

Friedberg Fellowship Report: Exploring the Book Towns of France

This past summer, I spent 10 days exploring literary culture and tourism in four French book towns: Cuisery, Bécherel, Montmorillon, and Montolieu. I traveled between towns by the SNCF (Société Nationale des Chemins de Fer Français), the French national railway system. Each town I traveled to was in a different region of France (See Figure 1). Cuisery is situated in eastern France, in the Bourgogne-Franche-Comté region, about 110 kilometers from Lyon. Bécherel is located in Bretagne in northwestern France, roughly 35 kilometers from Rennes. Montmorillon, in Nouvelle-Aquitaine, central-western France, is about 45 kilometers from Poitiers. Finally, Montolieu, the only booktown in Southern France, is in Occitanie and about 70 kilometers from Toulouse.



Fig. 1. Book towns mapped onto the regions of France (via MapChart)

My journey began in Cuisery, a town originally formed in the Middle Ages and established in 1999 as a Village du Livre, making it the fourth book town in France at the time. The town is run by A sign near the entrance to its main street (see Figure 2) boasts that it is “the largest street of bookstores in France!” The sign also reads: “By the end of the 1990s, when the center of Cuisery was slowly dying as the shops closed one after the other, a decision was made to revitalize it by encouraging booksellers and craftspeople engaged in the arts of bookmaking to establish themselves in the High Street.” Alongside its calligraphy and bookbinding workshops, monthly book market, and annual short story competition, Cuisery is home to Espace Gutenberg (see Figure 3). Espace Gutenberg has a model of the 15th century Gutenberg Press, the first mechanized printing press in Europe, and does demonstrations of the printing press for visitors. In attending one of these demonstrations, I learned about the history of the invention of the press, the history of printing, and the role that printing played in Renaissance Europe. I also got to take home a print that I watched being made on the press.



Fig. 2. The entrance to Cuisery’s bookselling street

Fig. 3. Cuisery’s Gutenberg printing press model

The next book town I went to was Bécherel, the oldest book town in the country, established as such in 1988. I attended Bécherel's "Nuit du Livre" event. This event included a "marché du livre," a calligraphy workshop, a book-binding workshop, as well as musical, theater, and storytelling events. After walking around the book town, stopping into bookstores, and watching parts of the cultural events, I spoke to one of the shopkeepers who ran one of the oldest bookstores in the village. The shopkeeper told me that while the town is normally on the emptier side, events like the "Nuit du Livre" bring together French tourists and generate businesses for the region's stores.



Fig. 4-5. The book markets at Bécherel's Nuit du Livre

After Bécherel, I took the train to Montmorillon, considered a "cité de l'écrit." Montmorillon was the largest town I went to, with around 6,000 inhabitants. The town is home

to the Musée de la machine à écrire et à calculer, as well as a yearly Salon du Livre. When I arrived in Montmorillon, I unfortunately learned that the museum was temporarily closed during my visit. However, while I explored the town I stumbled upon the Jardin des Écrivains (see Figures 8-9). This garden featured plaques for prominent French writers, each set in a different flower plot. Among the writers represented with Jean Cocteau, Bernard Pivot, François Rabelais, Arthur Rimbaud, Pierre de Ronsard, Guy de Maupassant, La Comtesse de Ségur, Victor Hugo, Alphonse Daudet, Frédéric Mistral, and Jean Giono. Each plaque had a description of the writer's accomplishment. François Rabelais's, for instance, began with: "Écrivain humaniste de la Renaissance, il est à la fois moine savant, médecin fêru de grec, et partisan du retour à la nature." Victor Hugo's read: "Poète, romancier, auteur de théâtre, c'est aussi une personnalité politique et un intellectuel engagé ayant joué un rôle majeur dans l'histoire du 19ème siècle."



Fig 6. Directions to bookshops and book-related workshops in Montmorillon



Fig 7. Street view in Montmorillon



Fig 8-9. The Jardin des Ecrivains in Montmorillon

My last stop was in Montolieu, established as a book town in 1989. Montolieu is known for its wide array of uniquely-themed bookstores, most of which are second-hand or antique. With only 800 residents, Montolieu has an impressive 18 bookstores. My favorite bookstore that I visited was the Librairie Au Temps Jadis, or “the bookstore of the olden days” (see Figures 11-12). This store was filled to the brim with antique books, newspapers, and magazines, and was organized by both topic (like “fashion” or “sports”) and by date.



Fig 10. Street view of Montolieu



Fig 11-12. The Librairie au Temps Jadis in Montolieu

I embarked on my trip to both explore these book towns and to answer questions I had about them, namely how their identities as “book towns” came to be. I found that for many of these towns—Cuisery and Montolieu in particular—they began as hotspots for bookmakers, artists, and writers, and then were drawn to the “book town” label due to the role literary tourism played in saving their economies during periods of financial hardship. After spending a semester in Aix-en-Provence, I discovered that these towns were far less frequented by tourists than the other parts of France I had traveled to—but are still cherished destinations among travelers who valued bookstores and literary destinations. I am incredibly grateful for the generous support through the Marguerite W. Friedberg Memorial Travel Fellowship and the Williams College French department for the opportunity to travel to these four book towns; it has proved an invaluable experience to explore such a diverse group of towns in France, speak with the booksellers and writers who live there, and see the role of literary tourism in French culture today.

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