

***The Library Book* by Susan Orlean**

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Excerpts chosen by Barbara Keating, February, 2021

- Memory believes before knowing remembers.
(William Faulkner, *Light in August*)
- And when they ask us what we're doing, you can say, We're remembering. (Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*)
- I have always imagined Paradise as a kind of library. (Jorge Luis Borges, *Dreamtigers*)

Pages 13-4: I expected Central Library to look like the main libraries I knew best. New York Public Library and the Cleveland Public Library are serious buildings, with grand entrances and a stern, almost religious aura. By contrast, the Los Angeles Central Library looks like what a child might assemble out of blocks. The building – buff-colored, with black inset windows... – is a fantasia of right angles and nooks and plateaus and terraces and balconies that step up to a single central pyramid surfaced with colored tiles and topped with a bronze sculpture of an open flame held in a human hand. It manages to look ancient and modern at the same time. As I approached, the simple blocky form of the building resolved into a throng of bas-relief stone figures on every wall. There were Virgil and Leonardo and Plato; bison herds and cantering horses; sunbursts and nautilus; archers and shepherds and printers and scholars; scrolls and wreaths and waves. Philosophical declarations in English and Latin were carved across the building's face like an ancient ticker tape. Compared to the mute towers around it, **the library seemed more a proclamation than a building.** ¶

I circled, reading ... Socrates, cool-eyed and stony-faced ... ¶ All the rotunda's features are larger than life, overpowering, jaw-dropping. The walls were covered with huge murals of Native Americans and priests and soldiers and settlers, painted in dusty mauve and blue and gold. ... **a massive chandelier – a heavy brass chain dangling a luminous blue glass Earth ringed by the twelve figures of the zodiac.** ¶ ... a large sculpture known as the Statue of Civilization – a marble woman with fine features and perfect posture and a trident in her left hand.

Page 25: In the physics of fire, there is a chemical phenomenon known as a **stoichiometric condition**, in which a fire achieves the **perfect burning ratio** of oxygen to fuel – in other words, there is exactly enough air available for the fire to consume all of what it is burning. Such a ratio creates an ideal fire situation, which results in total, perfect combustion. A stoichiometric condition is almost impossible to create outside of a laboratory. It requires such an elusive, precise balance of fuel and fire and oxygen that, in a sense, it is more theoretical than actual. Many firefighters have never seen such a blaze and never will. (Firefighter Captain Hamel) Although over thirty years have passed, he remains awed by what he saw that day at the library. ... Usually, a fire is red and orange and yellow and black. **The fire in the library was colorless. You could look right through it, as if it were a sheet of glass.** Where the flame had any color, it was pale blue. It was so hot that it appeared icy. ... “Combustion that complete is almost impossible to achieve, but in this case, it was achieved. It was surreal.” **(April 29, 1986)**

Page 39: Central Library had been a busy place. Each year, more than **nine hundred thousand books** were loaned; **six million reference questions** were answered; and **seven hundred thousand people** passed through the doors.

Page 80: As soon as the news of the fire at Central Library spread, condolence notes arrived from libraries in Belgium, Japan, England, Germany from all around the world. ... Notes also came from libraries across the United States, from New York, San Diego, Detroit, Kansas City, the Library of Congress, from universities and colleges. ... “We at the Oklahoma City Library are so sorry to hear of your library's calamity. Keep your socks up!” The sentiments expressed most often in these notes were grief, shock, distress, and devastation.

Pages 85-6: Every month, more than seven hundred new books arrive at the library. ¶ A popular book that gets checked out often begins to fall apart in a year so many of the (new) books ... are replacements...

Page 93: In Senegal, **the polite expression for saying someone died is to say his or her library has burned.** When I first heard the phrase, I didn't understand it, but over time I came to realize it was perfect. Our minds and souls contain volumes inscribed by our experience and emotions; each individual's consciousness is a collection of memories we've catalogued and stored inside us, a private library of a life lived. It is something that no one else can entirely share, one that burns down and disappears when we die. But if you can take something from the internal collection and share it – with one person or with the larger world, on the page or in a story recited – it takes on a life of its own.

Page 96: The most celebrated lost library of the ancient world was **Egypt's Library of Alexandria.** ... very little is actually known ... no record of what the building looked like or even its exact location. Supposedly, the library contained a half million documents and manuscripts and had a staff of one hundred resident librarians. ... burned several times ... Caesar (48 B.C.E.) hadn't targeted the library but the fire he started in the port spread and ... engulfed it. ... ¶ The last and final burning, which erased it from history forever, occurred in AD 640. By that time, the library was awe-inspiring and a little scary. People had begun to believe it was a living thing – an enormous, **infinite communal brain containing all existing knowledge in the entire world**, with the potential for the sort of independent intelligence we now fear in supercomputers. When Caliph Omar, who led the Muslim invasion of Egypt, came upon the library, he told his generals that its contents either contradicted the Koran, in which case they needed to be destroyed, or they supported the Koran, in which case they were redundant. Either way, the library was doomed. It burned for six months.

Page 124: The library opened in January, 1873. Membership was five dollars a year. At that time, five dollars represented several days' pay for an average worker so **only affluent people were able to join.**

Pages 125-6: **The first city librarian** ... was a dour asthmatic named **John Littlefield.** He hated the crowded space, and he tore out of the reading room whenever he could to hide in his office and smoke a medicinal compound of jimsonweed to soothe his

lungs. ... seemed burdened, regretful, and tormented ... managed to last six years in the post. His successor was an alcoholic painter named **Patrick Connolly** who barely made it through the year. ¶ **Mary Foy** was only eighteen ... when ... hired to replace Connolly. ... surprising that such a young person ... the bigger surprise was that this younger person was a woman, since in 1880 the library was still an organization run by, and catering to, men. **Women were not yet allowed to have their own library cards and were permitted only in the Ladies Room.** No library in the country had a female head librarian and only a quarter of all American library employees were women. ¶ ... stern and efficient ... library didn't have a catalog but Foy... could find anything in ... minutes. She pursued overdue fines with a vengeance. The adult male patrons respected her. Among her regular responsibilities was refereeing their chess and checker games, which were played all day long in the reading room. She was also constantly settling bets between patrons who were arguing points of trivia. ¶ ... when the mayor who appointed her left office in 1884, the library board voted to remove her. (possibly to give the job to a daughter to a popular rancher who passed away) ... (Foy) went on to become a teacher and a suffragette.

Page 126-7: In 1889, a newspaper reporter from Ohio named **Tessa Kelso** was appointed (as head librarian)... Kelso thought the library was stodgy and needed to modernize. **She abolished the membership fee. In no time, the number of cardholders rose from a little more than one hundred people to twenty thousand.** She moved most of the books onto open shelves and allowed children over twelve years old to use the library if they had an average of ninety on their school exams. She set up "delivery stations," an early version of **branch libraries**, in outlying areas where immigrants were settling. ... With additional space, she hoped the library could expand and begin loaning more than books; she pictured a storeroom of tennis rackets, footballs, "indoor games, magic lanterns, and the whole paraphernalia of healthy wholesome amusement that is ... out of the reach of the average boy and girl." **She believed a library ... should be "the entertainment and educational center of the city."**

Page 130: (In 1900: **Mary Letitia Jones**) ... the first city librarian to have graduated from a library school. ... serious, efficient, and innovative ... dropping the age limit for children ... by two years, allowing ten-year-olds.... **She recruited African American librarians for branches in neighborhood with large black populations and encouraged them to build a collection of books about “the Negro experience.”** The library thrived ... circulating about four hundred thousand books annually when Jones took over. By 1904, that number had almost doubled.

Pages 130-2: The general public didn't really agree on the **value of public libraries** until the end of the nineteenth century. Before that, libraries were viewed as scholarly and elite, rather than an indispensable and democratic public resource. Many public libraries still had membership fees. The change of attitude began with the philanthropy of Scottish businessman **Andrew Carnegie, who launched a library-building project in 1890.** ... He offered large grants to build libraries in communities that would commit to supporting them with tax revenues. ... Carnegie ended up building nearly 1,700 libraries in 1,400 communities. He funded six small libraries in Los Angeles, which were added to the main system as branches. ¶ **(1905 Board fired Jones so they could hire a man, Charles Lummis.)** Even by the standards of the time, Jones firing was baffling. ... The one rumor that followed her was that (Board head) Dockweiler, who was a candidate for lieutenant governor and the father of thirteen children, had propositioned her, and that she had turned him down. (Controversy followed.)

Pages 142-3: ... one thousand women signed a petition saying that the **Great Library War** of Los Angeles would end only if Jones was reconfirmed as head librarian and the commissioners behind the attempted ouster were kicked off the board. ¶ News of the battle got around, and librarians around the country rallied in support of Mary Jones. Some traveled to Los Angeles to take part in the protests. ... May McAleer called for a general meeting. **Thousands of women, including feminist activists Susan B. Anthony and Reverend Anna H. Shaw, attended.** The resulting discussion was raucous and inconclusive. ... For the time being, the Los Angeles Public Library was run by a fired head librarian who

refused to leave, and a fired board of commissioners who refused to yield. ... city attorney announced ... that the city librarian served at will, and therefore the **board had the legal right to fire her for any reason at all, including the fact that she was a woman.** ... At last, Jones turned in her keys and left Los Angeles for good, accepting a job as the head of the library at Bryn Mawr, a woman's college in Pennsylvania.

Page 145: (Head librarian **Charles Lummis**) felt personally responsible for the **intellectual health** of the library's patrons. The popularity of pseudoscience books, which he considered “not worth the match to burn ...” worried him. Instead of removing the books from the collection, he established what he called the **“Literary Pure Food Act”** to warn readers about them. He hired a blacksmith to make a **branding iron** in the shape of a **skull and crossbones** – the poison warning symbol – and used it to brand the frontispiece of the offending books. He also created warning cards to insert in the questionable books. He wanted the cards to say, “This books is of the worst class that we can possibly keep in the library. We are sorry that you have not any better sense than to read it,” but was persuaded to use a more restrained tone. The cards, shaped like a bookmark, said, “For Later and More Scientific Treatment of This Subject, Consult _____,” followed by a blank space for librarians to list better books on the topic. Lummis noted in his diary that he considered the poison-label brand one of his finest innovations at the library.

Pages 148-9: (**Lummis hired friend, Dr. C.J.K. Jones**, a former Unitarian minister, with) a large salary and the title **“the Human Encyclopedia.”** ... to be “a walking information desk” who would rove around ... and provide answers to ... questions... ¶ (C. Jones) had a habit of tapping his forehead after being asked a question, as if he had to jar the answer loose from a storage bin in his brain. There is no record of how patrons ... felt about him, but the **library staff hated him.** They resented his vanity and salary, which was nearly double the salary of senior librarians. ... (Jones) complained ... that he sometimes found lemons and hammers on his desk, which he interpreted as an insult. ... (LA Times speculated) that the highly paid Dr. Jones spent most of his time in the library's roof garden, watering the geraniums.

Pages 150-1: **Lummis** was smart about many things. He had a **knack for getting attention and a genius for getting things done** that man people would have thought were impossible. He was **brave**. He was **enterprising**. He drew people to him with the sheer force of his own convictions; he was **magnetic**. He **thrived on drama and challenge and a certain amount of chaos**.... his personal life was in turmoil, and the scene at El Alisal (home) was a circus. ... Lummis and his wife and their children and the daughter he conceived in college lived there, along with a family of troubadours and an endless stream of partygoers ... In 1907, one of the troubadours murdered one of Lummis's housekeepers. Still the parties continued, as many as two or three a week, one blurring into the other, with some guests who never bothered to leave. One day in 1909, Lummis's wife, Eve, came across the diaries in which he detailed close to fifty extramarital affairs. (She left and took two children devastating Lummis.) He loved being around babies so much that he often invited pregnant women to be long-term houseguests at El Alisal, so they would stay for a while once their babies were born. ¶ As brilliant as he was, Lummis had no instinct for self-preservation.... he never considered that his behavior or the controversy that buzzed around him might compromise his position at the library. **He lived on bullheadedness, self-involvement, and a daredevil's willful obliviousness.**

Pages 152-3: **Lummis** changed the Los Angeles Public Library forever. He made it **more democratic** and yet more sophisticated; **more substantial, more accessible, more celebrated**. At the same time, he offended people and spent too much money and became much too famous for his personal travails. ... at the end of 1910, he was pressured to leave.

Pages 159: (History Department Senior librarian) Creason's tenure at Central Library has spanned the fire; the AIDS crisis, which killed eleven librarians; the reopening of the building; the library's adjustment to omnipresent Internet; ... helped historians Will and Ariel Durant find books. He also waited on ... Richard Ramirez, who was looking for books on torture and astrology. (... Ramirez was the serial killer known as the Night Stalker ... sentenced to death for thirteen murders ... "he was definitely really creepy," Creason says.)

Pages 173-4: After Charles Lummis... The board ... opted for a quiet, tender-faced librarian ... named **Purd Wright**, who tidied up the wreckage left in Lummis's wake and then resigned after just eight months ... His successor, who stayed ... over twenty years was **Everett Robbins Perry**.... A small man with an imposing forehead and a penetrating gaze whose idea of leisure wear was a three-button suit and a four-in-hand tie. He was an **imperturbable** as Lummis had been tempestuous. "He is all business ... Listens well; doesn't talk much ... the granite of old New England was in his foundations; imagination and creative spirit were not in his make-up." ... In fact Perry was passionate, but **his passion was exclusively for libraries, and he judged people by whether or not they shared his passion. The staff of the Los Angeles library adored him. They called him Father Perry.**

Pages 177-8: No one was quite sure whether this multiplying, spreading stew of a place was really a city. **Los Angeles** looked nothing like the old cities of the Midwest and the East, and its shape was spun out as if it had been created by centrifugal force rather than emerging from a hard center. The new city was comingled with the old ranchos. There were still orange groves downtown. It was the only major city in the country, and the largest city on the West Coast, without a stand-alone main library building. ... **In 1921, a bond issue for library construction** was put on the city ballot. ... ¶ The bond issue was a success, passing with seventy-one-percent approval.

Page 179: New York architect ... **Bertram Goodhue** ... had gained notice in California for designing San Diego's 1915 Panama-California Exposition ... ¶ Goodhue was slim and debonair, ... and an air of impending tragedy... In addition to architecture, he **excelled at book design and typography**. He invented Cheltenham, one of the world's most popular typefaces; the *New York Times* used it as a headline front for decades. He was a workaholic ... pensive and neurotic, and suffered from inexplicable aches, unaccountable pains, and pervasive anxiety. **He seesawed between bursts of ecstasy, which occurred when he was exposed to great art, and troughs of melancholy**. His friends considered him mercurial and poetic. In his spare time, he enjoyed drawing intricate sketches of imaginary cities.

Page 180: (Architect Goodhue: After 1915) **Goodhue flew on an airplane for the first time, and the view from the sky transformed him.** He was astonished by the power of bold, simple forms standing out of the distant landscape, and how profound they were seen from a mile above. The airplane ride changed the way he thought about buildings. His next commission was the **Nebraska State Capitol**. His design ... more streamlined and geometric ... a low, wide stone base and a skyscraper tower. On the Nebraska prairie, it rose like a Machine Age monument, a limestone lighthouse. ¶ Goodhue also began toying with the idea that a building should be a sort of book – an entity that could be “read.” **He wanted a building’s form, its art, its ornamental surfaces, its inscriptions, even its landscaping, to connect in a unified theme that reflected the purpose of the building.**

Pages 182-3: (Goodhue’s LA Library) ... windows ... streamlined into stacks of rectangular panes. ... blocky base ... ascending terraces, making a cubist assemblage of crisp angled shapes ... The top ... an enormous but somehow **delicate pyramid tower ... covered in thousands of brilliantly colored tiles** and crowned with a finial of a human hand holding an open flame rising from a golden torch. The façade of buff-colored stucco was embellished with Lee Lawrie’s architectural **sculptures of thinkers, god, heroes, and writers.** Throughout the building were inscriptions addressing Harley Burr Alexander’s theme, “The Light of Learning.” French intellectual Blaise Pascal’s “Thought is the Grandeur of Man”; and Alexander’s own quote, which seemed to embody the spirit of the public library: **“Books invite all; they constrain none.”**

Page 190: (Architect) Goodhue wanted visitors to feel more than that they were in a pretty building. He wanted them **to feel they were part of a three-dimensional meditation on the power of human intellect and the potency of storytelling.** Even the garden was part of his plan. He called for it to be planted with olive trees, cypress, viburnum, and magnolia, all plants that might have been found in a classic Roman garden, which he felt would continue the experience of intellectual immersion. Among the trees were a variety of sculptures, including a fountain decorated with images of the great writers of the world, which was called the **Well of the Scribes.**

Page 195: Libraries were a solace in the **Depression.** They were warm and dry and useful and free; they provided a place for people to be together in a desolate time.

Pages 198-9: (1933: Perry died; **Althea Warren** appointed Head Librarian) Warren was probably the **most avid reader** who ever ran the library. She believed librarian’s single greatest responsibility was to read voraciously.... this directive was based in emotion and philosophy. She wanted librarians to simply adore the act of reading for its own sake and ... they could inspire their patrons to read.... Warren published tip sheets -- “Althea’s Ways to Achieve Reading” -- to encourage people to find time for books. She approved of fibbing if it gave you an additional opportunity to read. ... She was a **reading evangelizer.** She constantly looked for new ways to get books into the hands of the public.... she thought it far too restrictive that children had to be in third grade or above to get library cards, so she opened library membership to any child who could sign his or her name.

Page 236: Los Angeles librarians – and most librarians around the country – **are well organized, vocal, and opinionated.** They unionized as the Librarians Guild in 1967 and joined the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees in 1968. **Many ... had political or social service backgrounds.** ¶ There is special disdain for any city librarian who never worked on the floor, shelving books and handling patrons. When **John Szabo** was hired, a number of librarians reacted with pleasure ... that **Szabo had worked every position in the library,** ... saying things like **“He is a real library person,”** as distinguished from someone who is just a manager, with no real feel for the place. ¶ The staff channeled opinions via the Librarians’ Guild, which had a knack for coming up with lively demonstrations....Once, the Guild **released a live turkey** at a Board of Library Commissioners meeting to illustrate its opinion of a budget-cut proposal.

Page 245: The library’s commitment to being open to all is an overwhelming challenge. For many people, the library may be the only place they have to be in close quarters with disturbed or profoundly dirty people, and that can be

uncomfortable. But a library can't be the institution we hope for it to be unless it is open to everyone. ... international conference ... librarians ... everywhere in the world – found **the challenge of homelessness and the library exasperating, intractable, unwinnable**. The public can come and go, but librarians are in the library all day, and their jobs include handling difficult and sometimes violent people nearly every day. **The topic is bigger than libraries; it is a topic for society to solve.**

Pages 261-2: After two years to being frozen (to prevent mold and mildew), **the books were ready to be thawed, dried, fumigated, sorted, cleaned, repaired and rebound...** The aerospace manufacturer McDonnell Douglas ... offered to try drying the first batch of twenty thousand books. The McDonnell engineers researched the nature of water-soaked paper and decided to use their **space simulation chamber** to defrost and dry. They placed a selection of books spine-down on an aluminum tray, and then flattened them with a rigid aluminum plate. The plated books were stacked six tiers high. The entire rig was secured with bungee cords and placed inside a **forty-foot vacuum chamber** used to test satellites under different atmospheric and meteorological conditions. The **temperature** in the chamber was raised to 100 degrees and the books were left inside it for five days. The air **pressure** in the chamber was dropped until it equaled the pressure found at 140,000 feet above earth. **The pressure was increased and decreased in intervals, and the temperature was raised and lowered in wild swings.** When the first small batch of books was run through the process, **six hundred gallons of water** seeped out.

Page 262: The city ... divided (the book drying) contracts between Eric Lundquist's company, **Document Reprocessors** and a company called **Airdex**. The companies used **different systems** to achieve the same results. Document Reprocessors owned five vacuum chambers similar to the one at McDonnell Douglas that used intense vacuum pressure to remove water.... Airdex, which was collaborating with NASA on the project, placed the books in a chamber that purged its internal atmosphere every twenty-five seconds, carrying away water vapor that evaporated from the books. Both of the systems took close to a week to dry a single book,

depending on how wet it was. **Book conservators estimated that the books' water content ranged from ten percent to one hundred percent – that is, some of the books were equal amounts of water and paper.** Book conservators like to argue over whether vacuum drying is better than dehumidifying for wet books. Eric Lundquist stamped "DR" in the books he dried because he was convinced his system was better than Airdex and he **wanted to compare** them when the project was finished. He dare me to find one of his books and compare it to one of Airdex's. **"Ours are flat. ... they look like they never got wet."**

Pages 264-5: There are a lot of surprising things in the library; ... the Los Angeles library has a huge collection of restaurant **menus** ...an ophthalmologist from Palos Verdes, who collected menus since 1940, donated most of them. ... in the Art and Music Department ... the **costumes, props, and large, terrifying marionettes** from the Turnabout Theatre Company, an adult puppet theater that flourished in Los Angeles from 1941 to 1956. There are collections of **book plates** and **fruit crate labels** and **sheet music covers** and **movie posters** and the largest gathering of **materials on bullfighting** in the United States and, of course, **Lummis's autographs**. ... **anti-war posters and pamphlets** from the L.A. Resistance.

Page 267: (Librarian Roy Stone) confided that ... local **drug dealers used to come to the library and ask him to help fill out their tax returns. He thought it was a perfect example of the rare role libraries play, to be a government entity, a place of knowledge, that is nonjudgmental, inclusive, and fundamentally kind.** ¶ The department owns more than two thousand orchestral scores, and each one has the music for every instrument written into the piece. ... The library also owns reams and reams of sheet music. The major donor of the sheet music was the composer **Meredith Wilson**, who donated his collection in the mid-1960's, soon after his play ***The Music Man*** was produced on Broadway.

Pages 289-290: Even when it is impossible to establish libraries in permanent quarters, people want them, and libraries have accommodated. **The first recorded instance of a bookmobile was in 1905, when a horse-drawn library wagon** traveled around

Washington County, Maryland, loaning books. ... In **1936, the Works Progress Administration established a Pack Horse Librarians** unit to serve the mountain communities in Kentucky.

Page 291: Worldwide, there are 320,000 public libraries serving hundreds of millions of people in every country on the planet. A large number ... are in conventional buildings. Others are mobile and, depending on the location's terrain and weather, operate by bicycle, backpack, helicopter, boat, train, motorcycle, ox, donkey, elephant, camel, truck, bus or horse. In Zambia, a four-ton truck of books travels a regular route through rural areas. In Cajamarca Province, **Peru**, there is no library building, so seven hundred farmers **make space in their homes**, each one housing a section of the town library. In Beijing, about a third of library books are borrowed out of vending machines around the city. In **Bangkok**, a train filled with books, called the **Library Train for Young People**, serves homeless children, who often lived in encampments near train stations.

Page 294: (International Conference called **Next Library**) In every session, the point made was that **libraries could do more** and more while still being a place of books. ... the Aarhus library (Denmark) has a **marriage license bureau** among its services. A Nigerian librarian told me that her library offers art and entrepreneurship training **classes**, and a librarian from Nashville described how the city library ... started a **seed exchange** and housed a theater troupe.

Page 295: (Bill and Melinda Gates helping libraries) the effort began in 1997, with the goal to helping **every American library get connected to the internet**. In 2002, after they completed their part in helping wire all the libraries in the United States, the Gates decided ... to expand it internationally. The Global Libraries Initiative was founded in 2004. ... In a sense ... (it) **designated libraries as the worldwide portal to the future, by making them the default location for free public internet.**

Pages 297-8: I stepped into another portal to the future when I visited Cleveland ... and toured the headquarters of **OverDrive**, which is the **largest digital content catalog for libraries and schools in the world**. If you have ever borrowed an e-book from a library, it is likely that you were borrowing it

from the library's cache in the OverDrive mega-collection which numbers in the multimillions. ¶ **OverDrive had thirty-seven thousand member libraries** and just a month later, it had risen by over eight percent... within three years, OverDrive had loaned one million books, and in 2012, it had reached a hundred million checkouts. By the end of 2017, it had reached the milestone of **having loaned one billion books. On an average day, seven hundred thousand books are checked out.**

Pages 309-10: (visit to Los Angeles Central Library) ... the **beautiful hollow rotunda, a gorgeous surprise** every time I entered it...The silence was more soothing than solemn. **A library is a good place to soften solitude; a place where you feel part of a conversation that has gone on for hundreds and hundreds of years even when you're all alone.** The library is a whispering post. You don't need to take a book off a shelf to know there is a voice inside that is waiting to speak to you, and behind that was someone who truly believed that it he or she spoke, someone would listen. It was that affirmation that always amazed me. Even the oddest, most particular book was written with that kind of crazy courage – the writer's belief that someone would find his or her book important to read. I was struck by how precious and foolish and brave that belief it, and how necessary, and how full of hope it is to collect books and manuscripts and preserve them. **It declares that all these stories matter, and so does every effort to create something that connects us to one another, and to our past and to what is still to come.**

Pages 322-324: Reading Group Guide Topics & Questions for Discussion

1. What has your relationship with libraries been throughout your life? Can you share some library memories from childhood to adulthood?
2. Were you at all familiar with the Los Angeles library fire? Or any library fire?
3. How would you describe the fire's impact on the community? How about the community's building efforts?
4. In Chapter 5, Orlean writes that books "take on a kind of human vitality." What role do books play in your life and home, and do you anthropomorphize them? Have you ever wrestled

with the idea of giving books away or otherwise disowning them?

5. What is your impression of John Szabo How does his career inform and shape your understanding of what librarians do? (LA City Librarian, 2012+; his day: pages 66-78; acceptance: page 236)
6. Libraries today are more than just a building filled with books. How has your local branch evolved? Are you able to chart these changes and gauge their success within the community?
7. *The Library Book* confronts the issue of street people patronizing the library. Is this an issue in your hometown? How do you feel about the L.A. library's involvement, handling of the issue, and the notion of inclusion?
8. Andrew Carnegie is perhaps the most famous supporter and benefactor of libraries. Can you name a modern equivalent who is using his or her largesse to underwrite public works? Is it more important for the public sector to have big benefactors or overall community support?
9. What was your initial impression of Harry Peak? Did it change throughout the investigation?
10. What was your reaction to the Mary Jones and Charles Lummis saga? Can you cite any similar examples from history or the present?
11. Each of the head librarians discussed in *The Library Book* brought certain qualities to the position. What ideas and initiatives did you like? Did you disagree with any?
12. *The Library Book* chronicles the history of the Los Angeles Public Library from its origins to the present day. How were the library's ups and downs reflective of the city's ups and down? Are libraries a fair barometer to judge the mood of a city or town?
13. Chapter 30 discusses a range of initiatives undertaken by international libraries and librarians. Do you have a favorite example that you would like to see replicated at your local library?

Backcover: ... April 29, 1986, a disastrous fire ... in the Los Angeles Public Library ... destroyed or damaged more than a million books

“The Los Angeles Public Library serves the largest population of any library in the country. Its Central Library, 72 branch libraries, six million books and state-of-the art technology provide everyone with free and easy access to information and the opportunity for life-long learning.” (4Feb’21: <https://www.lapl.org/sites/default/files/press/2012/pdfs/szaboannouncement.pdf> announcing John Szabo’s 2012 appointment as City Librarian)

LA Library homepage: <https://www.lapl.org>

Library photos: <https://www.lapl.org/about-lapl/press-room/press-images-central-library>

LA Library Art and Architecture:

<https://www.lapl.org/branches/central-library/art-architecture>

