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## **In Praise of Libraries**

by Joe Queenan

A salute to society's most successful civic institution.

The public library is the only civic institution in my community that is uncompromisingly successful. Not everyone in my small town is crazy about the police force, and not everyone is all that pleased with the public schools. No one ever seems terribly happy with the planning board, the architectural review board, the board of trustees. Some people think the volunteer firemen get too much money for new equipment, though no one ever dares say it out loud.

The public library is different. The public library is the community's kindly grandmother: helpful, patient, understanding. Nobody in my town ever stands up and says he dislikes the public library. Nobody in your town does, either. Grumpy old librarians who keep shushing you, sure. But not the library itself.

The public library is an indispensable institution that somehow manages to get taken completely for granted. Like the clouds above us, like the birds that fill those skies, it is a glorious creation that is hiding in plain sight. Society pays little attention to it, even though society cannot survive without it. Not any real society. Small towns can do without movie houses and fancy restaurants and stores that sell 50 kinds of balsamic vinegar. They can even do without bookstores. But small towns cannot do without a public library. Cannot, cannot, cannot. You can look it up.

The public library serves many functions in a community. It is an adjunct to the public schools, **a place where kids can do their homework**. It is a **day care center of sorts**, where small children gather for story hour. It is a safe haven where **senior citizens can pass the time** in the company of others, **where the unemployed can look for work**. It is a place **where the lonely can be less lonely**, the bored less bored, the dejected less dejected, and **the ignorant more enlightened**. It is the one place in a small town where teenagers cannot possibly get into serious trouble. Well, not without really setting their minds to it.

The public library has features that make it different from any other institution. It is public, in the true democratic sense of the word, and it is free. The value of being free cannot be overestimated. You cannot hang out in the local coffee shop for free. You cannot hang out in the diner for free. You cannot hang out at the senior citizens center for free if you are not a senior. Yes, you can pass the time in the park or along the banks of the river, but not in December, especially not in Chicago. But **you can hang out in a library no matter who you are**, no matter what your income, no matter how you are dressed, no matter what your interest. **The library's philosophy is simple: Come one, come all.**

The wide array of things that libraries offer means that **they reach all levels of society**. They make society better than it would be if left to its own devices. Libraries are a subtle, almost cunning, bulwark against the racial and socioeconomic segregation that society naturally gravitates toward, even when it does not do so out of malice. People congregate in libraries in a way that they do not congregate elsewhere. Because they are not bound by narrow class or economic or cultural strictures, **libraries can cater to everyone**. Poor people do not shop at the local gourmet store. Teenagers do not frequent stores that sell expensive perfumes or whimsical gifts or Inuit pottery or Veuve Clicquot. The library is the only place where people of all colors, creeds, ages, and political beliefs freely, easily, and inadvertently intermingle. **The public library is the only fully democratic institution** I know of.

**Libraries are both aspirational and inspirational.** I love going into a library and watching little kids do their homework. I love to watch retirees devouring newspapers and magazines, refusing to recede from life just because they are no longer working. I love to watch people who do not look like book lovers reading books anyway. Anyone can read in the privacy of their own homes, but there is something joyous about watching people reading or studying or researching or exploring in public. Time spent in a library is time not spent in front of a television. That in itself makes the public library the most valuable institution a society could possibly imagine. Being in front of a television will only inspire you to watch more television. Being in front of a stack of books could inspire you to take a gander at *Jane Eyre* or *Persuasion* or *Beloved* or, at the very least, *Ethan Frome*. You just never know what might happen in the public library.

**Public libraries are not judgmental** in the way that other institutions are. They offer good books, but they also offer bad books. Lots and lots and lots of bad books. If you want wheat, they will lend you wheat. If you want chaff, they've got plenty in stock. Inside the library, it's a free-for-all, culturally speaking. Some people are reading David Baldacci; some people are reading *David Copperfield*. But the most valuable thing that libraries offer us is a path through the looking glass, a sense of wonder. American life is all about planning and regimentation and scheduling and efficiency. The public library is where serendipity reigns. It is the place where you throw out all the rules and wing it. I personally never go into the library and come out with what I went in for. I go in looking for a luminous, elegiac novel by a terse, glacial Englishwoman and come out with a rousing mystery set in Reykjavík. I go in for *Freedomland* or *Atonement* or *Bel Canto* and come out with *Get Shorty* or *Dracula*. When I go into the supermarket, I already know what I am bringing home. **When I wander into the library, I might bring home anything.**

Maureen Petry is the director of the Warner public library in Tarrytown, NY, the village I have called home for 32 years. I asked her about the challenges libraries face. “Some people think libraries are obsolete, because you can Google everything,” she says. “Some people don’t see why we need all these books. Well, last year, 192,000 items circulated in this building. Not all of them were books, but most of them were. So somebody still thinks library books are important.”

She adds: “**We are a community center**, yes, so we **offer help with doing your taxes** and **applying for jobs** and **improving your English**. But we can’t just be that. We can’t just be a service organization. **We can’t lose sight of our identity as a cultural center.**”

Petry says you cannot underestimate the role of the library as a community adhesive. She believes that **people become more appreciative of libraries as they mature**. This is, indeed, a sign of maturity. “The library is especially valuable to people as they grow older,” she says. “You cannot overstate this. Maybe you’re sitting at home, all alone. Maybe you don’t get that many visitors anymore. So you come here. When you go to the library, you see children, families, people of all age groups. It makes you feel that you are part of a community.” She pauses.

“In the library, you get to feel that you are part of something bigger than yourself. It’s life.”

And a big part of life is adventure. Yes, **public libraries are a place to learn, but they are also a place to play**. They are a place to experiment, a place to go hither when one is expected to go yon. Not all work conducted in the library is rewarded, not all efforts bear fruit, not every pathway leads where you might expect it to go. So what? The journey is what matters, not the destination. With all those strange books on all those strange subjects arrayed along the shelves, the library reminds me of the old trunk back in kindergarten that little kids can root around in, trying on different costumes: cowboy, pirate, ballerina, certified public accountant.

At school and at home, authority figures – parents, teachers, older siblings, Uncle Ralph – can tell young people, “You’re not old enough to read that yet; that book is not age-appropriate.” In the library, young people can choose what they read. They can gain access to otherwise forbidden knowledge. The library is thus both the ultimate backstage pass and the rabbit hole we can follow Alice down. **The library is not just the House of Knowledge. It is the House of Dreams.**

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