

What Are Libraries For?

By Roger L Simon

When I was a kid in New York, the 96th Street library was a focal point of my life. Even though I was perpetually losing my library card and amassing fines for overdue books I didn't want my parents to know about, it (as well as the movie theaters on 86th) was my home away from home.



People work at desks in the Rose Main Reading Room at the New York Public Library in New York City on Oct. 5, 2016. (Drew

It had also, I was given to understand, served the same function for the young [James Baldwin](#) (although Wikipedia cites the 135th Street library in Harlem) and other esteemed writers of the past and had a history of spawning authors, something even then I dreamed of being.

It was also a place for stimulating the mind as only books can.

According to its website, the 96th is currently [undergoing a rehab](#). Simultaneously, I was interested to read, a new library

here in my present hometown—six years now—of Nashville is opening.

From [Axios Nashville](#): “Musical performances, a puppet show and appearances from Nashville political leaders marked the long-awaited grand opening of the Donelson library branch Monday.”

But wait, as they say, there’s more: “The new 24,000-square-foot library has three dedicated spaces to host community events, six study rooms, artwork by local artists and a mobile kitchen on wheels sponsored by the Stones River Woman’s Club.”

They also do vehicle registrations. Seriously. No word on a bowling alley.

The local official who has been sponsoring this project for years said: “Libraries are not about just going to check out a book. They’re modern multimedia centers and places for all kinds of community programming.”

I disagree. Libraries should be primarily about the one thing that is among the most sorely missed in contemporary society—books, books, books, and more books.

Now, I have to admit something: Though I am an author now working on his 15th book, I have rarely been in a library in recent years, except to give an occasional talk to promote my work.

This aversion began several years ago when we had a second home in the Seattle area. I watched with interest, even excitement, as a new city library was erected. Designed by highly regarded Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, it was certainly stylistically cutting edge, utilizing all sorts of geometric shapes and colors.

But when I first entered the new edifice shortly after opening, what seemed to dominate the building, beyond the trendy architecture—you could barely see any bookshelves—were computer banks. Seated at those banks were, largely, the homeless. What they had up on their screens wasn’t Dostoevsky.

Not to overly disparage the well-meaning local official quoted

above, but the one thing libraries should not be is a “modern multimedia center.” We, especially our children, get enough of that virtually everywhere else. In fact, we can hardly escape it. Nor should libraries be centers of “community programming” that invite their use for ideological or lifestyle purposes that are inherently exclusionist. (These last have become all too common, with librarians too often the culprits.)

Libraries should be what they were always intended to be, what the first ones were—temples of books.

I assume that those who are expanding the concept of a library are doing so, in their minds, to induce people to read books. My guess is they are unwittingly doing the reverse. They are implying that reading a book is not sufficient unto itself, virtually the opposite of the truth.

Reading a book *is* the point. It is the brain’s best food, no matter the topic, since the days of the Bible and even before. That is the message a library should deliver.

What reading a book does for us as nothing else is create a mind-meld with the author or authors and, especially when it is good, allows us, whether fictionally or non-fictionally, to examine its subject in all its complexities and draw sophisticated conclusions. In short, we grow from the experience.

Largely because of the internet and the ADHD that it so often causes, people are losing the attention span it takes to read a book through. Though I write them myself, I read fewer than I did at 25 when there were no computers or cell phones to distract me. Has this technology rotted my brain? I think, to some degree, yes.

Having noticed this, I am making an effort to put away the phone—the latest from Ukraine can wait—and read some of a book every night. I don’t always succeed, but I’m trying. I recommend this, if you’re not already doing so. You will find

it is also an antidote to the stress of these times.

Meanwhile, I wish we could get some help in this by making libraries what they used to be—monuments to books and therefore public inspirations for a lifetime of learning.

Roger Simon's latest book is "[American Refugees: The Untold Story of the Mass Migration from Blue States to Red States](#)." He is currently working on a novel.

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