

The Best Bookshops in Copenhagen, Denmark

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Sroyon Mukherjee takes us on a tour of the best bookshops in Copenhagen, Denmark. If there's a bookshop that you think other students and academics should visit when they're undertaking research or visiting a city for a conference, further information about contributing follows this article.



Image: The Little Mermaid statue, Copenhagen

Søren Kierkegaard described Copenhagen as ‘the most favorable habitat I could wish for. Big enough to be a major city, small enough that there is no market price on human beings.’ The Copenhagen of today, with its jazz festivals and its [bicycle snake](#), may have little in common with the city that Kierkegaard knew. But it remains big enough to have a variety of interesting bookshops, and small enough that the best ones are all a short bike ride from each other.

Skindergade in central Copenhagen traces its name back to medieval times, when the street was the centre of the city’s skin and fur trade. It is now home to one of the most fascinating bookshops I have ever seen. [The Booktrader](#) is a second-hand bookshop founded in 1983, but it looks almost as old as Skindergade itself. Housed in a semi-basement and with no real signboard, the shop is easy to miss, but for that reason it feels all the more like a discovery.

The present proprietor, Lars Rasmussen, took over in 1988. ‘Dostoevski on Skinner Street’ is how [one interviewer described him](#), and the shop reflects his eclectic tastes: in addition to being a trained antiquarian, Mr Rasmussen has written short stories, erotica and books about South African jazz.

About half his stock consists of English books – a pleasant surprise since I don’t speak Danish. The front room is devoted to non-fiction, with a firm focus on the arts and humanities.

'I don't stock books about the natural sciences, you'll notice,' Mr Rasmussen told me.

'What about economics?'

'Nothing which bores me.'

A labyrinthine but well-organised backroom has a wide range of English fiction at very reasonable prices; I spotted a Penguin edition of *Sons and Lovers* for 20 kr (about £2) and most other paperbacks are in the 20–40 kr range (though if you are in the market for something pricier, there is also a second-edition *Principia Mathematica* for £1,690). I was keen to see Mr Rasmussen's collection of [books with one-letter titles](#) (*A* by Andy Warhol, *B* by Eva Figes), spelling out the entire alphabet including the Danish letters Æ, Ø and Å. But the alphabet currently on display is incomplete: Mr Rasmussen sold the previous set to a private collector two months ago, and is painstakingly building it up again.

For readers seeking new books – perhaps the latest Scandi-noir thriller – or simply a more 'mainstream' bookshop, [Politikens Boghal](#) in Rådhuspladsen is well worth a visit. An independent bookshop affiliated with the Danish daily *Politiken*, Politikens Boghal has a wide selection of Danish and English titles spread over two floors. The ground floor has a sizeable collection of English fiction, including a section for English translations of Nordic authors. On the non-fiction shelves downstairs, English books coexist with Danish ones – not surprising given that Danes are among the [world's best non-native English speakers](#).

Politikens Boghal is one of Copenhagen's largest bookshops (rivaling Arnold Busck's flagship store on nearby Købmagergade) but it still feels friendly and welcoming. Snippets from newspaper reviews adorn the shelves, helping indecisive readers choose books (or plunging them into further dilemmas). The staff are knowledgeable and helpful, and the store's elegant glass staircase serves as a setting for regular events – poetry readings, discussions, even live music.

Independent bookshops everywhere are finding it increasingly difficult to compete against chains and online retailers; meanwhile, Politikens Boghal marked its centenary last year. I asked Christina Thiemer, the store manager, about the secret behind its success. 'We care about our customers,' she said. 'For example, we put a lot of thought into choosing the books we stock.' Do they specialise in any particular field? 'Good books.'

The bookshop also has a small café, but if browsing has made you seriously hungry, I recommend a pit stop at [Paludan Bogcafé](#) in nearby Fiolstræde, just across from the old University library.

Paludan was founded in 1951 when a Danish bookseller named Erik Paludan took over a bookselling business that was already nearly 100 years old. The shop's history is tied up with the history of Copenhagen. Mr Bauch, a senior employee, showed me an old photograph of their front hall reduced to rubble by a Nazi bomb in 1944 – retribution for the shop-owner's decision to organise a commemorative display for the Danish playwright Kaj Munk who, days earlier, had been assassinated by the Gestapo.



The Booktrader



Patti Smith at a book signing at Politikens Boghal

Paludan became a 'bogcafé' in the late 1990s, and thankfully the union of bookshop and café has been a happy one. The menu – with large portions and fresh ingredients – is much more extensive than that of a typical bookshop café; the brunch in particular is a veritable feast. Most of the café tables are in the front hall, but the first floor feels more luxurious and intimate, with wooden tables nestled amidst rows of handsome, leather-bound antique books. Like most cafés, Paludan offers free wifi and laptop charging points, and those who want to get really cosy can borrow board-games and even blankets.

Purists who prefer to browse books undisturbed by café chit-chat and the smell of food are better off heading down to the basement which houses an impressive collection of second-hand books. While Paludan also has new books, their stock of second-hand reads is probably even larger than that of The Booktrader (albeit with fewer English titles).

Paludan started out as a student bookshop, and their catalogue, ranging from *Afrika-studier* to *Zoologi*, is dominated by academic and reference books. I asked Mr Bauch if they focus on any specific areas. 'It depends on who dies,' he said.

I was somewhat baffled by this cryptic reply, so he explained further: 'Say a professor of African studies has just died. We acquire his books at an auction, and suddenly we have an enviable African studies collection.'

As it happens, my three favourite bookshops in Copenhagen are all located in and around the Latin Quarter, but there are other good bookshops further afield, such as [Books & Company](#) in Hellerup and the non-profit, volunteer-run [ark books](#) in Nørrebro. The city also has some excellent specialist bookshops – Cinnober (books about art and design), Den Franske Bogcafe (French books) and Fantask (fantasy and graphic novels). Lastly, it has a wonderful network of free [public libraries](#) where even tourists can read and borrow books.

If the surfeit of options fills you with Kierkegaardian angst, I suggest you ignore my recommendations altogether. Spend an afternoon roaming the Latin Quarter, pop into a *boghandler* or *antikvariat* that catches your fancy, and perhaps you will discover an even better bookshop than the ones I found.



Paludan damaged by a Nazi bomb in 1944



Paludan Bogcafé



Københavns Hovedbibliotek, the main public library

Sroyon Mukherjee is a PhD candidate in the Law Department at LSE. His research investigates the role of judges in the valuation of natural resources (more details can be found on [his website](#)). He is currently Secretary of the [LSESU Beekeeping Society](#). [Read more by Sroyon Mukherjee](#).

Note: This bookshop guide gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics. Thank you to Sroyon Mukherjee for providing the images for this guide.

Do you have a favourite bookshop? If there's a bookshop that you think other students and academics should visit when they're undertaking research or visiting a city for a conference, then this is your chance to tell us all about it.

As part of a [regular feature](#) on *LSE Review of Books*, we're asking academics and students to recommend their favourite two or three bookshops in a particular city, with the aim of building an exciting online series for our book-loving community of readers the world over.

Bookshops could be academic, alternative, foreign language, hobby-based, secret or underground institutions, secondhand outlets or connected to a university. We'd like to cover all world regions too.

If something comes to mind, we're looking for around 150 words per bookshop, detailing why each place is a must-see. Our editorial team can then find suitable photos and links to accompany the piece, though you're welcome to supply these too. We only ask that you focus on just one city or region, and two or three bookshops within it.

Email us now if you'd like to contribute: lsereviewofbooks@lse.ac.uk

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