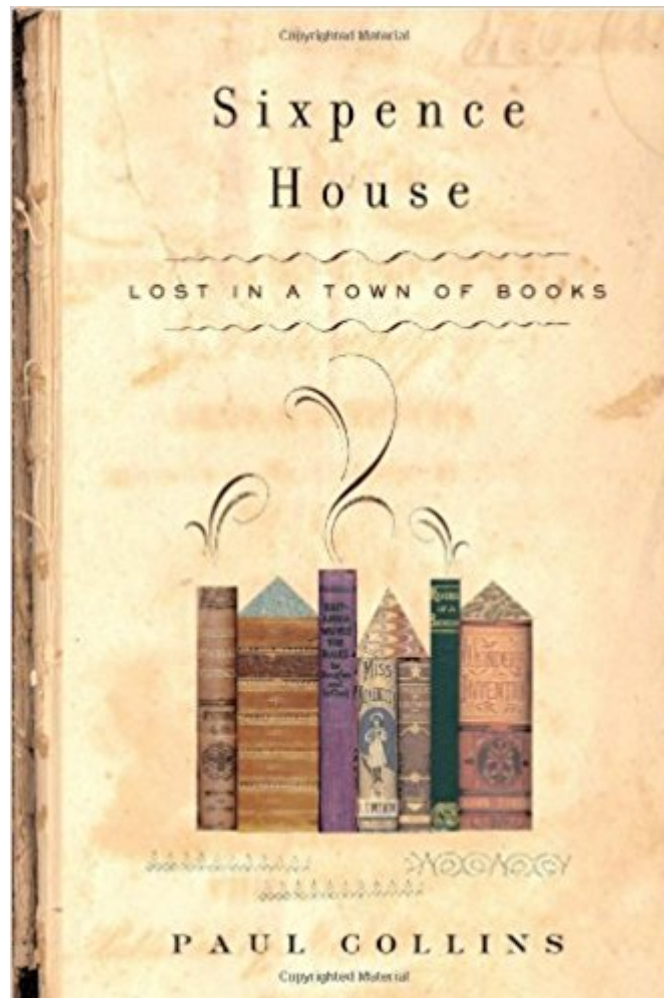


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Sixpence House: Lost In A Town Of Books



Synopsis

A bibliophile's pilgrimage to where book lovers go when they die-Hay-on-Wye. Paul Collins and his family abandoned the hills of San Francisco to move to the Welsh countryside-to move, in fact, to the little cobblestone village of Hay-on-Wye, the 'Town of Books' that boasts fifteen hundred inhabitants-and forty bookstores. Antiquarian bookstores, no less. Hay's newest citizens accordingly take up residence in a sixteenth-century apartment over a bookstore, meeting the village's large population of misfits and bibliomaniacs by working for world-class eccentric Richard Booth-the self-declared King of Hay, owner of the local castle, and proprietor of the world's largest and most chaotic used book warren. A useless clerk, Paul delights in shifting dusty stacks of books around and sifting them for ancient gems like Robinson Crusoe in Words of One Syllable, Confessions of an Author's Wife, and I Was Hitler's Maid. He also duly fulfills his new duty as a citizen by simultaneously applying to be a Peer in the House of Lords and attempting to buy Sixpence House, a beautiful and neglected old tumbledown pub for sale in the town's center. Taking readers into a secluded sanctuary for book lovers, and guiding us through the creation of his own book, Sixpence House becomes a meditation on what books means to us, and how their meaning can still resonate long after they have been abandoned by their public. Even as he's writing, the knowledge of where his work will eventually end up-rubbing bindings with the rest of the books that time forgot-is a curious kind of comfort.

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Customer Reviews

Hay-on-Wye, a Welsh town of 1,500, is heaven on earth for people who love books, especially old books. It has 40 bookstores, and if you can't find what you want in one of them, you can fork over 50 pence and visit the field behind the town castle, where thousands more long-forgotten books languish under a sprawling tarp. McSweeney's contributor Collins moved his wife and baby son from San Francisco to Hay a few years ago, intending to settle there. This book is Collins's account of the brief period when he organized American literature in one of the many used-book stores, contemplated and abandoned the idea of becoming a peer in the House of Lords, tried to buy an affordable house that wasn't falling apart (a problem when most of the buildings are at least a century old) and revised his first book (*Banvard's Folly*). Collins can be quite funny, and he pads his sophomore effort with obscure but amusing trivia (how many book lovers know that the same substance used to thicken fast-food milk shakes is an essential ingredient in paper resizing?), but it's hard to imagine anyone beyond bibliophiles and fellow Hay-lovers finding enough here to hold their attention. Witty and droll though he may be, Collins fails to give his slice-of-life story the magic it needs to transcend the genre. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc.

The McSweeney's gang may be the closest thing we have to a genuine literary circle; if its members have produced smug, postmodern chapter titles, such as "Chapter Two relies on the travelogue cliché of a garrulous cabdriver," they've also written some books that whistle like fresh air through the bookstore. Collins' travelogue/memoir is a book lover's delight, minus the pretense you might expect from someone schooled in obscure eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature. With his wife and young son, he moves to Hay-on-Wye, Wales, a village with one bookstore for every 37.5 residents. The narrative is structured around his house-buying attempts and the impending publication of his first book, but the meat of the work lies in his meandering asides and bookstore discoveries. His intellect changes focus often, but crisply, and it's a pleasure to observe him in the act of observation: Who would have thought there was still new ground to cover on the topic of Anglo-American differences? Collins muses often on the impermanence of books, but this one will grace shelves for years to come. Keir GraffCopyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

I love reading books about books, and this little gem does not disappoint. Collins is an engaging author whose love of books, at the very least, matches my own. As he described sorting through towering piles of dusty old books, I felt myself nestled in the corner next to him, searching for my own treasures. Full of envy, I yearned for this to be true. I found myself jotting down notes for many

of the books he references here, hoping I might one day have the chance to read some of them myself. Mr. Collins takes the reader on a wonderful adventure in this tiny town of book lovers called Hay-On-Wye, or "Town of Books". The town is full of character and characters, both of which are wonderfully appealing. I must make it a point to visit there one day. If you are a lover of books, this is definitely one for you. I can't recall another book about books that I have enjoyed as much as this one. It is definitely going on my Favorites shelf to be read again and again.

Having just finished this book, I have to say that the Publishers Weekly review is spot-on. This truly is a meandering narrative that doesn't have a single focus (or two or three) but rather a stream of consciousness about whatever hits the writer's fancy at the moment. If you are looking for hilarious (think Bill Bryson) or introspective, you won't find it here. That being said, I found the book quite enjoyable as I was willing to go on the ride with Paul Collins as he shares his life in a small Welsh village with us. If you enjoy reading about small UK villages and are a fairly serious reader there is more than enough to keep your interest as it did mine. Just make sure to enjoy the book for what it is versus assuming it is going to mirror other writers' works. It really isn't comparable to "A Year in Provence" or any other book I have read.

for booklovers a trip to a town in Wales given over to the used book/antiquarian trade. In high school I remember hearing the phrase 'stream of consciousness' applied to a certain style of writing. This book seems to fit that definition--one man's response and reflections on moving to a unique environment and meeting a motley group of denizens. I'm a reader but he almost never mentioned a book I had heard of or read. I like that! Like the author, I am saddened to think that there are books no one wants to read, books that will go to burning or pulping instead of into a library or personal collection. Some of the book is a meditation on why authors continue to write books that soon enough will end up on the sagging shelves in a place like Hay. And then, the author will find a treasure and be off on a reading adventure. I found this quirky book a worthwhile read which asked questions and opened up lines of inquiry more challenging than most other contemporary biographies.

My first thoughts about this book was that it was composed of the flotsam and jetsam of an autodidact's ramblings ... but then I noticed how stuffy that sounded. This sweet little book is anything but stuffy, in fact for a bibliophile like myself, it is delightful. I only rated it down one star because from time to time it's narrative seems a wee bit disjointed - but that may be part of its

charm, too. The basic premise is that a writer and his wife and son go to Wales to live in a town known for its many bookstores. The writer wanders about, introducing the reader to many of the interesting buildings, bookshops and characters in the small Welsh town. He is often reminded of idiosyncratic books he has read, sharing with the reader colorful anecdotes. His sense of humor always comes thru. Overall, this book is a great deal of fun, as is wandering a book-filled town in Wales called Hay.

Right now I seem to be in this wonderful cycle of delightful books about books. I started the year with "Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore", then I caught up with Thursday Next in Jasper Fforde's wonderful books, then "Village Books" by Craig McLay (which might only be available as an e-book but was fantastic)...and then "Sixpence House". This wonderful book about Paul Collins's visit/move to a small town in England, Hay-on-Wye (population: 1500. Number of bookstores = 40) was so enjoyable to read. Not only does he describe and delight in the written world, the joy of reading, the texture and smell and heft of books, he gives the reader a colorful and meaningful look at this small town - including some very insightful contrasts to life in the United States. As much of the story deals with a search for a house in Hay-on-Wye, he spends a good deal of time talking about architecture. The look and feel of the buildings and homes in small town England. "...most building materials today will not age gracefully and were never meant to. They are only meant to be new. Perhaps the ancient brick walls in London weren't built with much more foresight for their aesthetic future than any structure today; yet by their very nature they succeeded perfectly as ruins." The humor in this book is wonderful as well. As obvious as it is that Collins adores the British and many aspects of their way of life, he does poke gentle fun at them...or maybe I should say, with them. "No situation is so dire that it cannot be interrupted for tea. It is particularly important to the British when it is cold and damp outdoors, which is often, or when it is cold and damp indoors, which is always." And, "The fellow roots around and walks us to an oaken side door of the castle, producing from his pocket a skeleton key so weighty that he has clearly stolen it from Vincent Price." Collins gives the same treatment to American life, though possibly with just a bit more edge. (This made it all the more funny, as far as I was concerned.) "The fresh milk is gone too. It just seems so strange to be denied this; to an American, finding empty shelves in a market, to be told that you can't buy something, is a little like waking up and being told that gravity has been switched off until further notice." And yet, the most wonderful aspect of this book, is his underlying love and fascination with books. He writes them, reads them, collects them, organizes them...is surrounded by these wonderful chronicles of human dreams, ideas, history, ideas of the future. And here, too, his gentle humor shines through.

Surrounded as he has been for his life by books, he knows them well enough to poke a bit of fun at them as well. "If a book cover has raised lettering, metallic lettering, or raised metallic lettering, then it is telling the reader: Hello, I am an easy-to-read work on espionage, romance, a celebrity, and/or murder. To readers who do not care for such things, this lettering tells them: Hello, I am crap. Such books can use only glossy paper for the jacket; Serious Books can use glossy finish as well, but it is only Serious Books that are allowed to use matte finish."(And one delightful coincidence between the last two books about books that I've read? Both mention the English cider "Scrumpy" - though with wildly differing opinions of the drink.)I loved "Sixpence House" and dreaded finishing it - I can only hope my luck in books continues.

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