

Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Poet Who Nurtured the Beats, Dies at 101

An unapologetic proponent of “poetry as insurgent art,” he was also a publisher and the owner of the celebrated San Francisco bookstore City Lights.



By Jesse McKinley

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Lawrence Ferlinghetti, a poet, publisher and political iconoclast who inspired and nurtured generations of San Francisco artists and writers from City Lights, his famed bookstore, died on Monday at his home in San Francisco. He was 101.

The cause was interstitial lung disease, his daughter, Julie Sasser, said.

The spiritual godfather of the Beat movement, Mr. Ferlinghetti made his home base in the modest independent book haven now formally known as City Lights Booksellers & Publishers. A self-described “literary meeting place” founded in 1953 and located on the border of the city’s sometimes swank, sometimes seedy North Beach neighborhood, City Lights, on Columbus Avenue, soon became as much a part of the San Francisco scene as the Golden Gate Bridge or Fisherman’s Wharf. (The city’s board of supervisors designated it a historic landmark in 2001.)

While older and not a practitioner of their freewheeling personal style, Mr. Ferlinghetti befriended, published and championed many of the major Beat poets, among them Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso and Michael McClure. His connection to their work was exemplified — and cemented — in 1956 with his publication of Ginsberg’s most famous poem, the ribald and revolutionary “Howl,” an act that led to Mr. Ferlinghetti’s arrest on charges of “willfully and lewdly” printing “indecent writings.”

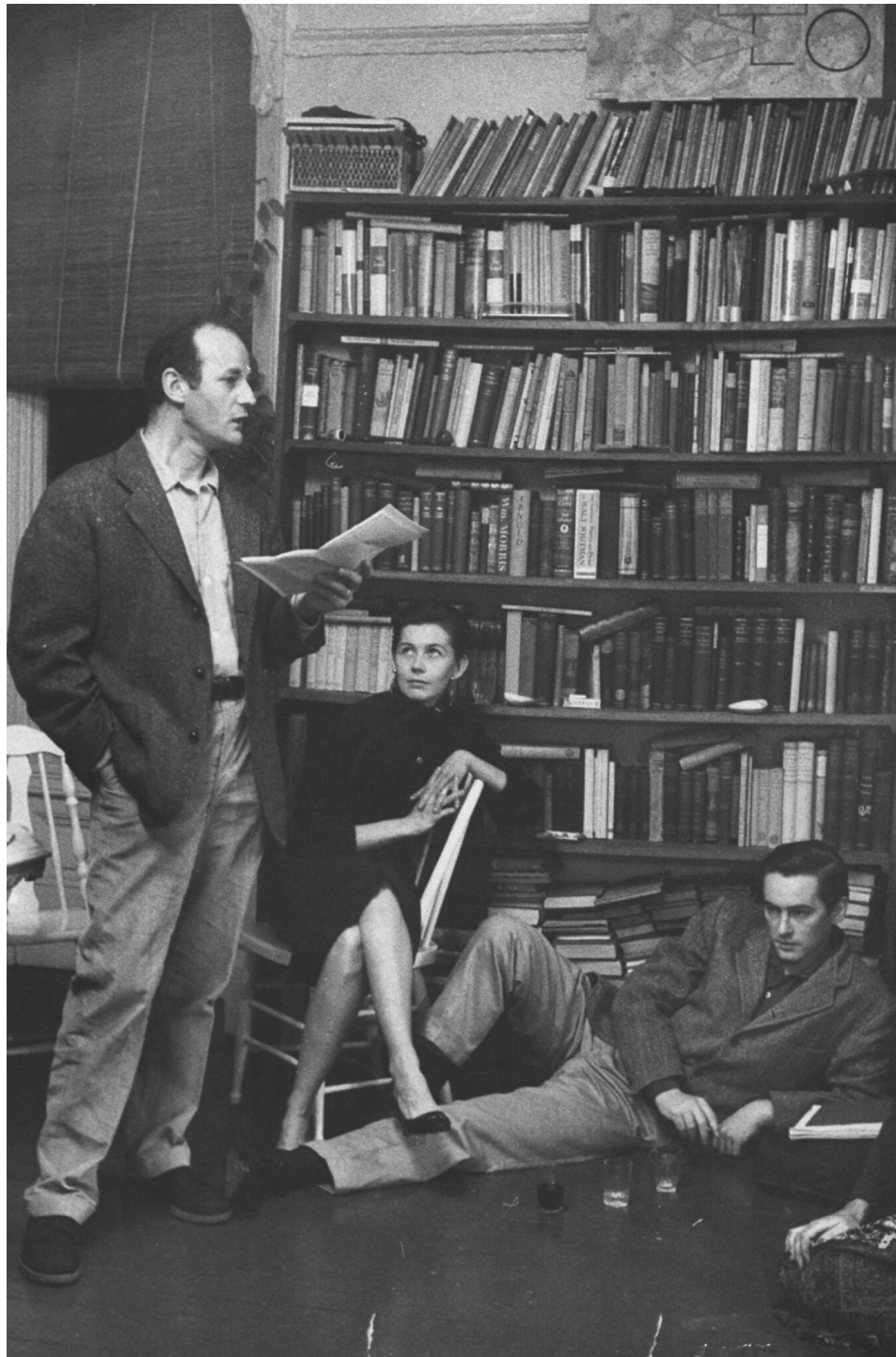
In a significant First Amendment decision, he was acquitted, and “Howl” became one of the 20th century’s best-known poems. (The trial was the centerpiece of the 2010 film “Howl,” in which James Franco played Ginsberg and Andrew Rogers played Mr. Ferlinghetti.)

In addition to being a champion of the Beats, Mr. Ferlinghetti was himself a prolific writer of wide talents and interests whose work evaded easy definition, mixing disarming simplicity, sharp humor and social consciousness.

“Every great poem fulfills a longing and puts life back together,” he wrote in a “non-lecture” after being awarded the Poetry Society of America’s Frost Medal in 2003. A poem, he added, “should arise to ecstasy somewhere between speech and song.”

Critics and fellow poets were never in agreement about whether Mr. Ferlinghetti should be regarded as a Beat poet. He himself didn’t think so.

“In some ways what I really did was mind the store,” he told The Guardian in 2006. “When I arrived in San Francisco in 1951 I was wearing a beret. If anything I was the last of the bohemians rather than the first of the Beats.”



Mr. Ferlinghetti, standing, in 1957 at a poetry reading. He was a prolific writer of wide talents and interests whose work evaded easy definition. Nat Farbman/The LIFE Picture Collection, via Getty Images

Still, he shared the Beats' taste for political agitation. Poems like "Tentative Description of a Dinner to Promote the Impeachment of President Eisenhower" established him as an unapologetic proponent of, as the title of one of his books put it, "poetry as insurgent art."

He never lost his zeal for provocation. "You're supposed to get more conservative the older you get," he told The San Francisco Chronicle in 1977. "I seem to be getting just the opposite."

His most successful collection, “A Coney Island of the Mind” (1958), attracted attention when one of the poems was attacked as blasphemous by a New York congressman, Steven B. Derounian, who called for the investigation of a state college where it was being taught, saying the poem ridiculed the crucifixion of Christ. The poem, “Sometime During Eternity ...,” begins:

Sometime during eternity

some guys show up

and one of them

who shows up real late

is a kind of carpenter

from some square-type place

like Galilee

and he starts wailing

and claiming he is hip

Despite the controversy it generated — or perhaps, at least in part, because of it — “A Coney Island of the Mind” was a sensation. It became one of the most successful books of American poetry ever published. It has been translated into multiple languages; according to *City Lights*, more than a million copies have been printed.

A life as a provocateur would have been hard to predict for Lawrence Monsanto Ferling, the youngest of five sons born in the placid environs of Yonkers, N.Y., on March 24, 1919, in the wake of World War I. His father, an Italian immigrant who had built a small real estate business, had shortened the family name; as an adult, Lawrence would change it back.

His parents had met in Coney Island — a meeting he later fictionalized as happening in bumper cars — but the veneer of normalcy quickly deteriorated. His father, Charles, died before Lawrence was born, and his mother, Clemence Mendes-Monsanto Ferling, was admitted to a state mental hospital before he was 2.

Lawrence was taken in by a relative — he called her his Aunt Emily, though the family connection was complicated — and she took him to Strasbourg, France, where he learned French, speaking it before he did English. When they returned to the United States, hardships returned as well. He was briefly placed in an orphanage while Aunt Emily looked for work.

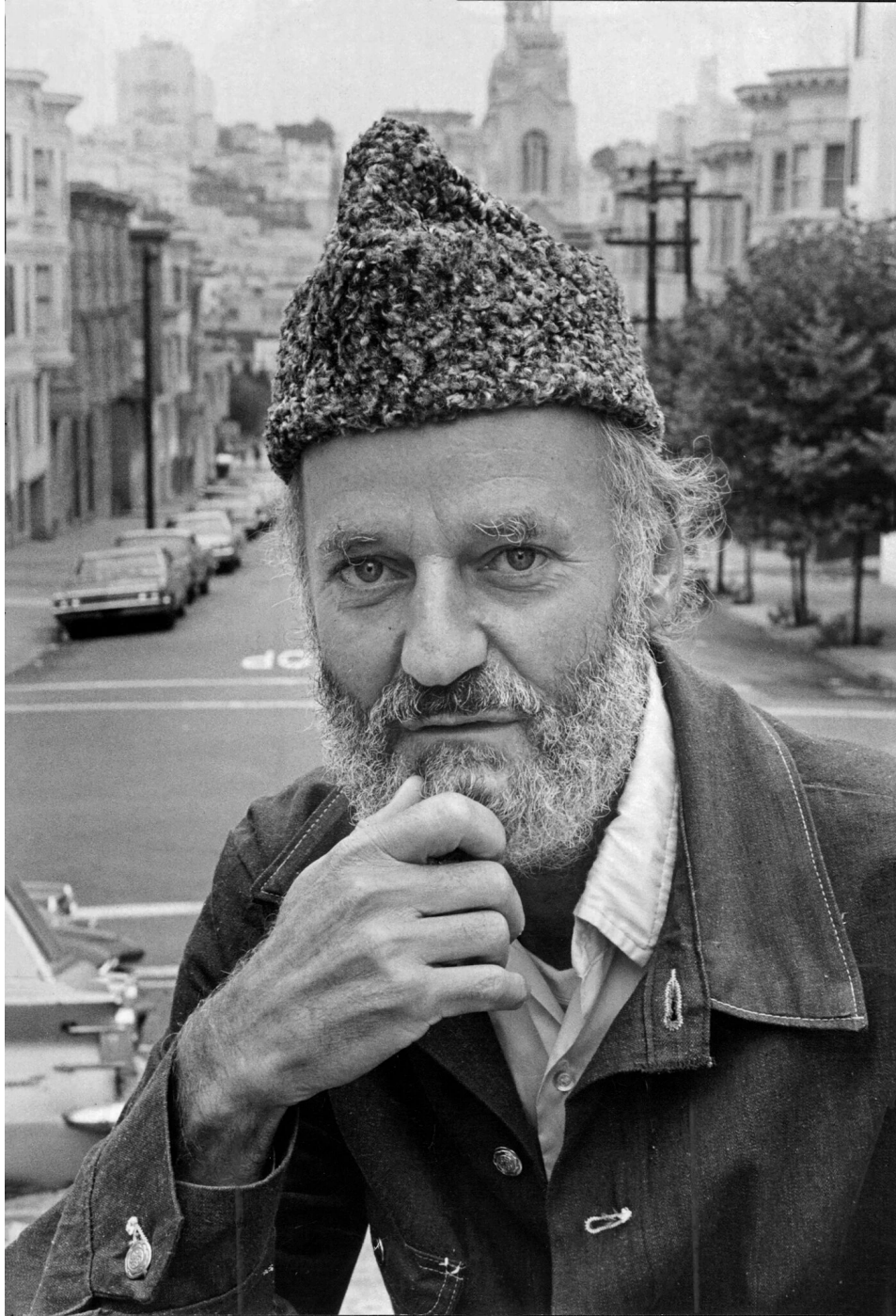
A turning point came when she began working as a governess for Presley and Anna Bisland, a wealthy couple who lived in nearby Bronxville, N.Y., and who saw promise in the boy.

Left in their care, Lawrence bloomed. According to “Ferlinghetti: The Artist in His Time,” a 1990 biography by Barry Silesky, he became a voracious reader, devouring classics in the Bisland library and earning silver dollars for memorizing epic poems. When he dabbled in juvenile delinquency — he was arrested and charged with shoplifting about the same time he made Eagle Scout — he was sent to Mount Hermon, a strict private high school for boys in Massachusetts.

“I was getting too wild,” Mr. Ferlinghetti recalled in a 2007 interview with *The New York Times*. “Or beginning to.”

That sense of abandon informed his taste in literature. Among his favorite books was Thomas Wolfe’s coming-of-age novel “*Look Homeward, Angel*”; Mr. Ferlinghetti applied to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, he said later, because Wolfe had gone there.

He graduated from North Carolina with a degree in journalism — “I learned how to write a decent sentence,” he said of the impact that studying journalism had had on his poetry — and then served as a naval officer during World War II, spending much of the war on a submarine chaser in the North Atlantic.



Mr. Ferlinghetti in 1970. He lived in the North Beach section of San Francisco for most of his adult life. Sam Falk/The New York Times

After the war he enrolled in graduate school at Columbia University, where he earned a master’s degree in English literature, writing his thesis on the art critic John Ruskin and the artist J.M.W. Turner, which fostered a lifelong love of painting. After Columbia, he headed to Paris, the classic breeding ground for postwar bohemians, where he received a doctorate in comparative literature from the Sorbonne.

Mr. Ferlinghetti went west in early 1951, landing in San Francisco with a sea bag and little else. After months in a low-rent apartment he found North Beach, even as San Francisco itself was fast becoming fashionable among intellectuals and a generation of young people for whom “establishment” was a dirty word.

“This was all bohemia,” he recalled.

He was surrounded by a politically and artistically charged circle, but he did not buy into the Beat lifestyle. “I was never on the road with them,” he said, noting that he was living “a respectable married life” after marrying Selden Kirby-Smith in 1951. They had two children, Julie and Lorenzo; the marriage ended in divorce.

In addition to Ms. Sasser, Mr. Ferlinghetti is survived by his son and three grandchildren.

Mr. Ferlinghetti’s life changed in 1953, when he and Peter Martin opened the City Lights Pocket Book Shop, which originally carried nothing but paperbacks at a time when the publishing industry was just beginning to take that format seriously. The store would soon become a kind of repository for books that other booksellers ignored and a kind of salon for the authors who wrote them — a place “where you could find these books which you couldn’t find anywhere,” he said, crediting Mr. Martin with the concept. Each man put in \$500, and City Lights opened.

“And as soon as we got the door opened,” Mr. Ferlinghetti later remembered, “we couldn’t get it closed.”

In 1955 Mr. Ferlinghetti, by then the sole owner of City Lights, started publishing poems, including his own. In his first collection, “Pictures of the Gone World,” his style — “at once rhetorically functional and socially vital,” in the words of the critic Larry R. Smith — emerged fully formed in stanzas like this:

*The world is a beautiful place
to be born into
if you don't mind happiness
not always being
so very much fun
if you don't mind a touch of hell
now and then
just when everything is fine
because even in heaven
they don't sing
all the time*



Mr. Ferlinghetti in 1993 in his bookstore. Age brought him honors; in 1998, for instance, he was named the first poet laureate of San Francisco. Jim Wilson/The New York Times

A year later his City Lights imprint published Ginsberg's "Howl and Other Poems," and before long he was in court defending poets' free-speech rights and helping to make himself — and the Beats he had adopted — famous in the process.

Over the years he would work in other mediums, including painting, fiction and theater; a program of three of his plays was produced in New York in 1970. But poetry remained the art form closest to his heart.

San Francisco remained close to his heart as well, especially North Beach, the traditionally Italian-American neighborhood where he lived for most of his adult life. In his 1976 poem "The Old Italians Dying," Mr. Ferlinghetti spoke to both the city he loved and the changes he'd seen:

The old anarchists reading L'Umanita Nova

the ones who loved Sacco & Vanzetti

They are almost gone now

They are sitting and waiting their turn



City Lights bookstore, on Columbus Avenue, has become as much a part of San Francisco as the Golden Gate Bridge or Fisherman's Wharf. Jason Henry for The New York Times

For Mr. Ferlinghetti, age brought honors. In 1998 he was named the first poet laureate of San Francisco; in 2005 the National Book Foundation cited his “tireless work on behalf of poets and the entire literary community for over 50 years.”

Age did not slow him down; he continued to write and give interviews. In 2019, Doubleday published Mr. Ferlinghetti’s “Little Boy,” a book he had been working on for two decades, which he characterized as the closest thing to a memoir he would ever write: “an experimental novel” about “an imaginary me.”

Its publication coincided with Mr. Ferlinghetti’s 100th birthday, which San Francisco’s mayor, London Breed, proclaimed Lawrence Ferlinghetti Day. A choir serenaded the writer from below his apartment with “Happy Birthday” and “Take Me Out to the Ballgame,” while at City Lights, poets like Robert Hass and Ishmael Reed read aloud from Mr. Ferlinghetti’s works.

In the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic, City Lights closed and started an online fund-raiser in which they announced that they might not reopen. The store received more than \$450,000 in four days. Its chief executive, Elaine Katzenberger, told Publishers Weekly that the money gave City Lights the ability to plan for the future.

Even at the end of his life, Mr. Ferlinghetti still composed poetry — “In flashes, nothing sustained,” he told The Times in 2018. The anthology “Ferlinghetti’s Greatest Poems,” published in 2017, included new work.

“My newest poems,” Mr. Ferlinghetti once told an interviewer, “are always my favorite poems.”

Richard Severo, Peter Keepnews and Alex Traub contributed reporting.

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