

erature, also hosts signings and political events.

Old Wives Tales (1009 Valencia St., 821-4675) specializes in books by and about women, including nonsexist children's books. **Land of Counterpane** (3452 Sacramento St., 346-4047) is the best-known children's bookstore in San Francisco, and **My Child's Destiny** (70 Grant Ave., 397-2424) produces a well-known catalogue. Both stores carry clothing and toys in addition to books.

Nature Company (4 Embarcadero Center, 956-4911; second location inside the Academy of Science in Golden Gate Park, 221-3533) The company's catalogues are renowned for their quality and merchandising expertise. The stores are beautifully stocked with books, clothing, art and other naturalist merchandise.

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art Bookshop (Van Ness Ave. at McAllister, 863-2890) This is not a large book-

shop, but is filled with wonderful books, posters, cards, jewelry and other interesting *objets d'art*.

San Francisco Opera Shop (199 Grove St., 565-6414) The Opera Shop carries books, records, clothing and other articles pertaining to music and the opera.

A store that specializes in books of interest to the gay community is **Walt Whitman** (2319 Market St., 861-3078).

City Lights: Three Decades of Offbeat Bookselling

by Ron Nowicki

In San Francisco, the bookstore of literary history is City Lights, an unofficial landmark—now in its 31st year—that is in many respects a typical San Francisco bookstore (and publishing house), although the owner, poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti, would no doubt dispute that point. There are obvious concessions, particularly electronic, to modern bookselling methods. Yet the store remains eccentric and offbeat, with a cornucopia of titles not likely to be found elsewhere.

The odd-shaped building that houses City Lights has a longstanding connection with publishing. Back in the days just before and during World War I, it was an establishment, owned by A. Cavalli, which sold Italian-language books and periodicals. After World War II, Peter Martin published a literary magazine on the second floor, called *City Lights* (in the interim, a travel agency had displaced the first bookstore). City Lights, with its book emporium and publishing offices, took over both spaces, and more.

When it first opened in 1953, City Lights occupied only a small section of the ground floor. The basement was then used by a Fundamentalist religious group as its meeting room. To this day one can see evidence of their presence in the form of huge, hand-lettered signs, partially hidden by bookshelves. One sign reads: "Remember Lot's wife!" Another somberly disclaims: "Born in sin, shapen in iniquity." On a boarded-up entry way, a more contemporary wag has scrawled: "I am the door." The basement was also once used by the local Chinese community to pre-

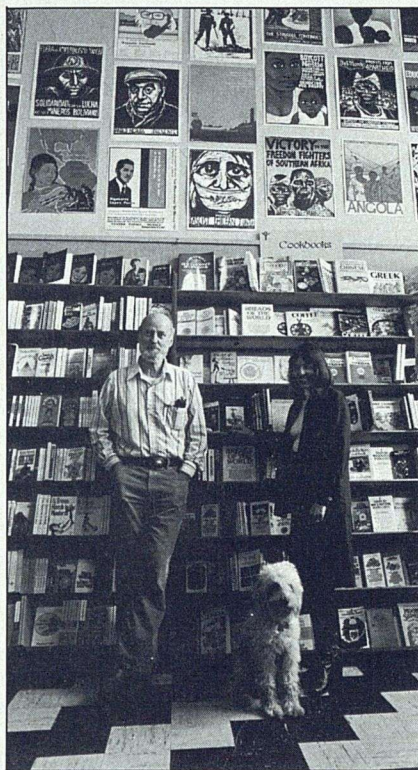
pare their dragon float for San Francisco's annual Chinese New Year's parade.

It was in that same year, 1953, that "Beat" poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti became acquainted with Peter Martin and his magazine. Soon afterward the two decided to open a bookstore whose stock would consist entirely of paperbacks. Ferlinghetti credits Martin with the idea for the store and its name which, of course, derives from the Chaplin film. The rest, as they say, is

literary history. Soon after the store opened, Martin departed for Manhattan, where he founded the New Yorker Bookstore (which closed in 1984). He was replaced by the man who was to become Ferlinghetti's longtime partner, Shigeyoshi (Shig) Murao, whom the poet refers to as "one of the great bookmen of all time."

Though City Lights at that time was widely known as the only bookstore in the U.S. to carry only paperbacks, what really catapulted it to fame was the obscenity trial of Murao and Ferlinghetti, held in a federal courtroom in San Francisco in 1955. The material they had been selling which was alleged to be obscene was Allen Ginsberg's now-classic poem *Howl*. After a much-publicized trial the two men were acquitted, and the legend of City Lights had begun.

Through the years City Lights has added to its reputation, to its stock, and has even made some concessions to modern technology in the form of an electronic surveillance device to help intercept shoplifters, and a new cash register which automatically records the category of each sale (fiction, poetry, T-shirts, magazines, etc.) as each purchase is rung up. These are in striking contrast to more archaic, playful items such as a two-pronged wooden implement called a "book picker," which enables the user to reach into window displays to get a book without disturbing the displays. The device was made by Ferlinghetti, who signed it and added the notation "Copyright 1983!" Then there is the store's intercom system: a white string stretched from the front desk, alongside a stairwell, through a window, and up to a second-floor office (City Lights' production



Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Nancy Peters on the main floor of City Lights

Nowicki is editor of the San Francisco Review of Books.

From *Howl* to Joint Ventures

The publishing division of City Lights Books, Inc., founded by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, has been operating since 1955. For many years it was on upper Grant Street, not far from the bookstore. However, because of a sizable rent increase the division was forced to find new quarters and in 1977 moved in above the store.

Many of City Lights' impressive list of authors are associated with the Beat Generation, and many of them are poets. Although City Lights titles seldom achieve national recognition, several titles have appeared on the *Village Voice* bestseller list (playwright Sam Shepard's *Fool for Love* and *Motel Chronicles*, and *Notes on Thought and Vision*, by the poet H. D.).

Over the years, City Lights' bestselling titles are: *Howl* by Allen Ginsberg, in its 33rd printing for a total of 510,000 copies; *Stories: Tales of Ordinary Madness & Most Beautiful Women in Town* by Charles Bukowski, which has gone through 10 printings to date for a total of

60,000 copies; *Pictures of the Gone World* by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, in its 18th printing for a total of 70,000 copies; *The First Third* by Neal Cassady, with 50,000 copies in print; *Notes of a Dirty Old Man* by Charles Bukowski, now in its 10th printing for a total of 45,000 copies; *Fool for Love* by Sam Shepard, with 25,000 copies in print; and *Motel Chronicles*, also by Shepard, with 20,000 copies in print.

Like many successful small publishers, City Lights has an extensive backlist and its titles simply don't go out of print. Locally, it has published jointly with Harper & Row's San Francisco division. In 1980 the two publishers produced *Literary San Francisco*, written by Nancy Peters and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, a narrative history of the city's literary figures, dating from the earliest times to the 1970s. The book is still in print and has sold 5000 cloth copies and 20,000 in paperback. City Lights hopes that its own latest title, *The Literary World of San Francisco & Its Environs* by Don Herron (who is also an authority on Dashiell Hammett), will be its big book this year. R.N.

room), where it is attached to a bell. One pull on the string by the clerk downstairs lets the person upstairs know that he or she is being summoned. The main drawback, it seems, is that there is no way for the person on the upper level to respond, so he or she must descend to the lower level.

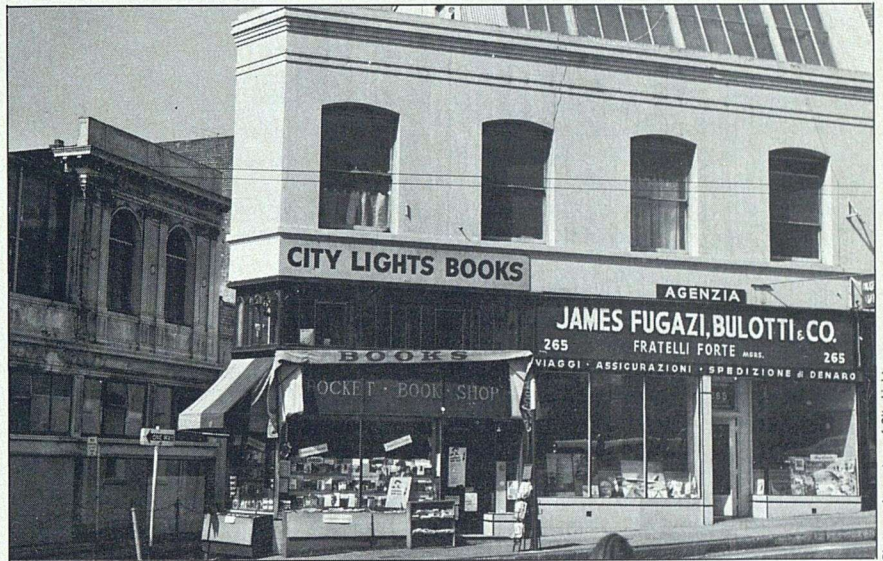
Another sign of the store's progress is that it no longer sells only paperbacks. Several years ago cloth books appeared in City Lights, but the space allotted to them is quite small. Nancy Peters, who holds the informal title of general director, reports that the store carries an inventory of 36,000 copies of some 11,000 titles. She estimates that 15%–20% of the store's register sales are of magazines and newspapers. Book sales, according to Peters, break out as 90% in paperback, 10% in hardcover. Of those totals, 40% of all sales come from fiction and poetry, while 60% are in the categories of history, politics, philosophy, cookbooks, and offbeat titles more difficult to categorize, as well as children's books such as Dr. Seuss titles, *Wind in the Willows* and classics by Robert Louis Stevenson. (Stevenson, incidentally, once lived in a San Francisco hotel, across from where the fictitious Miles Archer was bumped off in Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*.)

Browsing through the store's small selection of cloth books, one recognizes familiar titles such as *White Noise* by Don DeLillo; *The Empire of the Sun* by J. G. Ballard; *Without Honor* by Arnold Isaacs; *Son of the Morning Star* by Evan S. Connell; and *Wine* from the University of California Press. In this section, primarily during the holiday season, one also finds a quantity of art books, although Peters points out that City Lights does not ordinarily stock what are known in the trade as coffee-table books. What might be staples for most bookstores are not likely to be

found on these shelves; in fact, Peters says proudly that she rarely recalls City Lights stocking titles on the *New York Times* bestseller list (notable exceptions in 1984 were *The Color Purple* and *Son of the Morning Star*). The *San Francisco Chronicle* nonetheless calls the store occasionally for a report on its bestselling books, and still expresses amazement over some of the reported titles.

does some mail-order business which City Lights, Inc. hopes to expand in the future.

Another concession to the mainstream was made when City Lights joined the ABA, whose decal decorates the front door. Peters says the store joined as a practical matter, hoping to expand their list of publishers and titles, and to make ordering books easier. However, she points out, it is unlikely



City Lights in 1978, before expansion into spaces next door and second floor

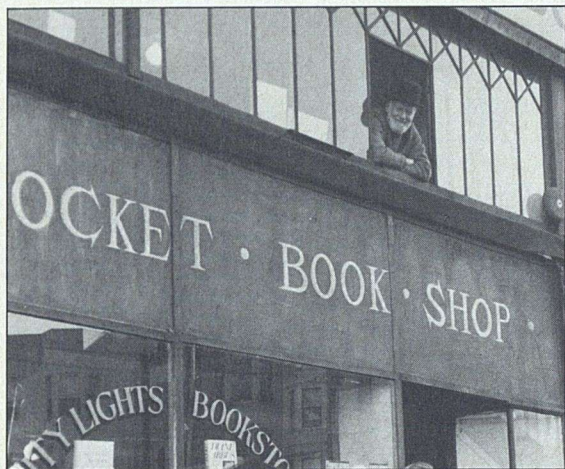
Both Peters and Ferlinghetti concede that by not stocking bestsellers they are sacrificing profitability for quality and independence. In fact, they sometimes keep the same titles on their shelves for two or three years, and seldom experience pressure from sales reps of the large New York publishers to carry their books. Unlike the more traditional bookstore, City Lights attracts customers because of its reputation, bolstered by a steady clientele who come to purchase from unusual stock they know can be found there. Presently, the store

that City Lights will ever become an active participant in the affairs of book-selling (or publishing) organizations.

Among the myths that have survived over the past three decades is that City Lights was a hangout for writers, particularly the elder statesmen of the Beat Generation. Peters says that this has never been true, and in fact Ferlinghetti seldom sees his old buddies, William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg and the rest. Some writers still have mail sent to the store, but they are few in number.

Another misconception, Ferlinghetti is quick to point out, is that despite the poet's literary activities on behalf of the Sandinistas and other "liberal" or left-wing causes, the store itself does not take a political stance; i.e., it stocks books and periodicals from all political points of view.

While not exactly in the category of dispelled myths, it may seem incongruous, at least, that the first thing one sees inside City Lights is a 3-M electronic surveillance scanner. For many years, City Lights had more than its share of shoplifting problems, but two years ago they installed the device to



© Nancy Peters

Ferlinghetti peers out from upstairs office

detect customers trying to leave the store without paying for their purchases. This particular problem was perhaps exacerbated by the makeshift reading room in the store's basement. There has always been a table and chairs for browsers, and shoplifting was not the only consequence of providing comfort in a relaxed setting. On one occasion, a customer became too comfortable and was locked in the store overnight; the staff found him when they opened for business the next day.

A different kind of problem can arise when a bookseller is also a publisher (also see box on page 143). How are the store's relations with the publishing industry? Well, probably hot and cold. As noted earlier, Peters receives little pressure from New York publishers to stock their titles. But the publishing firm's relations with New York have been somewhat unsettling recently. One of City Lights' bestselling imprints had been the text of the Sam Shepard play *Fool for Love*. Ferlinghetti and Peters thought they had an exclusive contract with Shepard to publish the book. However, in 1984 Shepard contracted with Bantam Books to publish an anthology of his plays, titled *Fool for Love*, which included that play. According to Ferlinghetti, when he phoned Bantam to protest, he was told

that Bantam was under no obligation to inform City Lights of its intention to publish; and furthermore, if City Lights was interested in a lawsuit they should try Sam Shepard. It is unlikely that City Lights will pursue litigation, but they do feel that they hold the exclusive rights to publish the title, *Fool for Love*.

Also, City Lights' bestselling author, Allen Ginsberg, has signed a contract with Harper & Row to publish five volumes of his work, at a reported \$25,000 per volume. (The first volume, *Collected Poems 1947-1980*, was published in January of this year.) In this case, City Lights will get a small fee as part of the agreement. However, Ginsberg will continue to publish with the City Lights Pocket Post series, a poetry series in 4" x 5" format with distinctive black-and-white covers.

What Becomes a Legend Most?

Because City Lights is well known, it seldom advertises. Store promotions consist mainly of autograph parties and unusual window displays. However, the displays are probably supplemental, at best, when it comes

to luring customers, for City Lights is situated just off the intersection of San Francisco's busiest crossroads, at Columbus and Broadway in North Beach, an area that is a combination of Times Square and Greenwich Village, a place where San Franciscans gather to celebrate New Year's Eve and Super Bowl victories.

In recent years the store has been doing more author book-signing parties, most recently Orville Schell for *Getting Rich Is Glorious: China in the 1980s* (Pantheon) and *What Shall We Do Without Us?* by Kenneth Patchen (Sierra Club and Yolly Bolly Press). Such events don't always guarantee additional sales, although when an author such as William Burroughs is on the premises his books usually sell out.

Among the staff, there has been very little turnover through the years. Nancy Peters, who was once a librarian at the Library of Congress, first became associated with Ferlinghetti in 1971, when he asked her to do some editorial work for him. She has been with the firm ever since, primarily as managing editor of the press. In 1982 she began to work in the store's operations and no doubt deserves much of the credit for City Lights' success over the past several years.

Each of the City Lights clerks is a specialist in one or more fields, which

has its advantages when ordering books, keeping track of stock, or giving out information. Richard Berman has been with City Lights since 1967. He is a Blake scholar and has a strong interest in fiction, literature in translation and women's studies. Paul Yamazaki, a 14-year veteran, coordinates the book buying. His background is in Third World politics and literature, and he prides himself on the fact that City Lights has one of the best stocks of jazz and blues books in the country. Bob Sharrard, who also doubles as the publishing firm's rights and permissions person, is the store's bibliophile in charge of rare books, fine presses and remainders. There are five other clerks, all of whom have been with the store for some time, who work on a part-time, or "as needed" basis, including one who was a Fulbright scholar in art.

Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who is (since 1975) the sole owner of City Lights bookstore and publishing company, is far from a typical businessman. Peters claims he would give away the stock if he could. Lawrence—as many call him—regards himself as "one of the old bookmen, who are a dying breed." He still writes and publishes poetry, primarily under the City Lights imprint, but with New Directions as well. He is at the store daily, where he maintains an office on an open balcony overlooking the main floor. Ferlinghetti is of course a familiar sight in North Beach, particularly at the local post office, where he can be seen unloading packages from his small pickup truck, accompanied by a small white dog that can best be called a very mixed breed.

The staff tends to remain with City Lights out of a sense of loyalty to its tradition and to Lawrence Ferlinghetti, but also because it is not operated like an ordinary bookstore. The staff is organized on a "collective" basis. There are regular meetings at which they share in the decision-making process, sometimes disagreeing with the owner. There is a profit-sharing plan and a very flexible sick day policy. But there is also a kind of quiet pride of being with City Lights that attracts and holds the staff.

As for competition with other bookstores, City Lights' unique stock and reputation continue to stand it in good stead. Both Ferlinghetti and Peters deny that the recent invasion of chain bookstores such as Waldenbooks, Crown and the independent discount stores, have had much effect on City Lights' business. According to Peters, total sales volume for 1984 was about 30% more than it was in either 1982 or 1983. In the midst of a continuing trend toward chain and discount bookstores, City Lights is more than holding its own.