

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article6415>



"Winter in the Bookshop"

- Reviews section -

Publication date: Sunday 16 February 2020

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

"Winter in the Bookshop" by Sylvia Riley (may be bought at <https://fiveleaves.co.uk>)

Sylvia Riley is a writer of distinction. Her first story "Trotsky's Other Son" (contained in the present volume) was chosen by Karl Miller, then editor of The London Review of Books, for "New Stories 8" an Arts Council anthology. "Rosehill" then won the Guardian fiction prize, followed by "Switchboard Operators" that spawned two series for BBC TV. Her latest book describes the time when she and her friend Jean Holman lived above Pat Jordan's International Bookshop.

The Bookshop was the functional centre of the International Group (IG) the precursor to the IMG. The IG was led by some older comrades such as Pat Jordan, Ken Coates, Alex Acheson and Ken Tarbuck. Grouped around them was a younger set recruited from the Labour Party and the Young Socialists. There was also a sprinkling of black comrades such as Dick Skyers and George Powe. Ken attracted several students from the University including Brian Simister who became dedicated to improving the Marxist education of IG members. These students soon drifted into the orbit of the Bookshop. Sylvia has not written a history: it is better than that. She recollects the activities, the feelings and the hopes of young people coming into politics. The story is delightfully irreverent and funny.

My favourite escapade was when Sylvia and Jean attempted to infiltrate a right wing inspired meeting of mature women who were opposing a local strike as "Wives against the Strike". Sylvia had a cunning plan. So as to not stand out, these two teenagers would wear "wedding" rings. Even this fool proof camouflage did not work and they were booted out. There was a journalist present whose job was to write a drearily obvious piece on union tyranny. Scouting a better story she followed the two expellees and was given a total endorsement of the strike and the necessity to defeat capitalism. Job done!

One of the scarier episodes was breaking the colour bar in a local pub. Dick and George played the major organising role. The pub, the Mechanics' Arms, was close to the Bookshop. Initially we went in twos; one white one black. The white one would order two pints of beer. When it was realised where the second pint was going to go, both were often grabbed back and poured away. The scariness came from the fact that most of the regulars thoroughly approved of the landlord's racism and were actively opposed to the demonstrators. Flooding the place with comrades who took every seat and watched their single beer for an entire evening proved more effective. Takings went down. Sylvia was much involved with the campaign and painted anti-racist slogans over the beleaguered pub.

A lot of pedestrian work had to be done. A weekly paper had to be written and then cyclostyled, collated and sent out. Pat did most of this but Sylvia became the North American "expert" and cut and pasted from The Militant with great panache. On rare occasions super stars from the FI, such as Ernest and Pierre, made lightning visits to Nottingham and awed the young comrades. The besetting sin of British Trotskyism, perhaps due to the massive presence of a reformist and opportunist Labour Party, was sectarianism. The IG attempted to avoid that trap and the FI leaders sent out similar messages that encouraged us to join the International.

Sylvia deals delicately with the split between Pat and Ken that led to a split between the IMG and the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation. There were no villains here: no Jacobin Jordan nor Renegade Coatesky. The split was provoked by a financial crisis in the Peace Foundation which suddenly blew up and then mysteriously disappeared. Perhaps only a historian/forensic accountant will solve this puzzle. The split certainly left the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign with some real problems. Sylvia is even handed in her treatment but provides some telling quotes from others: "It's like musical chairs around the money" and "These are the politics of the board room". Both sides went on to play important and valuable roles, but both lost some things. The IMG was sometimes subject to the volatility of

"Winter in the Bookshop"

student politics. Ken, lacking the ballast of a critical and engaged membership, could be subject to his own version of political volatility.

It was not all politics. There were friendships and lovers. There was a bewildering variety of jobs; since employment was far easier to gain in those days. There was a bewildering array of casual acquaintances that she remembers with humour and respect.

Sylvia describes the huge variety of campaigns we were involved in; workers control, anti-colour bar, Vietnam, Irish solidarity and the fight in the Labour Party. She also describes a politics of hope and the fun possible in fighting for the socialist vision. She continues to be a person of the left and regularly writes abrasive socialist columns for her local newspaper. There is no reneging on past political positions, nor any dying elegiac fall when discussing contemporary politics. It is also a very funny and enjoyable book and enables us veterans to vaguely remember what it was like to be young. A new generation will have as much hope and must get as much fun out of the struggle.

PS:

If you like this article or have found it useful, please consider donating towards the work of International Viewpoint. Simply follow this link: [Donate](#) then enter an amount of your choice. One-off donations are very welcome. But regular donations by standing order are also vital to our continuing functioning. See the last paragraph of [this article](#) for our bank account details and take out a standing order. Thanks.