

MY LIBRARIES

A talk given in 1997 at a celebration of the renovation of Portland's Multnomah County Library.

A library is a focal point, a sacred place to a community; and its sacredness is its accessibility, its publicness. It's everybody's place. I remember certain libraries, vividly and joyfully, as *my* libraries—elements of the best of my life.

The first one I knew well was in Saint Helena, California, then a small, peaceful, mostly Italian town. The library was a little Carnegie, white stucco, cool and sleepy on the fiery August afternoons when my mother would leave my brother and me there while she shopped at Giugni's and Tosetti's. Karl and I went through the children's room like word-seeking missiles. After we had read everything, including all thirteen volumes of the adventures of a fat boy detective, we had to be allowed to go into the Adult Side. That was hard for the librarians. They felt they were hurling us little kids into a room full of sex, death, and weird grown-ups like Heathcliff and the Joads; and in fact, they were. We were intensely grateful.

The only trouble with the Saint Helena library was you could only take five books out at a time and we only went into town once a week. So we checked out really solid books, I mean five hundred pages of small print in two columns, like *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Short books were no good—two days' orgy and then starve the rest of the week—nothing but the farmhouse bookcase, and we could recite everything in it by the time we were ten. I imagine we were the only people in the Napa Valley who regularly hit each other on the head with quarterstaves while shouting, "Varlet! Have at thee!"—"Why, fat knave, think'st thou to cross this bridge?" Karl usually got to be Robin Hood because he was older, but at least I never had to be Maid Marian.

Next in my life was the branch of the Berkeley Library near Garfield Junior High, where my dearest memory is of my friend Shirley leading me to the *N* shelf and saying, “There’s this writer called E. Nesbit and you HAVE to read the one called *Five Children and It*,” and boy, was she right. By eighth grade I sort of oozed over into the adult room. The librarians pretended not to notice. But when I arrived at the adult checkout carrying a thick, obscure biography of Lord Dunsany like a holy relic, I remember the librarian’s expression. It was very much like the expression of the U.S. customs inspector in Seattle, years later, when he opened my suitcase and found a Stilton cheese—not a decent whole cheese, but a ruin, a mouldy rind, a smelly remnant, which our friend Barbara in Berkshire had affectionately but unwisely sent to my husband. The customs man said, “What *is* it?”

“Well, it’s an English cheese,” I said.

He was a tall, black man with a deep voice. He shut the suitcase and said, “Lady, if you want it, you can have it.”

And the librarian let me have Lord Dunsany, too.

After that came the Berkeley Public Library itself, which is blessedly placed just a block or two from Berkeley Public High School. I loved the one as deeply as I hated the other. In one I was an exile in the Siberia of adolescent social mores. In the other I was home free. Without the library I wouldn’t have survived the school, not in my right mind, anyhow. But then, adolescents are all crazy.

I discovered that the foreign books were up on the third floor and nobody ever went there, so I moved in. I lived there, crouched in a spiderwebby window, with *Cyrano de Bergerac*, in French. I didn’t know enough French yet to read *Cyrano*, but that didn’t stop me. That’s when I learned you can read a language you don’t know if you love it enough. You can do anything if you love it enough. I cried a lot up there, over *Cyrano* and other people. I discovered *Jean-Christophe*, and cried over him; and Baudelaire, and cried over him—only a fifteen-year-old can truly appreciate *The Flowers of Evil*, I think. Sometimes I raided the lower, English-speaking regions of the library and brought back writers such as Ernest Dowson—“I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion”—and cried some more. Ah, those were good years for crying, and a library is a good place to cry in. Quietly.

Next in my life was Radcliffe’s small, endearing college library, and then—when they decided I could be permitted to enter it, even though I was a

freshman, and what was far worse, a freshman—Widener Library at Harvard.

I will tell you my private definition of freedom. Freedom is stack privileges at Widener Library.

I remember the first time I came outside from those endless, incredible stacks I could barely walk because I was carrying about twenty-five books, but I was flying. I turned around and looked up the broad steps of the building, and I thought, That's heaven. That's the heaven for me. All the words in the world, and all for me to read. Free at last, Lord, free at last!

I hope you'll understand that I am not quoting those great words lightly. I do mean it. Knowledge sets us free, art sets us free. A great library is freedom.

So then, after a mad but brief Parisian affair with the Bibliothèque Nationale, I arrived in Portland. Our first years here we had two little babies, and I was at home with them. The great treat for me, the holiday I wanted, the event I looked forward to all week or month, was to get a sitter and come downtown with Charles and go to the Library. At night, of course; no way to do it in the daytime. A couple of hours, till the Library closed at nine. Plunging into the ocean of words, roaming in the broad fields of the mind, climbing the mountains of the imagination. Just like the kid in the Carnegie or the student in Widener, that was my freedom, that was my joy. And it still is.

That joy must not be sold. It must not be "privatised," made into another privilege for the privileged. A public library is a public trust.

And that freedom must not be compromised. It must be available to all who need it, and that's everyone, when they need it, and that's always.