

## The woman who gave us 'Ulysses'

By: [Mercerspace](#)  
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Pia De Jong at the Firestone Library with the original metal sign from Sylvia Beach's book store, Shakespeare and Company.

March 14 is Pi Day in most of the world, but in Princeton it is most visibly Albert Einstein Day. It's his birthday, and this year of the Super-Pi — 3.14.15 — the streets are filled with kids wearing frizzy white wigs, smoking toy pipes and trying to win the Einstein lookalike contest.

My friend does not care so much for all these cute little mini-Einsteins. "You know," she says to me, "March 14 is also the birthday of Sylvia Beach. She was one of Princeton's most important residents. But no one celebrates her, even though she grew up here. All her life she was overshadowed by great men. And even after she's dead, exactly the same thing still happens."

Beach and Einstein, two revolutionaries of the 20th century. He was a man of numbers, she was a woman of words. In old photographs Einstein scribbles formulas on a blackboard; Beach reads from behind her desk. Einstein talks with Bohr, Ehrenfest and Lorentz; Beach talks to Hemingway, Fitzgerald and of course to James Joyce, wearing his trademark eye patch.

Sylvia was 14 when her father, pastor of the Presbyterian Church and a friend of Woodrow Wilson, took the family to Paris in 1902. She immediately fell in love with the City of Light. Back in America, she dreamed of someday opening a bookstore with a lending library. (She grew up on Library Place.)

After her father refused to give her the \$3,000 she needed, Sylvia's mother sent the money to her. Sylvia opened her English-language bookstore on the Left Bank in 1919 and called it Shakespeare and Company, a name that came to her in a dream.

Sylvia's bookstore became the central gathering-place for the writers of the Lost Generation — Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Ezra Pound. She fed them, nurtured them, and loaned them books and money.

One of them was James Joyce, who was trying to publish his groundbreaking novel, "Ulysses," which had been labeled obscene. Sylvia somehow scraped together enough money to publish "Ulysses" herself, even though her store almost went bankrupt.

Her friends helped smuggle chapters into England and America. Eventually she sold the novel to an American publisher — and the rest is history. "Ulysses" is now seen as a monument of Western culture. Ironically, even though Joyce made a princely advance, he never repaid a sou to Sylvia. But she said that she cared less about the money than about advancing literature (though she vented some frustration in a letter she drafted to him but never mailed).

"I'll show you something special," my friend tells me. She takes me to the Graphic Arts Collection at Firestone Library. The curator carefully pulls open a drawer. Suddenly I am face-to-face with the metal sign of the original Shakespeare and Company. On one side is the name of the store. On the other is a portrait of Shakespeare wearing a red shirt and holding a quill pen and sheet of paper. The board is moving in its simplicity.

"It was painted by the sister of Sylvia's lover, Adrienne Monnier," the curator explains. "It was stolen three times, so after they replaced it, they had to take it

down every night for safekeeping.”

Beach left all her letters, books and possessions to Princeton University. She wanted to be buried here. My girlfriend points in the direction of the Princeton Cemetery. “Let’s go,” she says. “Let’s go say hello on her birthday.”

Along the way, we pass Sylvia Beach Way, an alley hidden behind the Public Library. Some girls in Einstein wigs are kicking a soccer ball there. With our collars up, we walk over the crocuses, which are peeking between the last remnants of snow. Then I finally see Sylvia’s weathered gravestone, next to her father’s. Lying on it is a bouquet of purple flowers.

It is Pi Day in Princeton, but now I will go home and have a croissant and read my well-worn copy of “Ulysses.”


*Pia de Jong is a Dutch novelist who moved from Amsterdam to Princeton in the summer of 2012 with her husband, Robbert Dijkgraaf, after he was named the director of the Institute for Advanced Study. She currently writes a weekly column for the Dutch newspaper NRC, called Flessenpost (Notes in a Bottle) about her life in the USA.*

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