

Deborah Davis

The Bellevue Avenue Library looks like the work of a Hollywood set designer trying to recreate a nostalgic, Norman Rockwell, vision of Main Street USA. This historic building suggests a time when the local library was the heart of the community — a gathering place where silence was enforced with a firm "shhh," wisdom was dispensed by stern, but kindly, librarians, and adventure was only a book away.

The Bellevue has earned the right to look so historic. It is one of 2,509 public libraries funded by the legendary financier Andrew Carnegie, who considered books such an important part of his life and phenomenal success that he wanted others to experience the transformative power of reading. "A library outranks any other one thing a community can do to benefit its people," he enthused. With this goal in mind, Carnegie, called "the Patron Saint of libraries," gave communities throughout the world seed money to build libraries. In 1902, Montclair was the beneficiary of Carnegie's largesse and in December of 1914, the Bellevue Avenue Library opened its doors to an appreciative public.

One hundred years later, on a recent autumn afternoon, I visited the library to see what was behind its idyllic façade. I walked up the stairs (almost every Carnegie library is fronted by both a staircase that symbolizes "elevation by learning" and a lantern that suggests enlightenment), pushed open the heavy door, and inhaled the heady essence of aged books — a distinctive, suitable-for-a-candle scent that emanates from the stacks. Inside, I saw that the Bellevue is a destination for a diverse group of engaged Montclairians. At one table, two high school students quietly debated the best way to solve a difficult math problem; in another corner, a mother guided her child through the process of collecting materials for a school report. In the Young Adult section, a teenage girl perused the shelves, searching intently for her next stay-up-all-night read; and at a nearby computer station, an older man stared at the screen, engrossed in his own research project. As for me, I wandered through the stacks, looking for serendipitous finds tucked between books I've never heard of and books I've always wanted to read.

Atmospheric old libraries such as the Bellevue cast a spell on me. Suddenly, I'm interested in English history, gardening, etiquette — everything — and I cannot get through a visit without whipping out my card and borrowing multiple books on the subject du jour. Usually, I end up going home with more volumes than I can carry. I'm

embarrassed to admit that I often neglect to return my selections in a timely manner. But I always pay my overdue fines cheerfully, ("I'm the one on the Wanted Poster," I remind the librarians, who are probably sick of my tired old joke) because in some small way my nickels, dimes, and quarters support this wonderful place.

There was a moment when I worried about the future of public libraries. If books were an endangered species, weren't the libraries that housed them doomed as well? Foolish me. Libraries like the Bellevue may look fragile and sweetly old-fashioned, but they are tough, resilient, and surprisingly up-to-date in their new Millennium resources. The Bellevue offers access to extensive databases, 3-D printing, e-books and digital audiobooks, and BCCLS, an interlibrary loan service that makes any book in the statewide system available to cardholders. And, as Andrew Carnegie envisioned, it's completely free and democratic – for residents of all ages to use and enjoy.

In addition to being a bricks-and-mortar building, a lovely old place that provides a strong connection to a storied past, the Bellevue Avenue Library is also a state of mind, a magic portal into a vast, virtual universe. Either way, the Bellevue continues to reflect – and serve – our ever-changing community. It is 100 years young.

Deborah Davis is the author of many books researched at the Montclair Public Libraries, including "Fabritius and the Goldfinch," "Guest of Honor," and "Strapless."