

A gift of words: The radical and socially equalising role of the public library

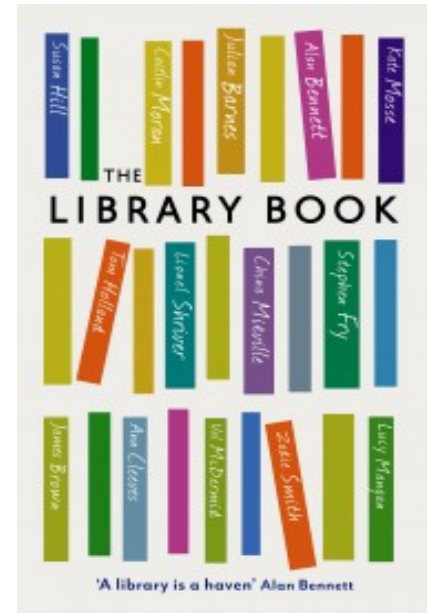
Aug 4 2012

The Library Book has excerpts from 23 of the UK's most notable writers, including Zadie Smith, Julian Barnes and Stephen Fry, all reflecting on how libraries are used and why they are important. **Sara Wingate-Grey** finds this is both a worthy cause and tome, for those who are consummate library lovers, although there is little of great depth or nuance to pique and inform, unless one so happens to find their favourite author's musings inside.



The Library Book. Alan Bennett, Lionel Shriver, Julian Barnes, et al. Profile Books. February 2012.

Published for National Libraries Day in 2012, in support of The Reading Agency, with funds going towards their public library reading schemes including the "Six Book Challenge – helping children and adults with low literacy levels", *The Library Book* is first and foremost an anthology: of short stories, book excerpts, brief memoirs and rememberings of libraries past and present. Its pleasure is twofold: as a slim volume it enables a reader to dip in and out as time wills or allows; while the selection of pithy narratives provides readers with the chance to perhaps discover their favourite authors' thoughts on libraries, whether public, private, mobile, or historical.



The book's *Afterword*, written by The Reading Agency's Chief Executive, Miranda McKearney, states that "[l]ibraries have a radical, socially equalising role right across the UK" and it is this aspect which most becomes clear from the many different personal stories this work contains. Loughton, Kirkcaldy, Rye, Huddersfield; Wolverhampton, Leeds, Willesden Green, Blackwood; Marylebone, Armley, Leicester and Norwich: the list of public libraries, remembered and revisited here by the likes of writers as diverse as Alan Bennett, Val McDermid, Ann Cleeves, and Caitlin Moran, for example, amply demonstrates the push and pull that a national public library service has exerted on the psyche of its citizens since its c.150 year old inception.

What is most interesting, and perhaps most informative about many of these stories, is that they

narrate an individual, yet correspondingly similar account, one where the imagination's transformative power over our being is activated and released, through a gift of words given by the public library. Anita Anand recalls her encounter with Essex public library services with a Proustian flourish, her meeting with Loughton library's books indelibly mixed in memory with the scent of its civic mate, the swimming pool, all "chlorine and tomato soup...from the machines in the foyer. The fewer powdery lumps at the bottom of the plastic cup, the luckier the week ahead was going to be", while her visits to the library itself are akin to a "cathedral where I would come to worship...the stories...precious to me as prayers."

Authors Zadie Smith and Stephen Fry likewise tell a tale of childhood and adolescence powered by public libraries and library books, a seemingly alchemical combination where new words and worlds sublimely conspire to open up the doors of adulthood, identity and a fuller sense of self. Smith's memoir-esque contribution also includes a present-day damning of the current cuts to public library operations, ongoing across the country. It is this threat to the service, in fact, which appears as the lynchpin of the book itself, crafted to "celebrate libraries" and published "in support of libraries" as "funding is under threat all over the country".

In many ways, although this is both a worthy cause and tome, for those who are consummate library lovers there is little of great depth or nuance to pique and inform, unless your favourite author happens to have had a hand in contributing to the volume. For those less library-enlightened, the inclusion of Tom Holland's essay is a welcomely concise chronicle, detailing the origins of some of the first great libraries such as Ashurbanipal and Alexandria; while the fictional library narratives contributed by Julian Barnes, China Miéville, Kate Mosse and Susan Hill, for instance, create a well-rounded and agreeably easy-to-read anthology. As public library closures and cuts continue, any and all hands on deck to stem this rising tide are, frankly, most welcome and worthwhile. Meanwhile, the obvious thing to do – if you don't want to fork out from your personal riches to buy this book – is to get yourself down to your local library where more than likely this, and a treasure trove of other information riches, is available to you today!

Sara Wingate Gray is a researcher, writer and artist, founder of The Itinerant Poetry Library, and currently a PhD student in the Department of Information Studies at University College London, investigating the philosophy of the public library. [Read more reviews by Sara.](#)

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