**Waterstones, Canterbury, 1990 to 2020.**

Somewhere in the TV archives is a 1991 film of Julian Barnes walking around [Canterbury](/20c/20c-Canterbury) and talking in Waterstones. It’s one of many moments from the bookshop I have run in the city for 30 years, at 20-21 St Margaret’s Street, and since 2019 at 7-8 Rose Lane. I came here to open the shop because of the resonance ‘Canterbury’ has: of words, of pilgrimage, of longing and of some pan-European Boccaccian earthiness, a visionary mist my city of London had only in certain parts, on certain days.

[Canterbury](/20c/20c-Canterbury) did not disappoint. Unlike many ‘pretty’ UK cities it gets lots of worldwide visitors. The locals even moan about them, and they did that anciently too. Like or not, Canterbury belongs to the world, as much as Venice and Compostela. Poised between London and Paris, Roman and Christian, Catholic and Protestant, it has a Triestian liminality which may not be apparent from its chain store facades.

A Japanese lady wrote from home for the scone recipe we used in our bookshop café. Gravitas-exuding courtly-mannered Germans in loden coats shopped regularly for piles of Art books and fiction. The Dutch humbled us with their courtesy, perfect English and knowledge of our literature. I discussed our lesser paper quality with Italian book-lovers, and loved the French, a lot. I learned that Romanians were particularly book-loving and charismatic. Russians were moved and astonished by the profusion of uncensored literature spread over three floors.

I chose the initial stock myself and then each bookseller ran a section under my tutelage; David Mitchell, future novelist, curated Fiction and had long and queue-holding-up conversations with customers. Since the shop opened, I have sold over £50 million of books. We sold nearly 200 copies of a £130 book on the Art of Florence. Publisher John Murray himself told me that was miles more than any shop anywhere. By luck and happenstance and with thanks to Tim Waterstone who hired me, I had created a shrine to books with a loyal worldwide following, which included authors.

Thousands of writers gave talks in Waterstones [Canterbury’s](/20c/20c-Canterbury) café on both sites, to audiences totalling, in all, over 80,000 people. I know from feedback that people’s lives were changed. As well as the usual literati- Bradbury, Ishiguro, Lodge, Byatt, Cornwell, Chevalier, John Mortimer, Scarlett Thomas, Rendell, PD James, Hilary Mantel, and anyone else you have heard of – I welcomed politicians like John Major and Edward Heath, Roy Jenkins and Mandela’s old colleague Ronnie Kasrils. This last author got me a wave of hate mail, for Kasrils had engaged in armed resistance in his youth.

Three poets Laureate came and Ted Hughes told me one drunken evening he was going to – at least I have his signed book. Titans of mind-body connection spoke too: Deepak Chopra, John E Mack, Paulo Coelho and five separate Tibetan lamas, one of whom buried sacred ash with me in St Martin’s Churchyard, which he had identified as a global chakra-point. In that bookshop café authors also took audiences of 100+ into past-life regression, remote viewing, and Wiccan shape-shifting. Tears were shed, spines tingled, and one customer told me my shop must be a stargate.

After these outre gatherings I would often interview, say, Margaret Drabble the next night about her oeuvre to a completely different, staid-looking audience. There was little crossover, but I saw the wide spectrum of [Canterbury](/20c/20c-Canterbury) consciousness, especially when I include the talks by JK Rowling, Pullman, and Jacqueline Wilson, oh, and all the sci-fi/fantasy, then ignored culturally: Pratchett and Gaiman, Terry Brooks and Raymond Feist, who assured us his less famed mate ‘George’ would make it one day. He meant George RR Martin.

Many writers interacted with the shop. Spike Milligan answered the phone, to customers’ puzzlement, Ray Davies of The Kinks brought his guitar, Peter Ackroyd decided to make his talk an in-conversation with Jenny Uglow from the audience – I wish I’d taped that one - Humphrey Carpenter worked on his Britten biography for days in our café, Umberto Eco wanted to man the till for a day anonymously. I let him. His UK publisher had told me he would never come. I phoned his Italian one.

David Seabrook just mooched about in the shop in his haunted way year after year, one of my private-mannered regulars. My process-minded Assistant Manager wanted to collar him as a shoplifter, on the basis of his general shiftiness. Silly. With great joy I hosted the launch of Seabrook’s now cult hymn to Kent, [\_*All the Devils are Here\_*](/21c/21c-seabrook-biography)*.* Seabrook was predictably self-effacing at the event, but I much prefer that to the ego authors such as the American who asked me to check his teeth, or Julian Cope, who asked me to wear his drugs in case of a bust.

In summer, I ate ice cream on the roof. It was a shop of dreams, I can still smell the combination of books and wood, and I dreamed vividly there when I afternoon-napped in my hammock in a basement cupboard. I happily sacrificed that bedroom to get the Roman Bath-house floor excavated via the biggest petty cash claim in Waterstones’ history. Head Office called it a pile of rubble, but I am proud to say that is now a Scheduled Ancient Monument with finds on display. Though now in the basement of a successor shop at 20-21 St Margaret’s Street, the occupants are legally bound to shop the remains on request. I thought the Rose Lane relocation would never have the magic, but the books and customers have quickly proved me wrong. Like an unfinished Chaucerian pilgrimage, the contrapuntal dance between Canterbury and the written word, which before me figured [Chaucer]( /14c/14c-chaucer), Marlowe, Somner and [Conrad](/19c/19c-conrad-biography), just goes on as it will when I lie in Kent’s earthy earth.

Article by Dr Martin Latham