

Pages Unturned

6 | BY: TOM FLANAGAN



Read the City

Amsterdam's art reputation is global, but its literary past and present are often overlooked: incredible for a city that harbours atmospheric libraries, illustrious authors and the best bookshops.

Along Amsterdam's central canals, you'd be forgiven for focusing on the outdoor scenery before you turn your eyes indoors. In the autumn, slender elms flecked with gold are framed by some of the city's most appealing canal houses, as the towering Westerkerk juts out above gabled roofs. It's a cityscape that feels innately romantic, even literary. And while it's tempting to get swept up in the views, once you reach Keizersgracht 123, known as the 'House with the Heads', you'll want to look inside. After all, it's here where you'll find the Embassy of the Free Mind museum and, within it, the Ritman Library.

Libraries and free thinking

The Ritman is the world's largest library on the Christian Hermetic tradition – home to around 30,000 works answering the big questions of what it means to be human. It's also a beautiful, almost magical space, where thousand-year-old texts – such as the very first Latin Quran and ornate books on Sufism – perch on wooden shelves and under beamed ceilings, a vision of what we imagine libraries to look like. And yet this is a place easy to miss, much like Amsterdam's literary history. 'Amsterdam has always been a place to disappear,' says Jozef Ritman, whose father, Joost, opened the



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library in 1984 after 30 years of collecting hermetic texts. 'Look at the history of Europe; the Netherlands was a swamp, where rivers end up in a delta. In a forgotten place like that, you attract a certain kind of thinking. It was where Europe came together and that spirit of difference is reflected in what we do.'

While Amsterdam's reputation as a place for free thinking is well-known, that same reputation allowed a lesser-known image to flourish: publishing. But even though people pilgrimage from around the world to visit this library and the nearby Anne Frank House, it seems few would characterise the city as a literary destination.

From publishing to poetry

Amsterdam has a long tradition of literature. Once a publishing hub and place of bookselling for much of Europe during the 1600s, its reputation as a place free of prying eyes and censorship made it appealing to the likes of some of the world's greatest thinkers, such as Baruch Spinoza and René

Descartes. It was the home of Joost van den Vondel, fondly referred to as the 'Prince of Poets', and in the 19th and 20th centuries gave birth to the likes of Eduard Douwes Dekker – aka Multatuli, who wrote the venerated novel *Max Havelaar*, a searing critique of Dutch colonialism – and, of course, Anne Frank.

So why doesn't the city get its due? Lisa Kuitert, Professor of Book Studies at the

It's only recently that it's become a publishing capital

University of Amsterdam, says language and history play a part in why the capital, and the Netherlands more broadly, is overlooked in the book realm. 'Dutch isn't a widely-spoken language around the world, so people have no idea about Dutch literary culture,' she explains. 'Realistically, Amsterdam was also a very poor city



until the 20th century, so it's only recently, since internationalisation and modernisation, that it's become a publishing capital.' That's not to say there's no literary culture, though, says Kuitert. In fact, the Dutch had a strong poetry movement courtesy of *De Vijftigers* ('The Fiftiers') in the 1950s, a group who wrote experimental verses that broke with



You'll find the *Amsterdammertje* bollards all around the city, and this wooden bookmark (€11.95) shaped like one is a version you can take home with you.

WOODENAMSTERDAM.COM

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Hotel V Nes

Dear Amsterdam...

Other than being a place to write, Amsterdam has also been the setting for numerous stories and international bestsellers.

★ Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch* (2013) finds its way among the canals, coffee shops and hotels of Amsterdam, with writers' hotel De Ambassade the alleged location of the protagonist's fated stay.

★ On the corner of the Leidsegracht, you'll find the bench that featured in John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012), scribbled with messages from lovers far and wide.

★ Visit the Rijksmuseum for Petronella Oortman's dollhouse, which inspired Jessie Burton's *The Miniaturist* (2014) or stroll down Warmoesstraat, the real-world home of Oortman.

© PETER KOOIJMAN



Oudemanhuispoort Book Market

© MANON VAN WESEREN



Cuyper Library

© REINE DEN ENGLERSON



Café Americain

Writers' cafés

Certain cafés and bars used to be the temporary homes of acclaimed writers and journalists back in the day, a place to write and meet other minds. Dip into writerly history at Scheltema aka the 'Fleet Street of the Netherlands', journalist hangout Café de Pels and Harry Mulisch's haunt Café Americain. Mulisch would allegedly call the venue itself so the waiter would be forced to shout 'Telephone for Mr Mulisch', and his former table is now dubbed 'Harry Mulisch's Reading Table'.

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Museum libraries

Beyond the Rijksmuseum, both Huis Marseille and the National Maritime Museum are home to dedicated book collections. At the former, you'll find an extensive catalogue of photography and monographs, while the latter is home to nautical works and texts on watery histories.

HUISMARSEILLE.NL
HETSCHEEPVAARTMUSEUM.NL



Story time

Beyond just books and libraries, Amsterdam is emerging as a destination for storytelling clubs and literary festivals. There's the Amsterdam Storytelling Festival (6-9 November, podiummozaiek.nl), where acclaimed storytellers light up the autumn nights in this four-day festival, with pacy plots, touching tales and real-life accounts surfacing from around the world. Amsterdam's leading literature festival Read My

convention. Poets such as Lucebert and Remco Campert were big names. They represented a big shift in poetry – they stopped using rhyme and experimented with expressive sounds. They weren't always comprehensive, but they did something to you emotionally.' And then there's the *De Grote Drie* ('The Great Three') of Dutch literature – the term used for postwar authors Gerard Reve, Harry Mulisch and Willem Frederik Hermans, known (respectively) for books such as *The Evenings* (1947), *The Assault* (1982) and *The Darkroom of Damocles* (1958). As for what defines Dutch literature and its literary culture, Kuitert says there are themes. 'Even today, the Dutch tend to write about themselves, their lives. There isn't a tradition of fiction here as there is in other countries.'

Bookshop galore

Whether you're familiar with Dutch literature or not, the city is a bona fide hub for book lovers, especially if you love

© PETER ENKST

All around the city, you'll find small **neighbourhood libraries** – little bookcases on the street – with unwanted paperbacks for you to take, though it's always nice to leave one in return.



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The best bookshops

With more than 90 shops, Amsterdam has a bookshop for everyone – the challenge is picking which to choose.

ARCHITECTURA & NATURA

Speciality bookshop focused entirely on architectural history, urban design, botanical life and animal studies.

LELIEGRACHT 22, ARCHITECTURA.NL



SPUI

About 25 booksellers gather here every Friday to sell their collections of old, rare, second-hand and out-of-print books at Spui Book Market. You'll also find the American Book Center here, a family-owned business that is one of the biggest English-language bookshops in Amsterdam, and Atheneum, a long-time institution for Dutch-language literature and hard-to-find magazines.

SPUI 12, ABC.NL

SPUI 14-16, ATHENAEUMSCHELTENA.NL

AMSTERDAM ANTIQUARIAN BOOKSTORE

A passionate bibliophile opened this in 1952 and it remains a storied hideout for rare finds and literary heritage.

KEIZERSGRACHT 123, AABOOKSTORE.COM

SCHELTEMA

A Dutch chain with an impressive English section – the main branch on Rokin is home to 125,000+ titles and a cookbook section with a kitchen.

ROKIN 9, ATHENAEUMSCHELTEMA.NL/SCHELTEMA

OUDEMANHUISPOORT MARKET

An 17th-century covered walkway, brimming with stalls stacked with second-hand books, prints and sheet music.

OUDEMANHUISPOORT 14
BOOKS4LIFE.AMSTERDAM

BIJLMER BOOKSTORE

This community bookshop curates fiction, non-fiction, cookbooks and poetry by Black authors from Africa and the diaspora.

HARRIET FREEZERSTRAAT 108A
BIJLMERBOOKSTORE.COM

JAVA BOOKSHOP

A neighbourhood-friendly and favourite, this bookshop has both Dutch- and English-language sections, plus an extensive kids section, all within its ambient and cosy four walls.

JAVASTRAAT 145, JAVABOOKSHOP.NL

THE BOOK EXCHANGE

More than 50,000 preloved paperbacks across 40 categories make this the spot for secondhand books.

KLOVENIERSBURGWAL 58, BOOKEXCHANGE.NL

MINERVA

A local bookshop in Oud-Zuid that prides itself on its personal touch, where you'll find everything from English literature to travel tomes and glossy magazines.

KONINGINNEWEG 229, BOEKHANDELMINERVA.NL



bookshops. Its rapid internationalisation means that Amsterdam's bookish institutions are more accessible than ever, with plenty of English-language booksellers, and the rise of BookTok on TikTok driving younger people to brick-and-mortar shops more than ever. Sanne Muijser, who directs the Dutch Booksellers Association (*Koninklijke Boekverkoopersbond*) says

The city's bookish institutions are more accessible than ever

Amsterdam's bookshop culture has responded to that, though it's always been there. 'We have a strong book culture now in Amsterdam with more than 90 shops, many of them small and indie, with a lot of English sections plus ones related to our history,' he says. 'They've always been sanctuaries, but BookTok has brought a lot more young people to these spaces who use it as meeting points, as a way to get to know people and their neighbourhoods.' One bookshop that has long fostered community in the capital is the American Book Center (ABC), Amsterdam's first English-language bookshop and a cult favourite among both locals and visitors. Started in 1972 and owned by an American family, it remains a family-run business, with a focus on community. 'We try to be something for everyone, and we organise events such as writer's nights to bring people together,' says Tiemen Zwaan, Senior Bookseller/Buyer. 'We get a lot of both tourists and locals here, people who have the ABC as a destination to visit in Amsterdam.' And rightly so, its multi-floor layout and in-house café make it a home for stories as much as a hideout for those writing them. Still, you'll find similarly alluring spaces across the city. The Rijksmuseum's Cuyper Library is a seductive, Hogwarts-esque escape; Oudemanhuispoort is a covered maze of antiquarian books and sellers that'll transport you to



Part history, part travel guide, journalist and author Geert Mak details Amsterdam's storied, soulful journey from its murky past to present-day glory in *Amsterdam: a brief life of the city*.



times gone by, while snug writers' cafés such as Café Welling will invite you to curl up with a book or debate one like the writers of old once did.

A storytelling sanctuary

Amsterdam's literary culture is also very much of the present and still evolving. Enter Mezrab, a storytelling venue that invites visitors to share their stories on stage or curl up with a bowl of soup and listen. Part performance, part social club, it's a place you'll be hard-pressed to find anywhere else and a nod to how Amsterdam is keeping its literary culture alive (and modern). 'My father raised me on stories,' says Sahand Sahebdivani, who founded Mezrab inspired by his Iranian heritage and the stories his parents would share growing up. 'I came here as a refugee and we couldn't bring anything with us. So I was aware of our

Amsterdam's openness to stories has helped it become what it is

heritage, this culture of sharing stories, which I felt didn't exist [in NL] at the time.' Now, Mezrab is a success story – having recently opened a second location in West – with dedicated weekly programming and as much a place to hear great tales as it is to meet great people. And Sahebdivani says Amsterdam's openness to stories has helped it become what it is and, in some way, that's the real legacy of its literary past. 'Amsterdam is a great literary city,' he says. 'They may not have the best writers, but they do have open spaces. And now, more than ever, with what's going on in the world, we need this. When someone tells you a story here, you experience something you wouldn't have access to, something human. And there's something beautiful about doing that together.'



Literary corners

When you need a place to hide from the cold, or when books are the only company you're after.

CUYPERS LIBRARY

Serene and stunning, this is the largest and oldest collection of historical art texts in the

Netherlands and a gorgeous place to escape to.

MUSEUMSTRAAT 1
RIJKSMUSEUM.NL



MULTATULI MUSEUM

The 17th-century canal home of Eduard Douwes Dekker (pen name: Multatuli) – the man behind the Dutch classic *Max Havelaar* (1860) – has been turned into a boutique museum celebrating his life and work.

KORSJESPOORTSTEEG 20
MULTATULI-MUSEUM.NL



ETS HAIM, LIVRARIA MONTEZINOS

The oldest active Jewish library in the world, its 30,000-strong collection of works on Judaism is unparalleled.

MR. VISSERPLEIN 3
ETSHAIMMANUSCRIPTS.NL

ANNE FRANK HOUSE

The home of Amsterdam's most famous alumni, this museum traces Anne Frank's story and has

a thoughtful bookshop attached.

WESTERMARKT 20, ANNEFRANK.ORG

OBA OOSTERDOK

This centrally-located, sweeping, glass-fronted public library (that's also the Netherlands' biggest) houses a collection of 1.5 million books, periodicals, CDs, DVDs



and games spread across seven floors. Grab a book and head up to the top to the OBA theatre and a restaurant with a terrace that boasts views over the city.

OSTERDOKSKADE 143, OBA.NL

BIBLIOTHECA ROSENTHALIANA

Housed in the Allard Pierson Museum, the basis of this library was the personal collection of Leiser Rosenthal. Now it's one of Europe's largest libraries dedicated to Jewish history.

NIEUWE AMSTELSTRAAT 3-5
ALLARDPIERSON.NL

THE RITMAN LIBRARY

The world's largest space for Christian-Hermeticism is home to unusual, esoteric texts not found anywhere else.

KEIZERSGRACHT 123
EMBASSYOFTHEFREEMIND.COM