

## **A Library Life**

In Bristol, the Central Library will re-open to browsers and borrowers in early September. In other parts of the city – Henwood, Fishponds and Stockwood – libraries are already open, coping with new restrictions which social distancing have brought to our post-Covid world.

It isn't easy.

The closest branch to me is in Redland. Its red doors are shuttered, its windows dark. It made me reflect on how difficult I would have found it to cope without a library when my children were young. It got me thinking about the different libraries I have frequented over the years, sometimes on a daily basis. My life, I realised, was not measured in coffee spoons, but in library cards. So, as a nod to the vital educational and community supports which libraries and librarians provide, here is my library life, a look back at libraries and my use of them over the years.

### Early visits

My mom (the American spelling is intentional here) had a part-time job our local library. It was in a small room in same building as the police station and came with three adult-sized tables and twelve stiff chairs. None of your touch-screens or play areas I this library! As the sign over the librarian's desk said: READ IN SILENCE. In this room I discovered *Charlotte's Web*, Roald Dahl, *Tom Sawyer* and Matt Christopher, my favourite back then, a writer who wrote books for children which revolved around baseball and football.

### School libraries (as student)

I went to Catholic schools – Benedictine nuns in grade school, Jesuits in high school – where page-turners like *The Lives of the Saints* (A good read if you should ever find yourself interested in macabre ways to die) and that barrel of laughs, *The Bible*, featured prominently in their school libraries. Novels were restricted to the classics – you were not going to find any Judy Bloom books squirreled away on those shelves. On the plus side, I first learned about Greek mythology, Norse gods and the beliefs of different Native American tribes in these libraries, stories which have remained with me to this very day.

### University libraries

I completed my first MA in 1989, my last in 2017 and squeezed in a MEd somewhere in between. I started off with card catalogues and checking for references inside each volume of the James Joyce Quarterly (they filled four long rows of shelves) by hand at University College, Cork and ended in academic portals reached from my bedroom, sweeping the internet for wildly obscure links. I *love* university libraries, and miss them too: the periodical rooms, the rare books, the detective work involved when hunting down a link, the satisfaction that comes with unearthing a nugget of knowledge.

### Haringey Libraries

The Golden Age.

My wife and I moved to a two-bed maisonette in north London before our children were born. I taught in Highbury, then west London, lecturing two nights a week as well while my wife took a career break. Saturday mornings were spent visiting one of the three libraries near us – libraries in Alexander Palace, Crouch End or Muswell Hill – bundling through the door with our buggies and wet wipes and camping out in the children’s section for an hour or two. It’s where we first encountered the Gruffalo, Asterix, Miffy, Tintin, Puppy Tales and Beast Quest. We alternated libraries each week – we thought it best not to outstay our welcome – plus, it kept our churn of children’s books relatively new. Each visit seemed like an adventure.

In those days, I travelled by Tube to work often with a book in hand. Forever the student, for me reading was about Enlightenment. I read classics only or thick biographies, philosophy, history. Yes, those Jesuits had taught me well. Great books were peaks I was determined to scale in my quest for Learning. The Tube, however, did not prove the most ideal base camp. Whenever I read one of these tomes, I either found myself re-reading the same page or falling asleep.

One Saturday I hit on the bright idea of borrowing a “popular” novel from the library of my normal fare. Perhaps a lighter read will keep me from waking up in Cockfosters two nights a week. Since I was only borrowing it, I didn’t need to worry about it where it might sit on my august shelves either (sadly, an important consideration at the time). I chose a John Grisham novel and three or four others doing the rounds on the best-seller lists.

Sleep? I inhaled those novels. It was as if a bolt of electricity had smacked me on the arse. I read and read and read. It was like being re-born as a reader. I sampled genres. I broke free of the Canon and let my interests roam. It forced me to

re-think the old saws I was raised on and question what 'Enlightenment' is and why we read and write.

I will never be able to repay the debt I owe to those libraries and the people who ran and stock them.

### School libraries (as a teacher)

Where I teach, classes visit our school library once a week. It is open at every break and lunch time and children are expected to have a reading book with them whenever they enter class. Our librarian, Jenny Jones, is a dear friend and knows more about children's literature or what book might best suit a child's tastes than any algorithm Amazon (or anyone else) will ever invent. We have regular author visits and run frequent events and competitions. As a teacher and children's writer, our school library is the single most important resource I possess.

Corona-19 has closed many libraries, but our present government may prove an even greater threat. Across the country our library services are being cut and libraries closed. Our libraries are not only great sources of local knowledge, but often part of the backbone of our communities. If you would like to help, please follow this link: <http://www.librarycampaign.com/>