



# THE MARGINALIA OF PARIS

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It's a tale as old as time—Paris as a city of stories. Not just because of the published literature flowing through it ceaselessly, but also the *rues*, boulevards, bridges, gardens, and buildings royal and ramshackle which contain stories of all those who have passed through them. Stories of history, of banality; stories of love and pain, and often of violence.

I started thinking about Paris as a book after a lecture on 'Epic Histories' at Columbia University. Going through Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* (1982), Professor Jenny Davidson pointed out how the station Breguet-Sabin on Metro line 5 had derived its name from the nearby rue Breguet and

rue Saint-Sabin. Abraham-Louis Breguet (1747-1823) had been a famous clockmaker, highly favoured by the French scientific, military, and diplomatic elite, and the first to invent the wristwatch in 1801. His grandson Louis-Charles Breguet (1880-1955) had been an aircraft manufacturer and a founder of Air France. Charles-Pierre Angelesme de Saint-Sabin, on the other hand, had been an alderman in 18th century Paris. Fusing these two identities, the metro station on the corner of these streets acquired the name Breguet-Sabin in 1906.

Such histories run abundant all over Paris. Some street names memorialise the

trades previously practiced there, such as logging in Rue de la bûcherie, ironwork in rue de la Ferronnerie, or cutting-tool making in rue des Taillandiers. Others remember interesting local beliefs and incidents—in rue des Francs Bourgeois, meaning 'citizens exempt from tax', a nobleman named Mazurier allowed 48 of the poorest people to live in his mansion without paying taxes in 1415; in rue de Chat-qui-pêche, a fishing cat belonging to an alchemist was believed to be the devil's incarnation. Other places memorialise France's geopolitical relations, such as place des Etats-Unis or boulevard Franklin D. Roosevelt, or its historical milestones, such as boulevard

du 25 aout 1944, the date on which the German garrison surrendered to France during World War II. Conjoined names like Breguet-Sabin remind us how completely different lives—such as inventors and local magistrates—intersected in one space, with the hyphen in the name placing the two identities on an equal pedestal. And then we have the Tour Eiffel, a single tower containing numerous stories about its conception, about the identity of its maker, its journey through France's past, the cultural and almost mythological influence it has exerted through the years, and even the countless marriage proposals it sees everyday today.

This past year studying book history has awakened me to the evolving definitions of a 'book'. A book is a story, a text, a message. A book is spoken, until someone else writes it down, copies it, and circulates it, like the religious texts of Islam, Buddhism, or Hinduism. It is to be read, as instructed in the first word of the Quran (*iqra*); or not read,

*Continued to page 15*

