

Denise Lewis Patrick

I love libraries. I love company libraries (Yes, they do still exist!), school libraries and personal libraries. I created my oldest son's first personal library in a basket when he was still crawling and chewing on the pages of board books. But most of all, I love public libraries. Public libraries are why I grew up with a serious case of book love, and are perhaps part of the reason that I actually write books today.

The small Louisiana town where I grew up actually had two public libraries when I was a young girl just beginning to read. During that time of exclusion and segregation in the South, we could only patronize the Black library. My brother and I quickly devoured everything in its small children's section, but the head librarian wouldn't allow us to make selections from anywhere else. That library eventually closed in the mid-1960's.

Needless to say, the day that our mother took us into the spacious, formerly- White library situated on our lovely Cane River, we were back in our element. She told the librarians that we had no restrictions on what we could read. I flew to gothic mysteries and classic British fiction; my brother checked out "The Godfather" before it ever became a movie, and read it clandestinely in our bathroom.

We went to the library every week, and in summers competed (mostly with each other) in the various reading contests to win recognition for the number of books we read. My very early connection with the public library as a place of exploration and wonder has never gone away.

When I had my two oldest children we lived in New York City. I took the two oldest to Donnell Children's Library to get their first library cards, thus passing on the book love. As my children became aware of my career as an author, they'd embarrass me by marching up to the children's librarian in any New York library to ask if my books were on their shelves. I admit I did make quite a few sneak peeks among the stacks to check that out myself. Spotting my name on the spine of a library book is different, and somehow more satisfying than seeing the same in a bookstore.

Writing books and stories for a living has changed my relationship with libraries in a big way. Now I look to my public library as a research source for my historical fiction. There's nothing like browsing the shelves of the Montclair library and discovering something unexpected, or spotting a slim volume that takes my story in a completely different direction than the one I'd planned. This is very exciting. Although along with that old sense of exploration and this new one of discovery, public libraries have become a wellspring of energy for me.

At several points in my writing process (on several different books) I have hit that proverbial "block." I've reached the point of staring at a sentence for the hundredth time, or blinking at a blank screen. My solve? I pick up an old-school yellow pad, a couple of sharpened pencils, and head to the main branch of the New York Public Library. In the Rose Reading Room, something magical and other-worldly happens, perhaps from being in the heart of so many words and experiences—and being surrounded by so many books. The love of decades of readers and the power of a library to change the life of ordinary people never fails to rekindle my creative fire. I thank my mother for that.