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San Francisco Chronicle

DATEBOOK

SECTION



Tuesday,
June 10, 2003



**CITY LIGHTS
BOOKSTORE
50TH ANNIVERSARY**



City Lights enters the modern age: 1975 - 2003

LITERARY MECCA

CHAPTER THREE

The end of the Vietnam War marked a turning point in the nation and at City Lights Books. Many of the seminal figures from the first decade of City Lights had moved away from the Bay Area, which was still a cultural center, but now the counterculture had evolved into the New Age. Yet the tales of City Lights continues in part 3 in *The Chronicle's* special 50th anniversary series.

LAWRENCE FERLINGHETTI:

Gregory Corso came out of Vesuvio one night when it closed at 2 a.m. He broke the window of City Lights and went in and got cash out of the cash register. He got maybe \$75 or \$100, maybe \$200, I don't know. People at Vesuvio called the police. The police came and dusted for prints and they got his prints. We went around to see him early in the morning. We told him that the police had his prints and he'd better leave town. So he did. He went to Italy and didn't come back for several years. We just didn't pay his royalties for a couple of years.

THOM GUNN, poet:

I knew Allen Ginsberg slightly. In 1982 or '83, we arranged to meet at City Lights. Before we went out for coffee he went to have a pee. Some stranger looking at books said to Nancy Peters, "Who's that?" And she said, "That was Allen Ginsberg." He'd seen me talking to Allen and asked me, "Are you Jack Kerouac?" This was several years after Kerouac's death. I was very flattered that somebody should mistake me for somebody so good-looking.

HERB GOLD, author:

Corso for a while used to sleep in the store. I think he was doing a lot of bad drugs, and a lot of bad karma then also. He asked me in a fairly subdued way, "Who do you write for?" And I gave some answer, like some ideal reader, or something. And he began yelling at me: "That's the trouble with you! I write for the eye of God. I write for God!" I think he was asked to leave.

While City Lights changed with the times, its counterculture soul carried on, thanks largely to the commitment of Ferlinghetti and the City Lights staff.

NANCY PETERS, City Lights co-owner:

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CITY LIGHTS AT 50

Sunday in Insight: An oral history of the early days of City Lights Books, from its founding in 1953 through the "Howl" trial and the Beat years.

Monday in Datebook: City Lights is at the heart of the counterculture movement in the '60s and the Vietnam era.

Today in Datebook: City Lights in modern times.

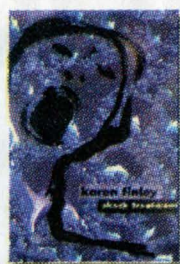
Wednesday in Datebook: Lawrence Ferlinghetti, in the words of some of the writers and artists whose lives have been touched by City Lights.



LEA SUZUKI/The Chronicle

Writer Michael McClure says playwright Tom Stoppard was "wide-eyed" on a visit to City Lights in 1975.

'Hill Street Blues' star just one of 'The Guys' | Retired broadcasters hear



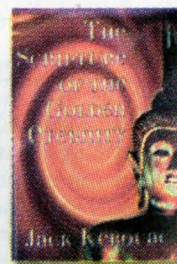
1990



1991



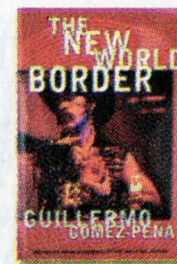
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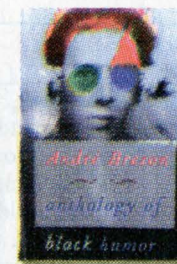
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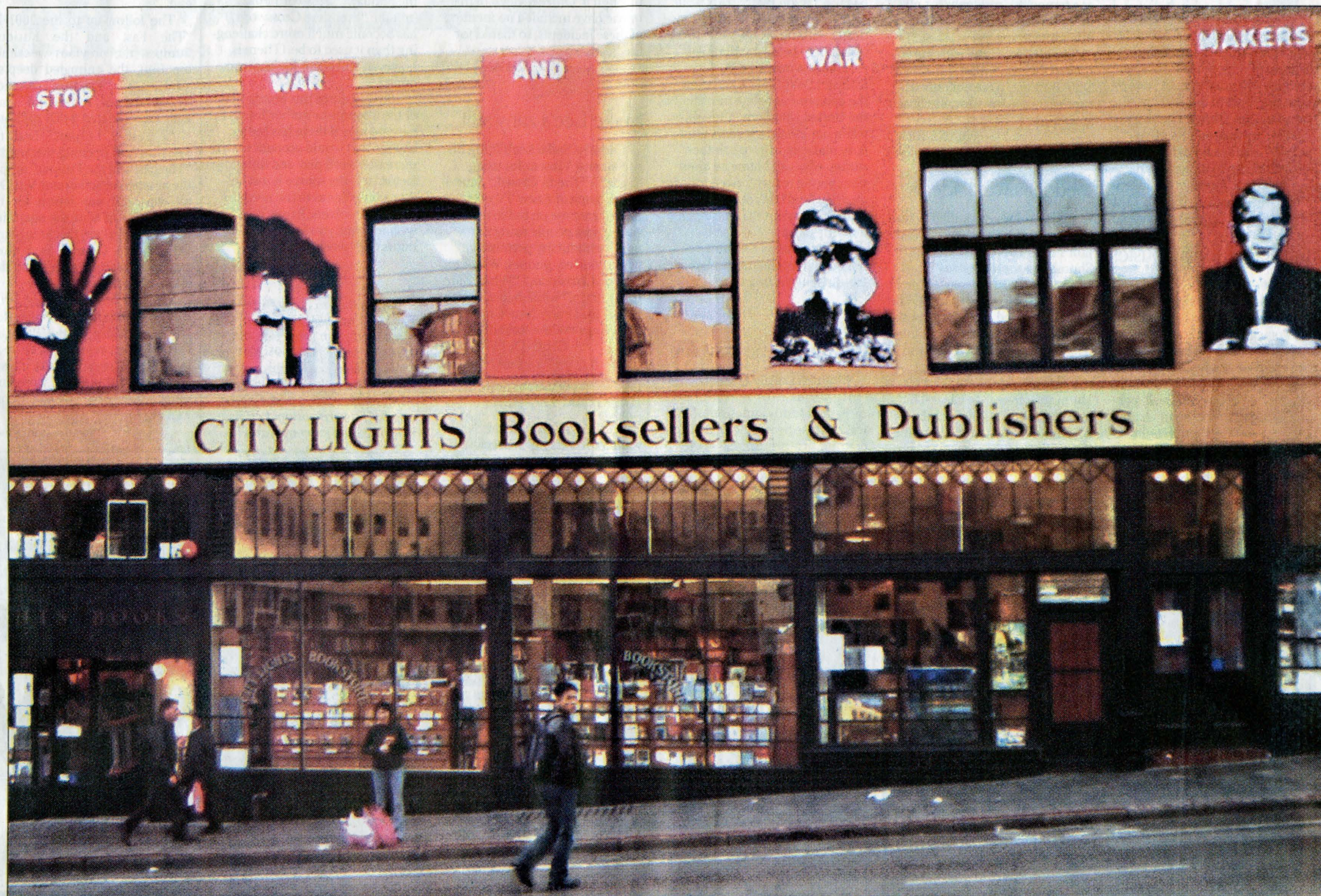
1996



1997



1997



CHRISTINA KOCI HERNANDEZ / The Chronicle 2002

As President Bush threatened military action against Iraq last year, City Lights responded with a display of banners, designed by San Francisco Print Collective, that read "Stop War and War Makers."

► **CITY LIGHTS**
From Page D1

We've always hired people who love books and know about books. We've

CITY LIGHTS
BOOKSTORE
50TH ANNIVERSARY



NANCY PETERS:

Shig had worked at Vesuvio before he came to work here, and so did Elaine.

ELAINE KATZENBERGER, associate director of City Lights:

I opened the store at 6 in the morning. And Richard Berman, who was the

► CITY LIGHTS

From Page D1

We've always hired people who love books and know about books. We've been pretty fortunate in the people we've had here. People work very hard. They have to be really devoted. We pay more than \$6 an hour now, but nonetheless, you're not going to get rich working in a bookstore. People here are very devoted and dedicated to their work. We have a fairly small staff.

HERB GOLD:

Shig [Murao] adored writers. People used to ask him what he was — he was obviously Asian, and he'd say he was an Eskimo. He was enthroned there behind the cash register.

LAWRENCE FERLINGHETTI:

Shig left in the late '70s. He had diabetes, and it got worse and worse. He'd fallen down in the basement and was hospitalized. He had a stroke. He wanted to come back to work, but I wanted to take some of the workload off him, and have him just be there as a major-domo, a silent partner. I had already given him a quarter of the business. He didn't want to do that. He wanted to come back full time as manager. It was a matter of losing face. We had a falling out over it. He wanted to be bought out, so we did. It took us several years to pay him back because we didn't have any cash.

HERB GOLD:

Shig left the bookstore and lived on upper Grant. There were people who were very loyal to him and were angry about what happened. Then Shig moved elsewhere, and ultimately had a stroke and died. I liked him a lot. I'd almost say I loved him. But I could also see why the bookstore couldn't have him, because they'd gone through an awful lot of financial crises, and he had, too — members of the family could do pretty much whatever they wanted. There was a lot of feeling among many writers that he had a hard deal, because he really was the soul of the bookstore.



SHEPPARD POWELL

Diane Di Prima and Allen Ginsberg in an undated photo.

CITY LIGHTS BOOKSTORE 50TH ANNIVERSARY



1975 — War in Vietnam ends as North Vietnamese forces take Saigon and rename it Ho Chi Minh City.

○

1976

Shigeyoshi Murao suffers a severe stroke leaves City Lights. Joe Wolberg becomes manager.

○

1978

The Italian travel agents next door retire, and City Lights expands once again, with larger selections of books on philosophy, feminism, ecology, history, film, jazz and blues. City Lights Publishers moves into the bookstore building.

○

1970s

City Lights publishes Neal Cassady, Charles Bukowski, Gary Snyder, Diane Di Prima, Harold Norse, Anne Waldman, Isabelle Eberhardt, Geoffrey Rips' "Unamerican Activities: The Campaign Against the Underground Press," Huey Newton & Erika Huggins' "Insights & Poems," Mary Low and Juan Brea's "Red Spanish Notebook," John Reed's "Adventures of a Young Man," Julian Beck's "The Life of the Theater."

○

1983

Peters becomes Ferlinghetti's business partner and general director of City Lights Books. Richard Berman becomes bookstore manager and Paul Yamazaki chief book buyer.

○

1988

City Lights successfully campaigns to name 12 streets after writers and artists: Ambrose Bierce, Mark Twain, Jack London, Isadora Duncan, Benjamino Bufano, Bob Kaufman, Jack Kerouac, Frank Norris, Richard Henry Dana, William Saroyan, Dashiell Hammett, Kenneth Rexroth.

○

1987

City Lights begins publishing annual Reviews, which continue through 1997. Each issue introduces new poetry and prose and features forums on political and social issues, including AIDS, media manipulation, urban ecology and Eastern Europe.

○

NANCY PETERS:

Shig had worked at Vesuvio before he came to work here, and so did Elaine.

ELAINE KATZENBERGER, associate director of City Lights:

I opened the bar at 6 in the morning. And Richard Berman, who was the manager here, who left last year, used to come over and drink coffee and smoke cigarettes and we'd talk books. My last bartending gig was down the street at the San Francisco Brewing Company. Richard came down, and had a beer and mentioned there was a job at the bookstore if I wanted one. I said, OK. It was \$6 an hour.

MICHAEL MCCLURE, poet, playwright:

Back in 1975, when I was doing some work with ACT, Tom Stoppard was there working on a play at the same time. He didn't have a car, and I said, "Is there any place I can take you?" He said, "Oh, God, would you take me to City Lights? I collect City Lights publications. They just published something of Hemingway's that I haven't gotten yet." He was wide-eyed and like a baby duck going to heaven. I also took him to Muir Woods. I wanted him to see the redwoods. But he got a much bigger kick out of City Lights.

ELAINE KATZENBERGER:

It's no exaggeration to say that at least on a weekly basis, there's a world-class luminary walking around in here, saying hello and happy to be here. Bono is in here every time he's in town. Or Bowie. You go to an R.E.M. concert and they're saying "City Lights!" from the stage. I remember one time Chrissie Hynde came in. She shopped, she bought some books and then she said something about how much she loved City Lights. Then she spontaneously recited one of Lawrence's poems from "Coney Island of the Mind."

The 1980s may have been "the me decade" to many, but for Ferlinghetti and his staff at City Lights, it was "the they decade," as the store enlarged its multicultural focus. That didn't mean City Lights abandoned its political and social commitments.

ELAINE KATZENBERGER:

We've collaborated in various ways with Youth Speaks for the last few years. They got a grant to do a North Beach poetry series. The kids are being exposed to something that they don't necessarily think they relate to, but then they find out that they're part of a continuum.

LAWRENCE FERLINGHETTI:

I'd go to slam poetry events because that's what was happening and I wanted to find out about it. It enlarges the audience. Generally, it's murder on the poetry. The winner is chosen by the amount of applause. In the '50s, poetry and jazz were considered the thing, a hot number, everyone was doing it. It was great for enlarging the audience for poetry, but most of the time the musicians wanted to just blow and generally ended up overpowering the voice of the poet. The poet ends up sounding like he's trying to be heard over the din.

ELAINE KATZENBERGER:

In the '80s, during the Reagan years, Lawrence traveled to Nicaragua and was very supportive of the revolution. We published Ernesto Cardinal. He came here. There were always responses to our foreign policy and also to domestic issues. As the multicultural dialogue started opening up, in the mid-to-late-'80s, we were able to expand our space and we opened up a space specifically in the store featuring translations from other parts of the world that are not European, and singled those out as something to pay attention to.

LAWRENCE FERLINGHETTI:

Someone who saw the set of banners that said "Dissent Is Not Un-American" came busting in and said very hostilely, "So you love Saddam Hussein, I suppose?" I said, "Well, that's not what the banners are saying." He didn't bother to read the banners very well. In New York, I've had people tell me no one could put up these banners.

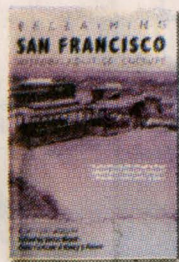
ELAINE KATZENBERGER:

When Rushdie's "Satanic Verses" came out, and there were all of these threats, we had the book in the window the entire time. And we did receive some threats. When Lawrence uses the phrase "editorial vision," we're not just talking about the publishing company. We like to use the phrase "curatorial

► CITY LIGHTS: Next page



1997



1998



2000



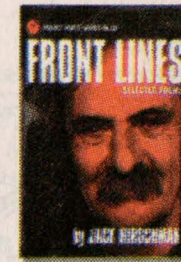
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2002



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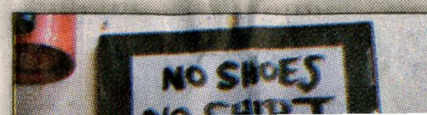
CHRISTINA KOCI HERNANDEZ/The Chronicle

"Since our banners went up," says Nancy Peters, co-owner of City Lights with Lawrence Ferlinghetti, "we've seen an upsurge of people saying, 'It's so good to come to a place where you don't feel excluded.'"

► CITY LIGHTS

From previous page

vision," in terms of what the bookstore reflects. And it's the same set of ideals



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LAWRENCE FERLINGHETTI:

After 9/11, a huge paranoia swept across the land, and allowed Bush to pass the new Patriot Act. It's much worse now than during the '50s. Even Eisenhower is beginning to look like an angel. The measures under this Patriot Act allow the government to do practically anything as far as taking away your civil rights. Friends of mine in Italy think it's like the early days of Italian fascism, the definition of fascism having been the close cooperation and alliance between government and corporations. And that's exactly what we have.

NANCY PETERS:

We published two books right after 9/11. One was an anthology of writings about 9/11 and what might be expected afterward and how people could organize. The other one was a book by Michael Parenti called "The Terrorism Trap," which has had pretty good sales. I think we're into our fourth printing now.

LAWRENCE FERLINGHETTI:

When Berman left after how many years — 30? — we had a meeting and I said, "This is the perfect situation for an ideal anarchist solution, because we didn't have a manager. You know the anarchists have gotten a bad name in the mass media, that an anarchist is just a bomb-throwing idiot that's disrupting everything. Whereas I'm thinking of Kenneth Rexroth, who called himself a philosophical anarchist. The basis was that mankind was basically good and not evil and that mankind, and womankind, too, of course, was capable of governing himself without a tyrannical government on top of him, or on top of her. It's basically a world view; the present administration evidently has the world view that man is basically evil. All except us, of course.

NANCY PETERS:

Since 9/11 and since our banners went up, we've seen an upsurge of people coming to the store, being that this is a center, people coming in and saying, "It's so good to come to a place where you don't feel excluded, where people are supporting the kind of position that we have." And we've seen a big growth in sales in our muckraking section.

LAWRENCE FERLINGHETTI:

I've been keeping a file for 50 years called Days and Nights at City Lights. And I wanted some fellow writer to write a biography of City Lights, using a



LEA SUZUKI / The Chronicle 1997

A tribute to writer William S. Burroughs is displayed at one window.



JERRY TELFER / The Chronicle 2000

Signs throughout the store reflect City Lights' countercultural spirit.

1991

City Lights shuts the store to protest the bombing of Iraq by the U.S. government, and it remains closed the next day, joining a "No Business as Usual" anti-war campaign.



1992 — Bill Clinton elected president.



1994 — City of San Francisco names alley in North Beach "Via Ferlinghetti."



1999

With a loan from the Small Business Administration, Ferlinghetti and Peters buy the bookstore building at 261 Columbus Ave.

City Lights launches Web site, www.citylights.com



2003

In protest of the U.S.-led attack on Iraq, City Lights closes the store on the first day of the war.

Timeline source: City Lights Books

CITY LIGHTS SERIES STAFF

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Editing: Paul Wilner, Mark Hokoda, John McMurtrie

Timeline editor: Richard Paoli

Research: Laura Perkins

Series editor: David Wiegand

lot of this stuff in the file. It's mostly crazy letters. People that wrote years later and said, "When I was a poor student I spent all my time reading in the basement and no one ever bothered me and now it's 30 years later and I'm such-and-such and I wanted to let you know. I got my complete education in your basement." There's another letter in there saying — more than one saying — I was there, I was in the store when you first got the basement at the end of the 1950s and I used to boost books regularly. And now that I'm a successful stockbroker, I want to pay you back. Here's a check for \$100. There was one guy who was on drugs — this was a coupla years ago — he started paying back by the month. About \$10 a month. He was in rehabilitation somewhere.

GEORGE PLIMPTON, author, publisher, Paris Review:

What is great about City Lights Books is that it has lasted as long as it has, doing something that is not really a commercial venture — very much like the Paris Review, which also celebrates its 50th anniversary this year. That's good DNA. The Oreo cookie is 50, too.

Editor's note: Actually, the Oreo cookie is 91 years old this year, but why argue with Plimpton?

Tomorrow in Datebook: A Coney Island of great minds on the topic of Lawrence Ferlinghetti.

CITY LIGHTS ORAL HISTORY

Among the people interviewed or mentioned:

Andrei Codrescu is a Romanian-born poet, novelist and essayist, and columnist on National Public Radio; editor of the on-line literary journal Exquisite Corpse; and MacCurdy Distinguished Professor of English at Louisiana State University.

Gregory Corso was a beat poet.

Herb Gold is an author, wrote "Bohemia: Digging the Roots of Cool."

Thom Gunn is a poet whose books include "Boss Cupid," "Frontiers of Gossip," "The Man With Night Sweats" and "The Occasions of Poetry," a collection of essays. He was awarded a MacArthur Foundation fellowship in 1993. He lives in San

Francisco.

Elaine Katzenberger is associate director of City Lights Books.

Michael McClure is a poet, novelist and playwright whose books include "Rebel Lions," "Rain Mirror," the novel "The Mad Cub" and the Obie Award-winning plays "The Beard" and "Josephine the Mouse Singer."

Shigeyoshi Murao was a fixture at City Lights for many years until the 1970s.

Nancy Peters is the co-owner of City Lights Bookstore.

George Plimpton is an author and publisher of the Paris Review.



City Lights is having a party and you're invited

Here is a list of events celebrating the bookstore and publisher's 50th anniversary. All are open to the public. Unless otherwise noted, events take place at City Lights Bookstore, 261 Columbus Ave., San Francisco. For more information, call (415) 362-8193 or go to www.citylights.com/anniversary.html.

Week of June 9: Walking tours of North Beach with Bill Morgan, author of "The Beat Generation in San Francisco: A Literary Tour," published by City Lights and available this month.

6:30 p.m. June 12: Slide show and talk with Morgan, San Francisco Public Library's Koret Auditorium, 100 Larkin St.

7 p.m. June 19: Readings by poet and activist Diane Di Prima.

7 p.m. June 25: "Coming Back Home to Manila Town." An evening of "talk story" with Emil De Guzman, Nancy Hom, Al Robles, Bill Sorro and others on families, farm laborers, factory workers, Zen monks, pool sharks, cooks, children, lovers, preachers and more.

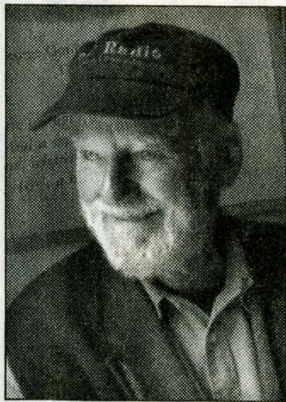
For more on City Lights' 50th anniversary, including additional photographs, an interactive first-person feature and a North Beach neighborhood guide, go to sfgate.com/citylights.

SFGate.com

pieces "Fugue" and "Simfony #13."

The "Threnody," which sets a

Wednesday in Datebook



A portrait of co-owner
Lawrence Ferlinghetti
concludes the
four-part series on
City Lights Books.
