

A close-up portrait of Herbert Weitz, an elderly man with curly brown hair and glasses, wearing a blue denim jacket. He is smiling slightly and looking towards the camera. The background is a bookshelf filled with books. On the left side of the image, there are two vertical blue bars. The top bar contains the name 'Herbert Weitz'. The bottom bar contains a grid of small, decorative book cover designs.

Herbert
Weitz

New York City's Last Bookbinder

In a disorderly little shop on New York's Upper East Side, time stands still. At the heart of this upscale Manhattan neighborhood, behind streaked windowpanes, sits Herbert Weitz, surrounded by stacks of old books and boxes. It is here that the old man fashions his exquisite book covers. Those who know him say he's the best bookbinder in the Big Apple.

In Manhattan, nothing is more important than the right address. Take the example of the young writer – we’ll call him Allen – who left the scruffy diversity of the East Village because his recent book made a splash, bringing an apartment on the posh Upper East Side within his means. Plus, he now has a wife and child to think about.

Still, Allen is actually embarrassed about his new address, despite the fact that a uniformed doorman with sparkling brass buttons watches over the entrance to the building, routinely deciding who may enter and who may not. This uniformed presence is less taxing than the green-haired punk who used to while away his days on the steps leading into the writer’s East Village apartment, spending his nights sleeping between the nearby dumpsters. But when Allen gives interviews, it’s invariably at a bar in the East Village.

Of course, that testifies to the dearth of bars on the Upper East Side, but it also has something to do with the fact that, for a writer, certain New York addresses just won’t do. Especially not when that writer is young and Irish, and seldom given to exiting a bar in a sober state. “When you totter down the swanky strip of Park or Fifth Avenue, you attract attention,” Allen says. In the apartments on Fifth Avenue, he reports, the wood is blond and the parquet flooring invariably gleams. And beer is not the beverage of choice.

Every barstool in the East Village, on the other hand, is a spot suitable for spending eternity, says the Irish author. “But New York’s Upper East Side isn’t all that bad,” Allen concedes, perhaps recalling that no one forced him

to move there. “It has its own cast of crazies. For instance, there’s an eccentric old fellow living up there who runs a bookbindery. He’s the last real bookbinder in all of New York – he binds my manuscripts for me in leather. And he looks like Lou Reed.”

And where would one find this bookbinder? The writer takes a beer-soaked napkin and jots down an address.

The bookbinder in question is named Herbert Weitz. Also a trader in old and valuable books, he really does look like Lou Reed, albeit a gap-toothed version. His shop, Weitz, Weitz & Coleman, is located on Lexington Avenue, not far from Central Park and right around the corner from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. A cloud of smoke casts a gray pallor over the interior, and an enormous, lazy dog with fuzz-covered dreadlocks dozes between the dusty shelves. It’s best to steer clear of the big Irish setter, Weitz says, because he sometimes dreams about chasing sheep and will suddenly bite, even if he’s sound asleep.

Books and Boxes from Floorboard to Roofbeam

The unwashed windows of Weitz’s shop alone make it an anomaly on the Upper East Side. Many of the items on display are not there to entice customers, but have alighted on shelves and in cases simply because every square foot inside the shop is jam-packed with books and boxes. Newspapers are stacked ankle-deep in the walkways. If author, playwright and director David Mamet hadn’t shot a few scenes for his film “The Spanish Prisoner” in the shop, there wouldn’t even be a new sign suspended over the gummy glass door. Weitz himself



Weitz inherited his tools from his father. Shown here: shelves full of embossing dies in a wide variety of sizes.

“would never have wasted any money on a new sign, God knows.”

The door to the shop usually remains locked, because Weitz serves as his own doorman, deciding who may enter and who will be turned away. The unlucky are dispatched with a quick shake of Weitz’s head; no explanation is ever offered. Not that any is necessary. Herbert Weitz has a clientele of loyal regulars, and he’s not particularly keen on extending his hours. The prospect of retirement has loomed large for quite some time now. Of course, when the time comes, the childless Weitz will almost certainly end up spending it in his little shop.

Sailor, Soldier and Bartender

Weitz has been in business since the late 1960s, when he took the 500-square-foot shop over from his father, Herbert Weitz, Sr. Before that, Weitz, Jr. was footloose and fancy free in Europe and the U.S., working as a sailor, soldier and bartender.

Today, Weitz is a minor New York legend. He makes for a bad listener, because he talks incessantly. His thought process is a succession of loose associations, so close to the brink of madness that actor-director John Turturro used to visit Weitz’s shop with a hidden tape recorder, and ultimately offered the bookbinder a cameo role in his latest film, “Mac”. Naturally, Weitz



Even Martin Scorsese and Henry Kissinger take their books to Weitz.

plays himself. But the real reason why people like Turturro, Mamet, Irish author Colum McCann, Martin Scorsese, Henry Kissinger, Martin Cruz-Smith and even Mikhail Gorbachev know Herbert Weitz is that he’s the best bookbinder in New York City.

Please Leave Modern Life at the Door

Weitz’s shop also stays locked during the day because it is an accumulation of anachronisms, and because Weitz engages in a bitter struggle to keep anything new or modern at arm’s length from himself and his work. He is constantly puffing on one of his thin, hand-rolled cigarettes, and each time he inhales, his tongue clicks with relish into one of the gaps between his teeth.

As an elegantly dressed woman is about to enter the shop, Weitz considers the scene briefly, then rinses his mouth with cold coffee, shoves the ashtray into a drawer, and opens the door. The woman hesitates uncertainly near the threshold, an “oh, my” expression on her face. The dog looks up for an instant, then returns to his slumber.

My father recently died, the woman begins falteringly, and he left me a large number of old books, most about hunting. She’d brought two of

the books with her, and wants to know if Weitz is interested in the collection.

Weitz takes the two leather-bound books and opens one, then the other. He looks at the woman and announces that he has two comments to make. First, the books aren’t worth anything. And second, he wouldn’t buy them even if they were valuable, because they bear the stamp of the National Rifle Association (NRA), which obviously counted her father among its members.

And now he’d like to say a few words about the reckless conduct of the NRA, which he considers downright fascistic, and wouldn’t she like to have a seat? The woman tersely responds that her father just died, and she isn’t the least bit interested in discussing him or the NRA with an absolute stranger. “Good day,” she says, and leaves. Weitz relocks the door, retrieves the ashtray from the drawer, and doesn’t waste another word on the woman.

Remembrance of Things Past

Weitz is an aging hippie who has taken cover from the world in his little bookbinding shop on the Upper East Side. His only contact with the outside world is through the books his customers bring him. In the evenings, he often sits reading them in his small apartment above the shop. But Weitz is also a conservative and a conservator – a combination that makes so little sense.

Weitz also is a weathered craftsman who shakes his head over things like cell phones and the Internet, who doesn’t even bother to get worked up about them anymore, who waxes nostalgic more and more often because, as he puts it, he had the incredible luck to be born into an amazingly trouble-free window of history. And it makes him think back on those years “after the Pill was invented, but before AIDS, when people still read a lot and anything seemed possible.”

But that’s all over now. America worries him more and more, but he does live in New York, after all – thank God, he has to add, because it’s the only American city he could stand. True, he may not belong on the Upper



Not for rough hands:
The pages are stitched together with needle and thread.

Even the finest details are meticulously executed. The ornamentation is applied by hammering on hot gold leaf with dies.



East Side, but where could he possibly belong in this day and age? This was, after all, his father's shop. There may not be much to gain here, but just as little to lose, and he aims to stick it out for the duration.

Sounds of Samba in the Cavern

Somewhere between the old bookcases, a narrow stairway leads down into the basement, where the actual book-binding work is done. Wrapping up a two-hour monologue, Weitz proposes a tour, then steps slowly down into the dark cavern. Two silent apparitions from the Caribbean sit under the

Edgar Allan Poe as he prepares to preserve it for posterity. Most of the books Weitz is commissioned to bind, however, are unpublished manuscripts – for the most part, unfortunately, by less-than-stellar authors. “The emotional connection that people used to have to books is fading,” says Weitz. “Apparently, people today reserve that kind of sensibility for photo albums.” Later, Jim explains that photo albums are now the shop's biggest source of income. That fact sometimes whips Weitz into a frenzy, he adds.

Three times a week – always after lunch – Weitz is paid a visit by an elderly Orthodox Jew. On those days, the shop door remains shut even to good customers. Then, Weitz stops talking, and the two men immerse themselves in a game of chess. Weitz's opponent sips chamomile tea from the thermos he brought with him. Outside, beyond the dirty window

panes, the Big Apple continues to throb and pulse.

On afternoons like these, time comes to another standstill at Herbert Weitz's shop on the Upper East Side, and that's just as it should be. How else would it be possible for a dark, musty cellar, of all places, to bestow upon New York its most exquisitely bound books?

Michael Saur/Photos: Holger Keifel



**Weitz's
shop is
his refuge
from the
world outside.**

vaulted ceilings, an unexpected sight. Herbert Weitz doesn't introduce them, so they have to do it themselves: one is called Jim, the other John.

In short sentences, with minimal enthusiasm but great precision, the two explain their work. They pull out lengths of leather, old Ex Libris stamps, and projects they are currently working on. Samba music can be heard in the background. Jim is in the process of scoping out a first-edition



You need a magnifying glass to fully appreciate the intricate rosettes and patterns on the embossing dies.