

TRAVEL

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as with Chinese Buddhist sutras hidden away inside pagodas. It has competing histories, from the glory of Gutenberg in the West to the ancient knowledge of China in the East. It is decoration, worship, instruction, memory, and entertainment. It often has a name; sometimes it has chapters. Most importantly, a book is created out of a variety of materials, from wooden blocks to clay tablets to parchment to paper to metal devices that glow in the dark and imitate their predecessors today.

If a book is all of these things, then a city is certainly a book. It has a name. It has histories etched on its locations. Paris is interesting because it textualises these stories. By dividing its urban landscape into historically significant names, Paris turns its visitors and pedestrians into readers. One wants to stop and read the plaques plastered on the city's walls; one wonders where these titles came from and why the dates are significant.

I had initially meant to say that Paris is an old book. It has its smells and smudges, its crooked corners like the dog-eared pages of a folio. But such a comparison would overlook the industrial and urban developments around the Quartier Chinois on the 13th arrondissement, the Francois Mitterrand site of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, or the industrial areas around La Defense, among several others. What I actually mean is that it is a used book. The very existence of stories in its corners gives it a lived-in quality. But by attracting people through the texts on its walls, by attracting tourists in flocks from the world over, the city ensures that its stories are read and reread endlessly.

But there is another quality that likens Paris to a used book—it is heavily marked. It is like finding a used copy in a library or a secondhand bookstore and realising that we can draw entire portraits of past readers, of their experience with the book, from the marginalia left behind in the pages. It happened to Harry Potter with Snape's Potions book



PHOTOS: COURTESY

in "Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince" (2005), as well as to the Harvard Depository when they decided to store the stubs and notes found in the books left behind in its reading rooms. Walking through Paris is a similar experience.

I noticed my first marginalia while walking through Boulevard St. Michel with a friend. The words "I love you to the cosmos and back" had been scribbled in tiny, black, barely-legible letters on a wall leading into a narrow alley. We have since noticed similar messages elsewhere—a cluster of hearts here, a quiet "je t'aime" there. As with all marginalia, it's impossible to know why these etchings were made or what the writer (reader?) might have been thinking, but it tells us that someone, at some point, had been in love in Paris and felt the need to record

the sentiment on its walls. I say "had been" because the English language of these musings implies that they were tourists or expat artists, though it could also have been an English-speaking Parisian.

Two other etchings felt particularly resonant. The first, "Penser à réfléchir," asks the reader to think to think. The other, "Meme les roses ont des épines", warns her that even roses have thorns.

I first thought that these writings differed from the previous one in terms of intended readership. "Je t'aime" and "I love you to the cosmos and back" spoke to a specific "you" that the writer had known, while these seemed to address humanity in general. But then I realised that the "you" could have been every "you" passing through the streets.

It could be me and every other passerby who had noticed the message hidden in a bustling tourist spot. Similarly, "penser à réfléchir" and "meme les roses ont des épines" seemed to include the reader in the writer's personal experiences by sharing his/her beliefs and wisdom.

How else can we add meaning to these anonymous annotations? Location could be a clue. Boulevard St. Michel is an idyllic tourist spot beside the river, home to historically romanticised landmarks like the Notre-Dame Cathedral and the Shakespeare & Company bookstore. Being there could have inspired many an Anglophone to mark a nearby wall with messages of love. I found the others, including one saying "Seuls vous êtes le nuit, nous sommes le jour" (Only you are the night, we are the day), in more run-down neighbourhoods. These messages overlapped other furiously scribbled phrases, some hurling outrage at the police, others expressing general political zeal and freedom of thought. The environmental realities of these neighbourhoods could very possibly have influenced the tone of these writings.

I compare these etchings to marginalia because they share the elements of experience, reaction, and information. Just as a reader scribbles on the margins of a book in response to something in the text, influenced by the space of the text, these writings too reflect the writer's experience and emotions in that space. And just as one reader's marginalia becomes for another a part of the visual components of a used book, the marginalia in Paris's walls do the same for passersby. In contrast to the printed plaques officially denoting a space in the city, such as the name of a building, a street, or a boulevard, these handwritten notes highlight human experience. It is these textual relics that contain the more intricate, the unofficial, and thus the more elusive stories that have taken place in Paris.

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THE UNRESOLVED ISSUE OF EQUITY

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On March 6, 2018 UNICEF published a report where it revealed that Bangladesh stands fourth in child marriage prevalence only outranked by Niger, Central African Republic and Chad. Here, one in every five girl child is married before they are 18. According to a 2017 report by Global Partnership for Education, when a girl marries early (before 18), her possibility to complete secondary school typically reduces by four to 10 percentage points, depending on the country or region. In Bangladesh, the situation is worse. According to Bangladesh Education Statistics-2017 by Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics, a whopping 42 percent of girls who are enrolled in grade VI, drop out before completing their secondary education.

Bangladesh is home to 1.5 million

indigenous people who mostly live in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. According to 7th Five Year Plan of the country, only 7.8 percent of all people in CHT can complete primary education and only 2.4 percent of them can complete secondary education. More than half of all the household members (55.2 percent) have never gone to any form of educational institution.

On the other hand, children with disabilities are also one of the most marginalised sections of Bangladesh's population. Although Bangladesh government's National Education Policy 2010 and the Comprehensive Early Childhood Care and Development Policy emphasised inclusive education, there is hardly any discussion on employment of people with disabilities who constitute 10 percent of the country's population. The prevalence of disability is more than

6 percent among those below the age of 18 and 14 percent among those above this age. According to a study titled "Educating Children in Difficult Circumstances: Children with Disabilities" conducted by the Ministry of Education, only 11 percent children with disabilities within school going age gain access to education every year. Female children with disabilities are doubly marginalised. Less than five percent of them can ever go to school.

For this huge number of deprived populations, a quota in the job market should be recognised as a fundamental right by any state which is now about to be abolished entirely in Bangladesh. The existing quota system offers only 10 percent reservation for female candidates, five percent reservation for indigenous candidates and one percent for disabled candidates. A rational

reformation of the quota system, which the students have been demanding for decades, should have ensured more opportunities for these disadvantaged people. Even, during her parliamentary speech on April 11, the Prime Minister assured that her government would ensure special arrangement for the employment of minorities and physically challenged in the public service recruitment system. However, there is no mention of this special arrangement in the report which recommends to abolish quota for class-1 and class-2 government jobs. The committee is choosing to meet the protestors halfway, but there is no middle ground when it comes to ensuring equity in employment in the public sector.

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