

# Ian Frazier

In Hudson, Ohio, where I grew up, our public library consisted of two frontier Greek revival houses that had been joined together, and you entered through the front door of one house or the other. The levels of the houses didn't exactly match, so in certain rooms and hallways you had to navigate small sets of stairs, and the houses sat at a skewed angle to each other, so you were always walking around odd corners. If a library is a physical metaphor for the brain, the Hudson Public Library was the brain of a cheerful small-town eccentric. For us kids it combined fun-house wackiness with the usual probity of self-improvement through reading. You always wanted to carom around the narrow passages and vault the stairs-- forbidden activities. There were two librarians, one patient and nice and the other mean.

I read books about boys' adventures in the wilderness, ancient Egypt, World War Two, and small towns like ours. Few people today remember the Penrod books of Booth Tarkington. There is a service plaza on Interstate 90 in Indiana named after that Indiana writer, but if you don't drive I-90 you're unlikely to hear his name nowadays, or that of his hero, Penrod, a boy in an Indiana town in the early nineteen hundreds. Until I was about twelve my town was not terribly different from Penrod's. Then everything changed. Everybody went more or less crazy with whatever was happening in the sixties. For its part, the library of that era added a strange modern brick addition with a vestibule containing a pay phone that I was given a dime to use when instructed to call my mother and report that the mean librarian had kicked me out again. I had become a teenager and the silence of the library oppressed me as something just begging to be shattered. My friends and I shattered it often with our wild, nervous adolescent hysteria.

As we later found out, we did not know what crazy was. Doing research for the nonfiction books I write, I now spend a lot of time in libraries, and the prevailing teenage hilarity at the next table is so common I don't notice it. The larger chaos in libraries nowadays, however, leaves me shaky on my feet. I've worked in a library in the Bronx where misbehaving kids are kicked out not by a librarian, but by a New York City Police officer put there for that purpose; and in a library in Cleveland, Ohio, where the rush at closing time is to take out DVDs, with hardly a book to be seen; and in big-city libraries where homeless guys giving themselves sponge-baths occupy the men's room; and in library after library where almost all the patrons are working on their laptops, apparently doing nothing they couldn't do at home. In the future, which is about twenty minutes away, will books even exist? At the New York Public Library's main branch building, in midtown Manhattan, throngs of visitors stroll the corridors and reading rooms snapping photographs and making videos all day long, as if with their many gadgets they could wash the mystery of the place away.

But then sometimes I also think about the public library in St. Petersburg, Russia, where I did research for my book about Siberia. Hanging in its entry hall are black-and-white photographs of library patrons reading at tables during the Leningrad blockade. In that terrible time the library had no fuel for heating. The people in the pictures are wearing heavy coats and hats and reading with gloves on. Whatever happens, and no matter the craziness of history, libraries somehow survive.

*---Ian Frazier is an author and staff writer for The New Yorker*