

Lee Siegel

Public libraries cannot keep the evil in the world from bursting in through their doors, but they can offer sanctuary from the world's ordinary business. When I was a kid, growing up in the Bronx and Paramus, the library was a transformative kingdom where the concrete givens of material circumstances had no claim. Inherited wealth or pedigree didn't stand a chance against the library's rarefied privilege of inhabiting any epoch, experience or life you wanted to.

The very physicality of the blond wooden chairs in the library was like an extension of the portals of escape that stood vertically, side by side, on the shelves. The polished smoothness of the wood put you in constant jeopardy of sliding down, or from one side to the other. How disadvantaged, all of a sudden, seemed all those posteriors that were the beneficiaries of lucky, inherited advantage, rooted as they were in the potholes of privilege! You, on the other hand, could slip and slide into one new life after another, and inherit the different treasure of experience embodied by each one.

It was in my town's public library, and then in the libraries of the public schools and universities I attended, that I discovered the alchemy of biography. I started with sports legends—Lou Gehrig, Babe Ruth, Jim Thorpe—and then worked my way on to historical and then literary figures. After that came books on places. And finally stories and poems—all the made-up tales proof that something grand and lasting and glorious can come from nothing.

I don't want to romanticize or idealize the library, but what is there gritty and disillusioned to say about public libraries? They are romantic and ideal places. Money is the abstract of everything, said Spinoza, ruefully; and in "The Hustler"—that immortal film—George C. Scott snarls to Paul Newman: "You owe me *money!*" Which makes you understand why they call it "money." But in the library the dull, leveling gravitational force of money has no influence. The public library's books, unlike their captive cousins shuddering in Amazon warehouses and on Barnes and Noble book-racks, are free. You don't buy them with common, interchangeable coin. You borrow them on the basis of your uniquely individual self. And you never have to return them. They remain yours, not because you *bought* them, but because they allowed you to extract all their contents. You bring back their outward forms, that's all.

If I were a certain kind of French writer, I would say that this borrowing and returning a book, only for it to be borrowed and returned again and again, ad infinitum, has an eros about it, a freedom of desire not bound by the mundane routine of selling, buying and keeping. Luckily I'm from the Bronx, so I will only say that for kids who lack money, public libraries are a moment of transactional grace.

I used to stare for a long time at the library cards that were once stamped and tucked back into the pocket on the inside back-cover of a book. I loved to look at the dates. As the years went by the ink changed, and so did the font they appeared in. The dates were never in neat vertical rows. Some were slanted this way or that, some loomed high above the previous date, while others were stamped over another date—in error or haste—so that you could barely make out either. I loved to imagine what "March 9th 1952" was like, how it was different from "December 18, 1968." Was it raining on that March day? Sunny? Were students chanting outside the library on that date in December? Who stamped it? Who carried it off, tucked in his arms, or in her bookbag, through sunlight or snow? What was on each one's mind, lender and borrower, at the moment the book changed hands?

You might say that the public library is both the essence of a book, and the essence of life itself. Like a book, the contents of the public library belong to everyone, in his or her own particular way, but are owned by no one. And like life, the books that circulate—I love the word, drawn from the operation of the heart and lungs—make each person who reads them only one degree of separation removed from every other person who reads them. You realize, in a public library, where books are borrowed, experienced and returned, how intimately connected knowledge is to the care and safe restoring of what love and desire have made precious.

---Lee Siegel is an author and cultural critic.