth as well, but it was the twentieth century that saw San Francisco's fine printing rise to a zenith



with the arrival of Edwin and Robert Grabhorn. These two brothers from Indiana staked SF as the center of the West Coast book trade, and today their legacies survive as patrons of the book arts.

Today's institutions, booksellers, private presses, and literary boutiques are the conservators of these traditions, and it is their shared realization that makes San Francisco a dream destination for book lovers.

For first time visitors, chances are you'll book a stay in tony Union Square—a good choice, as it's

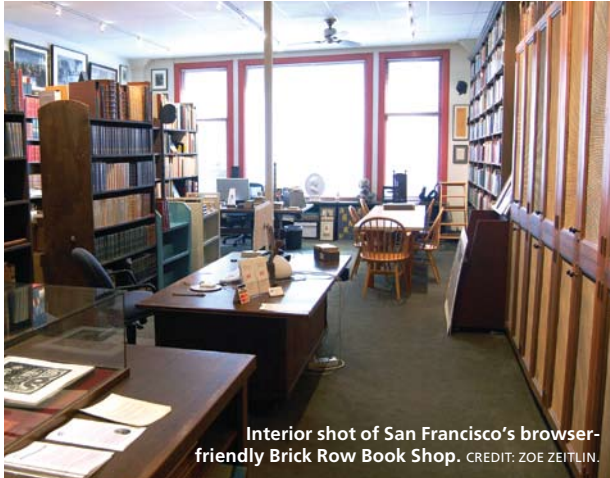
at the heart of some of the city's finest book tourist sites. First, off to the bookshops. Surrounded by world-class shopping and department stores like Saks, Neiman Marcus, and a massive Macy's, the most-convenient stop is **49 Geary Street** home to more than twenty fine art galleries and three ABAA booksellers. **John Windle Antiquarian Books** specializes in the illustrated work of William Blake, but also carries a selection that varies from medieval times to twentieth-century literature. Though serious buyers can make an appointment for a one-on-one consultation, browsers are always welcome. Located just across the hall is the **Children's Book Gallery**, established in 2006 as a spin-off of John Windle. This cozy, well-decorated shop specializes in antiquarian and collectable children's books from 1750 to 1950, and despite respectively recent beginnings, has quickly become a leader in its area of expertise. A little farther down is the **Brick Row Book Shop**, operating in name from 1915 though under the auspices of John Crichton since 1983. Crichton specializes in English and American fiction and manuscripts, and has a large, browser-friendly office. Another nearby ABAA bookseller

is **Argonaut Book Shop**. This street-level and spacious shop focuses on Western Americana and literature, along with associated maps, prints, and ephemera. Walk-ins are always welcome. If in town on a Thursday (Thursday is auction day!), pay a visit to one of the foremost West Coast auction houses of books and ephemera—**PBA Galleries**. PBA sells material across a broad price spectrum.

If exhausted by shopping (for the moment), biblio-tourists can let the collections and exhibits at the San Francisco Public Library occupy an afternoon. West of Union Square in the city's Civic Center neighborhood is SF's main library. Though unknown to many local residents, its sixth floor houses the **Marjorie G. and Carl W. Stern Book Arts & Special Collections Center**. Most bibliophiles are immediately drawn to the Robert Grabhorn Collection on the History of Printing and the Development of the Book, but there are also significant collections devoted to calligraphy, humor, early children's books, little magazines and 'zines, Robert Frost, and Sherlock Holmes. Thanks to continued care and acquisition, the sixth floor hosts a fantastic collection of fine printing highpoints. Visitors



Interior shot of San Francisco's browser-friendly Brick Row Book Shop. CREDIT: ZOE ZEITLIN.



Interior shot of San Francisco's browser-friendly Brick Row Book Shop. CREDIT: ZOE ZEITLIN.

can handle and even read favorite chapters from the Arion Press editions of Melville's *Moby Dick* and Joyce's *Ulysses*, or flip through the first two editions of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, a Kelmscott Chaucer, or a third edition of Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*.

One of San Francisco's greatest assets is its open space. This includes the Presidio, part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area and home to the non-profit **Grabhorn Institute**, sustaining San Francisco's storied fine-printing tradition since 2007, though its history reaches back to the turn of the nineteenth century. Andrew Hoyem has owned the Arion Press since 1974 and was once an employee of and later a partner with Robert Grabhorn. Today, his team of approximately fifteen employees produces three to four limited editions each year, with all type made and hand-set at the M&H type foundry (housed in the same building). Each book is printed on fine or hand-made paper stock, then sewn and cased-in using the best materials. Hoyem has made two of the most famous editions to emerge from the West Coast in the last 30 years: the 1979 edition of *Moby Dick* featuring Barry Moser illustrations and the 1988 edition of *Ulysses* with Robert Motherwell etchings. (The Grabhorn is in the business of preserving these beauties, so no touching the editions here, but the main library mentioned above affords that opportunity.) Arion Press also serves as a showcase for literary events, including lectures, exhibitions, and a weekly tour on Thursdays at 3:00 p.m. The 1 1/2-hour excursion exhibits the historic machinery and tools still in use, and participants are invited to view (not handle) any edition, with advance notice. Reservations are required, and it costs \$7.

Nearby, the new **American Bookbinders Museum** is a special find—it is perhaps the only bookbinding museum in the U.S. On exhibit are nineteenth-century binding machines and hand tools, as well as marbled paper, photographs, and a collection of binders' reference books, manuals, and journals. Open only on Saturdays, from 12 p.m. – 4:00 p.m. or by appointment with its president and founder Tim James, who also runs the **Taurus Bookbindery**.

At this point in the trip, a decision must be made: continue with the trip's fine bookmaking theme, or strike out

If You Go

Addresses and Phone Numbers

49 GEARY ST. ART GALLERIES AND SHOPS

See individual shops for locations and hours.

JOHN WINDLE ANTIQUARIAN BOOKS

49 Geary Street, Suite 233, San Francisco, CA 94108
(415) 986-5826

CHILDREN'S BOOK GALLERY

49 Geary Street, Suite 233, San Francisco, CA (415)
986-5826

BRICK ROW BOOK SHOP

49 Geary Street, Suite 230, San Francisco, CA (415)
398-0414

ARGONAUT BOOK SHOP

786 Sutter Street, San Francisco, CA (415) 474-9067

PBA GALLERIES

133 Kearny Street, San Francisco, CA (415) 989-2665

SAN FRANCISCO PUBLIC LIBRARY/THE MARJORIE G. AND CARL W. STERN BOOK ARTS AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS CENTER

100 Larkin Street (at Grove Street), Sixth floor, San Francisco, CA (415) 557-4560

GRABHORN INSTITUTE

1802 Hays Street, The Presidio, San Francisco, CA
(415) 668-2548

AMERICAN BOOKBINDERS MUSEUM

1962 Harrison St., San Francisco, CA (415) 710-9369

SAN FRANCISCO CENTER FOR THE BOOK

300 De Haro Street, San Francisco, CA (415) 565-0545

GREEN APPLE BOOKS

506 Clement Street & 6th Ave., San Francisco, CA
(415) 387-2272

BOOKSMITH

1644 Haight Street, San Francisco, CA (415) 863-8688

AARDVARK BOOKS

227 Church Street, San Francisco, CA (415) 552-6733

ADOBE BOOKS

3166 16th Street (at Albion St), San Francisco, CA
(415) 864-3936

826 VALENCIA

826 Valencia between 19th and 20th Streets, San Francisco, CA (415) 642-5905

THE BANCROFT LIBRARY

University of California Berkeley campus, Berkeley, CA (510) 642-3781

MOE'S BOOKS

2476 Telegraph Avenue, Berkeley, CA (510) 849-2087

SERENDIPITY BOOKS

1201 University Avenue, Berkeley, CA (510) 841-7455



The sixth floor of the San Francisco Public Library, containing the Marjorie G. and Carl W. Stern Book Arts & Special Collections Center. CREDIT: MATTHEW JONES.



Already in San Francisco (or nearby)?

The San Francisco Antiquarian Book, Print, & Paper Fair is happening this month on the 6th and 7th. The hours on Saturday are 10 a.m. to 7 p.m., and on Sunday 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Who'll be exhibiting? Book Hunter's Holiday, Eureka Books, Lux Mentis, Ten Pound Island Book Co., Ken Sanders, and many more. Admission is \$10. Also in February, **Bonhams & Butterfields** at 220 San Bruno Avenue, will be holding a **Fine Books and Manuscripts auction** on Feb. 14.

on to the bookstore circuit? For the former, head to **San Francisco Center for the Book** (SFCB). If the city's proper fine-printing movement began with the Grabhorns and has continued with Hoyem and Arion Press, then the SFCB is also hard at work to inspire a new wave of book arts enthusiasts and creators. Opened in 1996 and now occupying a 4,500-square foot facility in the Potrero Hill neighborhood, the SFCB offers more than 350 classes annually to 2,000 students. With an exhibition hall overlooking the printmaking studio, visitors can observe students at work while examining the ever-changing gallery of hand-made books on display. If a visit happens to correspond with one of the free monthly exhibitions or lectures, it's sure to be something appealing. More ambitious book lovers can also enroll in an introductory bookbinding class, though these fill up fast. Long-term advance registration is recommended.

If heading out to more bookstores, don't miss **Green Apple Books**, in the Inner Richmond district, a short drive from Arion Press. Opened in 1967, Green Apple has since grown to nearly 8,000 square feet divided between two shops within easy walking distance to each other. The main structure is a cozy two-story space replete with creaky wooden floorboards, a well-tended and maintained stock (no dead inventory here), and a maze of nooks, alcoves, and stairways. Two doors west is the store's literature and genre lit store, attended by a music wing with listening stations. Though decidedly thin on antiquarian books, it's otherwise well versed. Next up is the **Booksmith**, in the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood. They sell only new books, although they are constantly working to promote San Francisco's literary lifestyle. The shop's stream of readings makes it one of the best places to pick up signed copies of your favorite authors' recent works. A third generalist bookshop is **Aardvark Books** in the city's legendary Castro District. Though not as large as Green Apple, they carry an excellent, affordable, and well-selected balance of fiction and non-fiction.

Near the Mission District, there's a great opportunity for a lunch break along Valencia Street (the burrito is to San Francisco what the cheesesteak is to Philadelphia) and a chance to pour over purchases. While travel companions hit up the local fashion boutiques, shops, and cafes, check out the neighborhood's several used bookstores, most notably **Adobe Books**. With its narrow walkways, teeming shelves, eccentric employees, book scouts, and patrons, this is a classic stop on any SF book circuit. Rejoin your group at Dave Eggers' **826 Valencia**, promoting literacy and creative writing for kids aged 6–18 through the sale of **McSweeney's** editions and pirate supplies. The shop feels like a smuggler's cove, with low-slung ropes and treasure chests. There are also T-shirts, city-related replica prints and broadsides, and local literary maps available for sale.

A day trip to Berkeley from San Francisco, either by car or aboard Bay Area Rapid Transit (known locally as BART), is easy and worthwhile. There are three main stops for the aficionado: **The Bancroft Library** of the University of California at Berkeley is home to approximately 430 incu-



The San Francisco Center for the Book's printmaking studio. CREDIT: MATTHEW JONES.



The San Francisco Center for the Book's bookbinding classroom. CREDIT: MATTHEW JONES.

nabula, along with a digitized collection of over 35,000 papyri fragments from the Tebtunis find in Egypt, the four folios of Shakespeare, a magnificent selection of Aldine editions, and an endless array of literary and historical works from the sixteenth century onward. Plus, there's always **an exhibit** to enjoy. **Moe's Books** has been a literary and cultural institution since 1959. With four floors and over 100,000 volumes, including a rare book room, this is another must-see (where there are certain to be must-buys). **Serendipity Books** is a fantastic shop for browsing. Proprietor Peter Howard is a legendary fixture in the Bay Area literary community, and his shop is a modern wonder. Although there is a so-called rare book room near his desk, both the astute and obtuse will find rarities simply littering the space. Another maze of alcoves, bookshelves, and piles of books; the back room actually has movable stacks!

Despite the general doom and gloom over books and printing (which seems about as accurate as the paperless office), book culture is prospering in San Francisco. So go for the books, go for the Bay—just go! But do bring an extra suitcase.

An auction-house cataloger turned bookseller, **Matthew Jones** studied both English Literature and the Classics at San Francisco State University. He spends lots of time on his bicycle.