

The Burning and Rebuilding of the Los Angeles Public Library

The Library Book

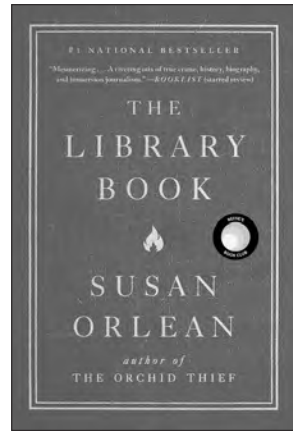
by Susan Orlean. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018. Hardcover, 335 pp., hardbound, USD\$28.

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The morning of April 29, 1986, the Los Angeles Public Library caught on fire. The seven-hour blaze destroyed four hundred thousand books, damaged seven hundred thousand more, and shut down the library for seven years. The fire, as Susan Orlean reconstructs it in *The Library Book*, started with smoke “as pale as onionskin” and escalated into a conflagration that spiked to 451 degrees, the ignition point of paper, as we know well from Ray Bradbury’s dystopian novel *Fahrenheit 451*. Book covers “burst like popcorn” and pages “flared and blackened and then sprang away from their bindings” (23).

Library fires are not unusual. Libraries burn because of arson, still the presumed cause of the LAPL fire. They burn because of human error: a cigarette tossed in a waste basket, or faulty wiring. And they burn in wartime, because they are located in city centers that fall victim to fire bombings and aerial attacks, or because the enemy specifically wants to destroy books. The Nazis, Mao Tse-tung’s Red Guard, the Khmer Rouge, the Taliban, and Islamist jihadis all targeted libraries. It’s not an efficient way to bring down a nation, but it is a devastating blow to a nation’s spirit. “Destroying a culture’s books is sentencing it to something worse than death,” Orlean writes. “It is sentencing it to seem as if it never lived” (103).

What we do to resist the existential nightmare of being forgotten is one of the primary themes of *The Library Book*. Orlean confesses at the outset that before she started researching the LAPL fire, she thought she was “done with writing books” (92). This line made me smile—I’ve heard the same from almost every author I know who is over forty-five, worn out from the soul-scraping effort of wrestling a topic into a coherent narrative, and many of them *do* go on to write more books. Her words also made me wince, because the literary world would be a lesser place if she had kept to the resolution. Orlean was moved to write about the LAPL fire after taking her young son there and being reminded of her own childhood trips to the local library with her mother. Orlean’s recollections are bittersweet, as her mother was suffering from dementia and could no longer remember these trips herself. Orlean finds the idea of



being forgotten “terrifying,” because it threatens to make life meaningless (93). Keeping a record of existence—what both libraries and authors do—allows us to make meaning out of the past: “Writing a book, just like building a library, is an act of sheer defiance. It is a declaration that you believe in the persistence of memory” (93).

Orlean, a longtime *New Yorker* writer and one of the most acclaimed literary journalists publishing today, interweaves the high narrative whodunnit story of the library fire with the cultural history of the Los Angeles Public Library and the larger public library movement. Orlean can write the hell out of any subject, and she’s particularly good at finding unusual ones: taxidermy, origami, orchids. With *The Library Book*, she takes on a subject that isn’t obscure. Libraries are right under our noses. They are everywhere (one of the many thrilling facts Orlean tosses out is that libraries outnumber McDonald’s [289]), and they intersect with a wide swath of humanity in emotionally, intellectually, and socially significant ways. The ubiquity of libraries makes them no less a perfect vehicle for Orlean’s literary journalism, which, as Jan Whitt describes in *Settling the Borderland: Other Voices in Literary Journalism*, is “the lens by which news . . . becomes an extended look into the human psyche, into the universal truths of being human” (149).

The Library Book showcases other Orlean trademarks. She fashions complex, irresistible characterizations of quirky people: accused arsonist Harry Peak, an aspiring actor, charming space case, and compulsive liar; Mary Jones, the innovative and effective head city librarian who refused to stop coming to work after she was replaced in 1905; Charles Lummis, the far less qualified and far more colorful journalist and adventurer who replaced her, sparking a petition drive and street protests led by Los Angeles society women. Orlean immerses herself in the everyday life of the LAPL, guided by her keen radar for paradox. In *The Orchid Thief*, Orlean renders the Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve as both an inhospitable, unpleasant, wild place and one that harbors the Ghost Orchid, a thing of delicate, ephemeral beauty. The LAPL, through Orlean’s immersive gaze, is noble, the walls covered with philosophical declarations and bas-relief stone figures of Virgil, Leonardo da Vinci, and Plato. Yet it is also revolting, thick with body odor and the “vegetal smells of dirt embedded in clothes that were advancing in the direction of compost” (241), worn by the library’s homeless clientele.

Orlean’s reporting is relentlessly, deliciously fascinating. We learn that mid-twentieth century movie studios dispatched emissaries to the library to steal the books they needed for movie research rather than be beholden to a due date; the library in turn would send an employee out to the studios to get the books back. We meet the “Art, Music, and Recreation” (266) librarian who, sensitive to the competition and secretiveness among the classical music ensembles in the greater Los Angeles area, delicately steers one ensemble away from borrowing a score if she knows another is programming the piece that season. We journey to the spacious, light-filled library in Aarhus, Denmark, which features a marriage license bureau, an excellent coffee shop, and a wide main staircase where toddlers like to play.

The Library Book is also an account of how libraries are changing. They are increasingly less about physical books. I found myself struck by the strenuous efforts

made to restore the thousands of volumes soaked by firefighters' hoses in the 1986 fire. McDonnell Douglas engineers put a batch into their space simulation chambers in an attempt to dry them out. I couldn't help but muse (and please forgive me) how much easier it would have been to buy a cheap replacement from Amazon's endless used book selection, had it been available back then. Some books wouldn't have needed hard copy replacements at all. Near the end of *The Library Book*, Orlean tours the Cleveland headquarters of OverDrive, a digital content catalog for libraries and schools. She finds herself enraptured by a wall map that pinpoints the moment one of their ebooks is borrowed, the name and location of a library, along with the book's title.

The LAPL does not lack for corporeal patrons, though. They hover at the entrance before the doors open and are reluctant to leave at closing time. But many are not there for the books. They want computer time, Wi-Fi, heat, a clean bathroom. They attend English language conversation classes and a crowded one-stop-shopping type event that connects them to social service agencies from around the city. The LAPL illustrates wider library trends. In my community and elsewhere, librarians train to administer NARCAN to reverse opioid overdoses and assist patrons with filling out the online census. I found myself wondering, as one forthright LAPL staff member does, where libraries should draw the line. Is the mission of libraries today becoming impossibly broad?

Perhaps I'm just being nostalgic. I, too, had a mother who took me on weekly trips to get stacks of books at my local public library. I got my first job there, making minimum wage as a teen clerk. It was the least demanding job I have ever had. The early evening shift was slow, and I would disappear into the stacks, ostensibly to reorganize the nonfiction books into proper Dewey Decimal order. Much of the time, I sat on the floor in an empty aisle and read, on the taxpayer's dime, giving myself quite an education with *The Hite Report: A Nationwide Study of Female Sexuality*, *The Cinderella Complex*, and other books about feminism and sex. Today in that job, I'd likely be kept busy monitoring computer stations, giving out the Wi-Fi password, and straightening up meeting rooms for Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, resumé writing sessions, and teen manga clubs. Just like the patrons, I'd spend a lot less time sunk in a book.