Library

AN UNQUIET HISTORY

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Lost in the Stacks

Once upon a time, a boy climbed a ladder and gazed through a window toward the far-off desert outside Cairo. He looked up: at the high end of the ladder, a small hole gaped in the wall. He looked down: the papers clutched in his hand were crumpled and sweaty. They were pages from exercise books, random notes and letters, refuse; his task was to ascend the tall ladder and poke the wad of paper through the hole.

Finally he arrived at the top, trembling and out of breath. He stared at the hole, which was as dark as a mouth. This was the geniza, the grave of written things—any page of which, the rabbi told him, may contain the name of God. This is where books go when they die. His face taut, the boy gulped down his sudden fear and jammed the wadded leaves into the hole. He forced them through at last with a single finger, jabbing quickly to keep it out of the dark. The papers fell out of sight, disappearing with a faint rustle somewhere below.

The boy retreated down the rattling ladder to solid earth, away from this graveyard in the air to the safety of unbroken prayer books and fresh, blank sheets of papyrus.

Geniza: the word in Hebrew means "container." In the rabbinical tradition, it comes to signify a kind of book tomb, a place in the synagogue where writings of all sorts are put when they are worn out. All the tattered pages—whether from liturgical poems or old Haggadahs or children's copybooks—are gathered and put in a geniza for safekeeping, until they can be given a proper burial. The great rabbinical scholar Solomon Schechter described it this way: "When the spirit is gone, we put the corpse out of sight to protect it from abuse. In like manner, when the writing is worn out, we hide the book to preserve it from profanation. The contents of the book go up to heaven like the soul."

Veneration of the written word is common to the peoples of the Book. The Koran, like the Torah, is too holy simply to be discarded; Allah's book is an aspect of his personality. Chiltan Mountain near Quetta, Pakistan, is laced with caves that contain some fifty thousand buried Korans, each one shrouded, like the dead, in white cloth. The mountain is a pilgrimage site for Muslims throughout Asia; many caves have been turned into prayer rooms where the pious keep vigil among the stacked and shrouded pages. It is said that those who are buried near the mountain—popularly called the Mountain of the Holy Korans—are forgiven their sins.

This Islamic practice is not new. Workers restoring Yemen's Great Mosque at Sana'a in 1972 discovered a huge rotting pile of manuscripts, which they stuffed into sacks and set aside. Among the tattered leaves, scholars later discovered pages of Koranic text dating from the first two hundred years of Islam. Intriguingly, some contained variants of the standard version accepted today, offering tantalizing clues regarding the textual history of Islam's holy book.

The Jewish geniza, however, recognizes the sacral quality not of a single book (shredded or whole) but of the written word in general. As a result, abandoned and forgotten genizas have long been important sources of manuscript Judaica. But the geniza of Cairo's synagogue was uniquely long-lived: out of the way, accessible only by ladder, its books, letters, and sundry papers piled up, mingled, and moldered for a thousand years, from the ninth century A.D. until the nineteenth.

In 1890, the synagogue was renovated, and large amounts of material streamed from the geniza into the markets, where they found their way into the acquisitive hands of European travelers. In 1896, two Scottish women, Agnes Lewis Smith and Margaret Dunlop Gibson, having purchased odd bits of manuscripts while touring Cairo, upon their return to England gave Solomon Schechter two fragments of Hebrew writing. Schechter, then a professor at Cambridge, discovered that one fragment belonged to the Book of Ben Sira (Ecclesiasticus), the text of which had previously been known only in Greek. The book was written in about 200 B.C.; the original Hebrew version had been lost for a millennium.

Spurred by this discovery, Schechter made a trip to Cairo, where he obtained permission to take away whatever he wished from the geniza. Schechter's description of the state of the geniza is evocative, and worth quoting at length:

> One can hardly realize the confusion . . . until one has seen it. It is a battlefield of books, and the literary productions of many centuries had their share in the battle, and their *disjecta membra* are now strewn over its area. Some of the belligerents have perished outright, and are literally ground to dust in the terrible struggle for space, whilst others, as if overtaken by a general crush, are squeezed into big, unshapely lumps, which even with the aid of chemical appliances can no longer be separated without serious damage to their constituents.

Overwhelmed by the splendor and decay, Schechter decided to restrict his acquisitions to manuscripts, leaving out some four hundred years' worth of printed items. Scholars rue that choice now; since Schechter's time, great interest has grown around the history of printed Judaica. In any event, Schechter's inventory is awesome; it comprises some 100,000 fragments in all, including biblical texts, phylacteries, Apocrypha and Pseudepigripha, Mishna, Talmud texts by Maimonides and others, liturgical poetry, letters, bills, lists, amulets, calendars, catalogs, children's exercises and readers, dictionaries, illuminations, charms, cabalistic texts, medical texts, names, polemics, poetry, vocabularies, Arabic children's writing, Arabic grammars, histories, scientific texts, and Arabic Judaica.

In the years since Schechter first described the contents of the Cairo geniza, they have gradually been dispersed on both sides of the Atlantic. The bulk of the fragments reside in New York's Jewish Theological Seminary and at Cambridge University. But they've been brought together again in the scholarship of S. D. Goitein, whose six-volume study of them, *A Mediterranean Society*, gives an extraordinary account of Jewish life in the Middle Ages, showing connections among the economic, political, ethnic, intellectual, and personal spheres of the Judeo-Islamic world.

So is the geniza a library? In the strict sense of the term, of course, it is not. Libraries offer access, and the geniza was for many centuries inaccessible. Moreover, the library's books are chosen and approved, deemed worthy of preservation. And in this the geniza is the library's opposite: its contents were the things thrown out, discarded specifically for their uselessness. In a more fundamental sense, however, the geniza *is* a library—for libraries collect and store

books for future use, and this the geniza certainly has done; in its collection and preservation of unique cultural artifacts it is unparalleled among the libraries of the world. It could be said that the geniza preserved its materials better than a library would have done. For while its fragments were undoubtedly harmed by inattention, they fared better over their long incarceration than books do in even the most conservation-minded libraries, where they are subject to handling, movement, loss, attack, and theft. More interestingly, the fact that they were deemed valueless is precisely what makes them invaluable to us today. They convey a far more comprehensive message from their times than any vetted and authorized library collection ever could. It's their throwaway, quotidian aspect—forcefully evoked by Schechter in the passage above, which evokes as well the battle-of-the-books metaphor of Jonathan Swift—that makes them such a powerful testimonial to the beauties of people otherwise forgotten.

The geniza has no ax to grind, ideological or otherwise. This above all makes it the library's opposite, for regardless of the library's alleged political neutrality, its transparency, its seeming lack of roots, it contains the buried and often contradictory impulses of the princes, philanthropists, and academicians who are its authors. Alexander, after all, meant his library to corner the ancient market in intellectual capital; Dewey wanted a library that not only operated efficiently but promoted efficiency in readers' lives. Unlike these libraries—conditional, ideological, argumentative—the geniza is a simple refuse pile, unafraid of its own collected contradictions.

IN THE WAINSCOTED, SUN-WASHED HALL of a Wisconsin farmhouse, centuries after the ladder to Cairo's geniza toppled, a set of books sits atop a lace-covered table. Perhaps twenty volumes are snugly tucked into a portable bookcase built, like the *armaria* of ancient Rome, with two doors flung open wide to reveal a double set of tiered shelves. Twenty books in a little cupboard; that is all. And yet the image of them, reproduced in Arthur Bostwick's *The American Public Library*, shows that even in a few gathered volumes the aura of the library may reside. These books are an example of what librarians at the turn of the century called a "home library"—not a privately owned collection, but a set of books gathered together and sent out to readers in the countryside. An early version of the bookmobile, the home library traveled to the farmsteads of rural Wisconsin in a horse-drawn, librarian-driven buggy. It's modest, and even homely, set down beneath an obscure portrait, framed by two simple black chairs. Yet there's a bit of Alexandria contained in that cupboard of books—a whiff of the Vatican, the Sorbonne, the Round Reading Room, the granite majesty of the Boston Public Library. The sturdy bindings of the home library seem to shed light into the farmhouse room. Arranged on the shelves of the bookcase they make a diptych, an altar filling the room with the glow of books.

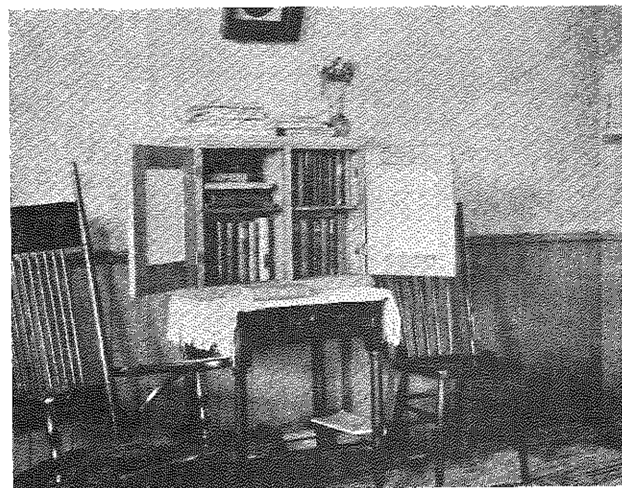
Bostwick describes two kinds of home libraries. In addition to the collections circulated to rural readers, another sort of mini-library was offered in the urban setting, especially to children of immigrants. In the city, Bostwick relates, a librarian or volunteer would go into the neighborhoods with these collections and look for a child to whom she could confidently lend them. The hope was that the child would not only read the books herself but share them with family and friends. In a week or so, the librarian would return to the tenements to collect the books, discuss them with the children, and offer another collection for them to borrow.

The combination of settlement-house outreach and library science was a product of the twentieth century designed to further nineteenth-century goals: to bring untutored masses into the circle

of readers, to set them on a path to right reading that would lead from adventure stories and travel tales to geography, history, and the trades. The expectation was that enjoyment of the home library would entice young readers into the children's room of the local branch, where they would begin the process of inculcation to the values of their society.

And yet in some cases, these immigrant children took the library books they were offered and used them to fashion a new world, a new America all their own. For them, the recreational reading that nineteenth-century librarians scorned—in particular the reading of novels—became the real work of the library. Libraries figure prominently in the work of Mary Antin and Alfred Kazin—both of whose families emigrated from Russia's Pale of Settlement (the only lands in which the czars permitted Jews to reside) around the turn of the twentieth century. Both writers reimagine the library in ways that support and subvert the ideals of an earlier generation.

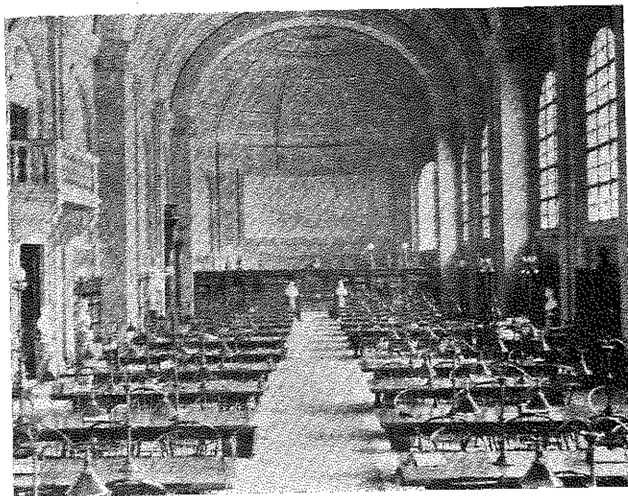
It is her partial ownership of the public library that most effectively symbolizes for Antin the rights her new society grants her. In her often breathless memoir *The Promised Land*, she calls the Boston Public Library "one of my favorite palaces." She watches visitors throng the library: "children [who] hushed their chatter at the entrance, . . . patting the great stone lions at the top" of the grand stairs. She watches "spectacled scholars . . . loaded with books," who are unaware of their own echoing steps. And tourists, too, who "lingered long in the entrance hall, studying the inscriptions and symbols. . . . All these eager children, all these fine-browed women, all these scholars going home to write learned books—I and they had this glorious thing in common, this noble treasure house of learning. It was wonderful to say, *This is mine;* it was thrilling to say, *This is ours.*" At the end of the "vast reading room" of Bates Hall, Antin



The home library, from Bostwick's The American Public Library *(New York: Appleton, 1910). Widener Library B 7739.10 (copy B).*

felt the "grand spaces under the soaring arches as a personal attribute of my being." The library is more to Antin than a hallowed repository of civilization; it contains all the energies of a new home she felt entitled to call her own without reservation or apologies—only with gratitude. "That I who was brought up to my teens almost without a book should be set down in the midst of all the books that were ever written was a miracle as great as any on record."

Assimilation was among the goals of the public library, of course, but Antin's onrushing spirit of ownership and involvement—this went beyond anything the library pioneers might have envisioned. (Certainly it went beyond the wishes of Melvil Dewey—a bigot who hid his antisemitism under the cloak of sober administration, barring Jews from the summer resort he founded in upstate New York.) To library leaders of the nineteenth century, the library



Bates Hall in the Boston Public Library as Mary Antin knew it. In Bostwick's The American Public Library *(New York: Appleton, 1910). Widener Library B 7739.10 (copy B).*

was an engine or a factory for producing *efficient* readers—people who read usefully, ignored the frivolity and dross of literature, and used books to advance themselves and their society. Such practical notions departed radically from the ideal of previous generations, in which the library was a treasure house, a cabinet of wonders, a chicken coop of the muses. The library, the reform-minded thought, should be progressive, purposive, and proletarian. The masses should leave the library better prepared to pursue trades, save money, and stay sober. Emancipation or individual enlightenment was at most a secondary goal. But the library, especially the large public library with its endless supply of books, offered more possibilities than the ideals of philanthropists and administrators.

Like Antin, Alfred Kazin was blissfully unaware of the modest, practical uses the founders of the public library movement intended him to make of books. In the heart of the Great Depression, Kazin fashioned himself into an intellectual amid the hum and rustle of the New York Public Library. "For almost five years," he writes in *New York Jew*,

> I had worked . . . in the great open reading room, 315, of the New York Public Library, often in great all-day bouts of reading. . . . Year after year I seemed to have nothing more delightful to do than to sit much of the day and many an evening at one of those great golden tables acquainting myself with every side of my subject. Whenever I was free to read, the great Library seemed free to receive me.

In the passage that follows, Kazin builds a metaphor: the library as America, as *his* America of dreamers and doers. In room 315, he encounters (in the person of their books and columns) the publishers, newspapermen, and writers who have hewn literary modernism out of the rough and tumble of the nineteenth century. Their vivid shades stream past him as a mobile crowd: Eugene Debs, Max Eastman, Upton Sinclair, H. L. Mencken, Edmund Wilson, Theodore Dreiser, Allen Tate, and all the nameless hucksters and night owls of Chicago. They're a surging mob, this bunch—hands in their pockets, hats pulled low—and Kazin roams among them like a flâneur of the mind.

Kazin is an idler; the library doesn't care. "I was my own staff researcher, a totally unaffiliated free lance and occasional evening college instructor who was educating himself in the mind of modern America by writing. . . ." Here he is, the American reader at his self-sufficient best.

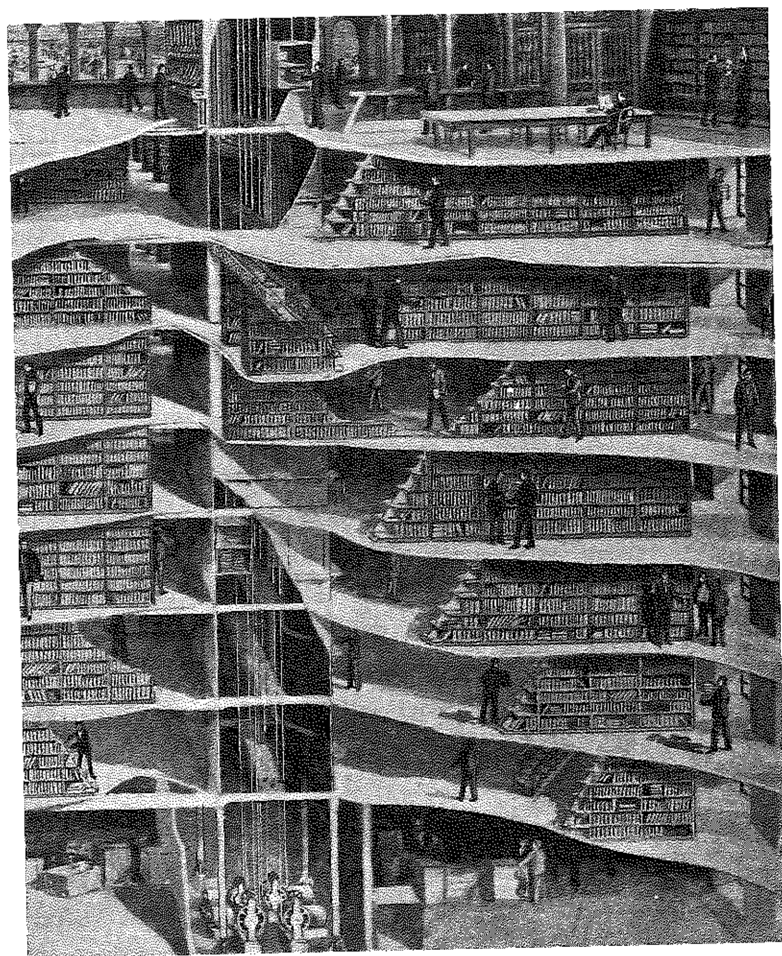
> No one behind the information desk ever asked me *why* I needed to look at the yellowing, crumbling, fast-fading material about insurgent young Chicago and San Francisco publishing houses in 1897. No one suggested I might manage whatever-it-was-I-was-doing with something more readily available than the very first issue of *Poetry* in 1912; *The New Republic* in 1914; muckraking *Collier's* in the Theodore Roosevelt era;

and a host of other buried signals in the current of emergent American literary modernism. Kazin succumbs to the dream of the research library, a dream not unlike the rags-to-riches fantasies of the penny dreadfuls—the dream of a personal success unaided by unnamed others. Like most readers, Kazin believes that the stuff he wants has been lost here, forgotten, discarded—that the library is a geniza that offers up its secrets only to the most indefatigable scholars. Of course, someone acquired these yellowing, fading materials; of course, someone cataloged them; of course, someone retrieved them from the shelves and will return them when the reader is finished. But in the library these assistants hide behind the curtains; the library becomes a stage with a mirror for a backdrop that reflects only the reader and obscures the multifarious origins of the books.

Libraries of a century before displayed their books as objects of veneration. The new libraries of the early twentieth century, however, hid away the books, rendering them accessible only by staff employing the latest technology: telephones, conveyor belts, elevators. The cover of the May 27, 1911, issue of *Scientific American* showed a cutaway view of the stacks of the New York Public Library, then newly opened. The view shows the all-male staff bustling among the shelves below floor level, sending volumes to the delivery room via a complex network of shafts and booklifts. Beyond the delivery room windows sit the blissfully browsing readers, unaware of the machinery employed to bring them their reading material.

But for all the technological complexity of New York's new library building, the author of the *Scientific American* article was more impressed with the library's efficient handling of people. "The necessity of supplying books for all classes of readers," he wrote, "rendered it advisable to devise an architectural plan and an executive system which would distribute the reader rather than the volumes which he reads." The author's emphasis on "classes of readers" mirrors the concerns of the nineteenth-century public library pioneers. He concludes by noting that the architects have designed a library "which is not only a work of art in itself and a worthy monument to the largest city in the western hemisphere, but which automatically, we may say, divides the thousands of readers who wish to consult the books *into the intellectual classes in which they belong*" (my emphasis).

Unaware of the goals of efficient administration, readers like Kazin rearrange as they see fit both themselves and the books they read. "Years before I saw Chicago," Kazin writes, "I learned what hope, élan, intellectual freshness came with those pioneer realists out of the Middle West. . . ." Kazin finds his Midwest in the library, too—an idealized "Middle West" of clear-eyed creators, madmen in shirtsleeves, visored visionaries "who said there was no American literature but the one *they* were rushing to create." The library contains it all: the city's creative anonymity, the frumpery and finery of the gilded age, the archaeology and geography of Manhattan, and, above all, the American people themselves, brought together in what Kazin calls "that asylum and church of the unemployed; of crazy ideologists and equally crazy Bible students doggedly writing 'you lie!' in the reference books on the open shelves; of puzzle fans searching



The library as factory: efficient administration of books, staff, and readers in the New York Public Library as depicted on the cover of the May 27, 1911, issue of Scientific American.

every encyclopedia; of commission salesmen secretly tearing address lists out of city directories." Everyone in Kazin's library is haunted, as desperate as Enoch Soames lost in his own diabolical future. This is a new archetype for the library, one far removed from its previous guiding images—bookworms buzzing in the cage of the muses; a solitary Saint Jerome in his carrel with his lion and his skull; the factory or the marketplace of commonsense ideas. And yet, for all its newness, Kazin's idea of the library connects seamlessly with those that came before it. To Kazin, writing on the eve of the war in which one hundred million books would burn, the library is a crucible of urban civilization, its quintessence.

For Kazin's parents, the object called the book was sacred, singular, and rare. Its type set by God, it could be said (in its first form, the Torah) to be the chief object in the world. And it was awfully expensive. That was the book for his parents' generation—a seventeenth-century conception of the book, though it was held throughout the West well into the twentieth century. But suddenly Kazin and his contemporaries found they could immerse themselves in stacks of books, that there was no end to the books they could have "just for the asking." Kazin, like Antin before him, powerfully reimagined the institution of the library. If the home library can be an altar and a viral speck of civilization, if a few books in a wooden box could open like the ark on a farmstead in Wisconsin, what could massed millions of books—all just sitting there waiting—do for immigrants and their children lost among the shifting crowds of New York, Boston, Chicago?

OTHERS HAVE CHOSEN THEIR BOOKS in the face of hunger and cold. Walter Benjamin, for one, risked his life for a single book—and an unfinished one, at that. But long before he packed the manuscript of his monumental *Arcades Project* under his arm and fled

over the Pyrenees to escape the advancing fascists, Benjamin pondered the idiosyncrasies that every reader expresses in his own collection of books. In the essay "Unpacking My Library," Benjamin delights in his books as objects. Taking them from boxes, making room for them on shelves, he discovers their true life as material things—the point at which they are free to take on lives of their own. "To a book collector," he writes, "the true freedom of all books is somewhere on his shelves." The universality of books is reflected darkly; it is their individuality that comes to the fore.

Readers have always opposed the manic energies of the universal library with the hope that one book could explain all. The yearning for such a book, which begins with the Bible, has always been part of the culture of letters. But Benjamin finds that any humble book, in its relation to its owner, may become the Book of Fate. So the personal library carries with it a potential that the publicly owned collection or the academic library, as Benjamin points out, tends to obscure. As the library offers passage into the universe of possible ideas, so the book as cherished object reveals to its owner the connections that individual books can make across time and place, reflected in the story of its previous owners, the history of its bindings, its uncut pages. The book is a tool, and like all tools, it tells the story of its making. It is the door and the key, the passport and the transport. How tragic, then, that Benjamin ended his own life carrying his unfinished book—the manuscript of *Das Passagen-Werk*, a library in and of itself—to safety and liberty. The book became in Benjamin's final days an anchor, a boulder to push up the mountainside, a world borne along on his hunched and bookish shoulders. If it was a burden, however, then he carried it happily. Ultimately, that one object's aura glowed most brightly on the stage that was Benjamin himself. "This book is more important than I am," he told his companions on his final, abortive trek over the Pyrenees.

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MUCH HAS CHANGED among the massed millions of books in Widener Library since the first time I lost myself in the stacks. Like those of all lovers of libraries, my bibliographical reveries are not enough to stop time. Today, Widener is in the final throes of a thorough renovation; the stairway I descend is freshly painted and new, its smell faintly fungal. The green, tubular handrails chime as I slide my ring finger along them. The *Lingo Language Games* and the brittle paper of the X-cage are now long gone, moved to off-site storage. It's harder now to find older books in the stacks, the rebound incunabula and vellum-clad eighteenth-century folios having been moved to safer quarters.

Where will I find the book you are now reading? Its place in the library is determined by anonymous others: first, the librarians who draw up the cataloging classifications of the Library of Congress. The process is dizzying in its distribution, offering endless opportunities for differing interpretations and outright errors. The LC subject classes—those nesting, cross-referenceable rubrics ("United States—Social Conditions—to 1865") that once ordered the subject card catalogs and that online users still search in the distributed databases—make up an epistemological labyrinth unto themselves.

And not everyone is happy with them. In seeking a lofty common denominator, useful for libraries of all shapes, sizes, and specialties, the Library of Congress subject classes often strike a tone of bureaucratic high-handedness. Sanford Berman, a librarian in Minnesota's Hennepin County Library since 1973, has waged a battle against subject headings he considers racist, reactionary, insulting to human dignity, and plain confusing. In the process, he and a merry band of fellow catalogers turned the HCL catalog into an exemplary tool for readers.

Even a partial list of the substitutions Berman and colleagues have made is at once comical and telling: where LC has the evasive, but etymologically correct, "amicide," Berman offers the plainer term "friendly fire casualties"; he would replace the impressive "dysmenorrhea" with a frank "menstrual cramps." But the difference between Berman's cataloging style and that of LC is more than ideological: his cataloging is artisanal. Where librarians are generally pressed to accept ready-made catalog records, gathered in astronomical numbers by consortiums and made available to subscribing libraries over computer networks, Berman insists on using his own intelligence to describe each book the library acquires. Thus, his records often contain added information, such as tables of contents and detailed descriptive notes, which are enormously helpful to the reader trying to determine, for example, whether Ntozake Shange's *Whitewash* is a work exploring the impact of a racist hate crime, or a how-to book about house painting.

Library administrators from Melvil Dewey to the present have argued that such hands-on work slows down the process at the heart of the library's mission: putting books into readers' hands. But to Berman, the top-down, networked library fails on its own terms. The reader isn't guided efficiently to the right resource; instead, she is alienated and confused by subject classes that emphasize professional knowledge. The efficiencies produced are largely those beneficial to the administrators of large library networks.

Those efficiencies now seem poised to win out. Berman was forced into early retirement—a fate his catalog will share in the wake of its planned replacement with a streamlined, standardized database. When librarians around the country protested the scuttling of the Berman catalog, however, administrators thought twice. It now appears that the catalog will find a home, possibly in the archives of a library school or the American Library Association

itself. This is good news for specialists, but cold comfort for the readers of Hennepin County.

My book, perhaps, doesn't need elaborate or controversial subject headings. And yet I wonder: will catalogers classify my book as history, memoir, or fiction? Will they send it to the GT class, which includes works on "customs and manners, including eating and drinking"? More likely, I'll find it in the Ps, reserved for language and literature. But what about the C class, which contains the "Auxiliary Sciences of History"—in particular CD, for emblems, seals, and archives? Despite all the arguable choices, I'm fairly certain that I will find my book in the Bibliography classification, which the catalogers in their modesty have tucked in at the end of the alphabet: the Z class, which holds the following: "Books (General). Writing. Paleography. Book industries and trade. Libraries. Bibliography." Yes, definitely the Zs. And so, nearly at the bottom of the Widener East Stack stairway, I stop at C level, home of the Z class. "No Roof Access," a sign on the door warns me.

Differentiations abound, however; the Z class, like the rest, is divided by a mixture of rationality, prejudice, and whim. Where to turn? I've written an inoffensive book, I think, unlikely to show up in Z1019–1033, where "prohibited books" are classed. And although it contains the traces of all my reading, it's no personal bibliography, found at the very end of the classification, Z8001–8999. Then there are "Libraries in relation to special topics," Z716.2–718.8; Z702, "thefts and losses of books"; Z102–104.5, "Cryptography. Ciphers. Invisible Writing." I'd like to think it might find its way into the part of the class reserved for "Best Books." But that's Z1035–1035.9—a mere nine-tenths' worth of space. Probably not enough room.

Here is Z719–725, in the spacious zone reserved for books about "Libraries (General)." I turn down this range of shelves. The incandescent bulbs that once punctuated these rows with a faint

ocher light are gone, replaced by the diffuse, tidy glow of fluorescent tubing. Pipes gleam overhead; they carry water at high pressure, primed to erupt at the first whiff of smoke or heat and douse the flaming books. No flames today, fortunately, despite the frequent fire alarms that break up the week for Widener readers and staff (dust from renovation and construction trips the alarms regularly). The Z class and its neighbors are among those least frequently visited by readers, and the sound of my footfalls on the marble is joined only by the nearly subliminal buzz of the lighting above me.

Here I am: the Z721s. What else is here? I see a few suggestive titles: *The Happy Bookers: A Playful History of Librarians and Their World from the Stone Age to the Distant Future*, by Richard Armour; *The Care of Books: An Essay on the Development of Libraries and Their Fittings, from the Earliest Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century*, by John Willis Clark; *Grundzüge der Bibliotheksgeschichte*, by one Joris Vorstius; *The First 350 Years of the Harvard University Library*, by my mentor Kenneth Carpenter. The bindings are myriad, endless variations in buckram. I run my finger along them, making a dry rhythmic hiss against the grain of stiff fabric. But my own book is missing. I stoop to ankle level, to where it should be shelved. All I find is a little tent of darkness—an empty space, a geniza hole—where the next book leans to rest against its neighbor. My book isn't here; I like to think that someone has already checked it out.

Geniza, home library, palace of the people, treasure house, and chicken coop of the muses: my original categories, the Parnassan and the universal, fall away in a maze of overlapping possibilities. Like Borges's Library of Babel, any collection of books contains the seeds of nearly numberless alternatives and contradictions. Although a canon is a constructed thing, the universalizing tendencies that oppose canonization are themselves no less constructed. Ultimately, even the universal library is less a true compendium of the totality

of human knowledge—less a model *of* the universe—than simply another kind of ritual representation of collective wisdom. The Library of Congress holds over one hundred million books in 450 languages—a latter-day Babel to be sure, but a mere fraction of the several thousand natural languages and dialects in which people speak and act around the world. With all its fructifying abundance, perhaps the universal library, like the canon-serving Parnassan, is a model *for* as well as a model *of*. Everything exists to end up there.

We see libraries everywhere. Following the intuition of thinkers ranging from Spinoza to Alan Turing, we can conceive of the universe as the shape information takes as it flows and clots, cascades and recombines. Recently, it's been suggested that the universe itself is a computer that stores all data in endless variation; all phenomena, from the scattering of subatomic particles after the Big Bang to the tumbling waves of the Pacific Ocean, to the wingbeats of a monarch butterfly in migratory flight, are computations. Readings.

The bibliographer in the digital age returns to the revelatory practice of her medieval forebears. Librarians, like those scribes of the Middle Ages, do not merely keep and classify texts; they create them, too, in the form of online finding aids, CD-ROM concordances, and other electronic texts, not to mention paper study guides and published bibliographies. Digital texts have followed the same deeply grooved arc of other forms of writing. As in ancient Mesopotamia, where cuneiform writing began as crude hash marks made in wet clay to account for cattle and bushels of grain, the binary texts of the computer age were first inscribed by numerate clerks and economical priests. And yet, in time those hash marks, those graffiti, were stolen by the cults of the muses. Already we call our databases and online catalogs "digital objects"—a reflection, perhaps, of our nostalgia for the dusty physicality of our books (an abundance of which we will continue to curate for some genera-

tions to come). Perhaps present-day written texts, translated immediately into these evanescent digital media, will be preserved for future generations. But won't those generations be as concerned to preserve the framing data that gloss and illuminate those texts? Won't they search for beauty and truth in the code our programmers mean to make invisible? Almost certainly they will. These digitial texts, these "objects," will be classified, described, and annotated. Undoubtedly, this will be a labor of love. The digital objects of today are the incunabula of a not-too-distant tomorrow—our palimpsests, our geniza bits, the refuse of our restless and inconsolable appetite for change and immortality.

The library in the digital age is in a state of flux, which is indistinguishable from a state of crisis—not only for institutions but for the books they contain, preserve, and propagate, a crisis for the culture of letters whose roots are firmly planted in the library. The universal library pretended to answer the question "What belongs in the library?" And yet in a world that seems to make ever more room for information, this question retains its ancient force. Jonathan Swift feared that the inclusion of modern books would ruin the library's canonical force; librarians in more recent, allegedly more liberal times have scrutinized the material in their growing collections with an equally jaundiced eye, presuming to separate wheat from chaff, worthy from worthless. Major libraries everywhere are hemorrhaging books by the heap, selling them, pulping them, or storing them in remote warehouses by the millions of volumes. The problems libraries face—lack of space, loss of funding—are real and formidable. And the choices they face are Faustian in their many dangers. In his recent book *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper*, Nicholson Baker brought indignation to bear on library administrators who judged the daily newspaper an ephemeral form unworthy of systematic collection. Its acidic paper they declared too trouble-

some to store and preserve, its contents too tawdry and quotidian to merit conservation. Yet, ever since John Dunton offered his *Athenian Mercury* as a means of education for the "middling sort" of person, newspapers have been the birthing grounds of the zeitgeist, its writers the often anonymous authors of the public sphere itself. As Baker recounts, newspapers have promoted great leaps in printing technology and have set standards for typographical elegance and graphic beauty that printers of books have long struggled to match. The disappearance of newspapers—their eviction from such allegedly universal collections as those of the British Library, the Library of Congress, the New York Public Library, and countless other libraries—is a loss of historic proportions.

In the ideal public library, we are all readers of the "middling sort." Reading whatever we will, we fulfill a public function, preserving the sacrosanct space of inner thought that is our birthright. Assaults on that birthright in the forms of legislation, surveillance, and censorship ultimately are precisely as dangerous as our acquiescence in them.

What we face is not a loss of books but the loss of a world. As in Alexandria after Aristotle's time, or the universities and monasteries of the early Renaissance, or the cluttered-up research libraries of the nineteenth century, the Word shifts again in its modes, tending more and more to dwell in pixels and bits instead of paper and ink. It seems to disappear thereby, as it must have for the ancient Peripatetics, who considered writing a spectral shibboleth of living speech; or the princely collectors of manuscripts in the Renaissance, who saw the newly recovered world of antiquity endangered by the brute force of the press; or the lovers of handmade books in the early nineteenth century, to whom the penny dreadful represented the final dilution of the power of literature. And yet, the very fact that the library has endured these cycles seems to offer hope. In its cus-

tody of books and the words they contain, the library has confronted and tamed technology, the forces of change, and the power of princes time and again.

Such changes are part of that endless cycle of renewal for which the library has its readers to thank. Think of Richard Wright, turning the Jim Crow library that excluded him into an instrument of self-discovery. Think, too, of Walter Benjamin, who for all his distance and difference lived in the very same world that Wright discovered: the forest of books. Benjamin was stopped at a geographical border with an unfinished book in his suitcase. Wright used a borrowed library card like a passport to cross into that same world, where his own books waited for him, unwritten.

Here in the stacks, the library may seem the place where books go when they die. In their totality, they disappear amid their own splendid mystifications. From age to age, libraries grow and change, flourish and disappear, blossom and contract—and yet through them all we're chasing after Alexandria, seeking a respite on Parnassus, haunted by the myths of knowledge and of wholeness that books spawn when massed in their millions. The divine irony that Borges discovered while groping his way through the stacks strikes the sighted librarian just as powerfully: preserving themselves, the books elude us. And yet it's this that inspires more books, goading us to finish them, to complete the set, to add another book to the collection.

Afterword

Time troubles us with its paradigmatic ironies, its uncanny grammar: the present is that which was the future, which *will be* the past. The library is a place where time's habitual ironies come home to roost—books lining shelves like shabby carrier pigeons, resting and ruffled, ready to deliver their dispatches from futures past and histories to come. I started writing *Library* from the vantage point of an embarkation, acknowledging a general sense that the library was on its way to a future rendered uncertain by digital disruption and transmutation. More than ten years on, we're well into a future now transformed to past—a splintered future, prospective and pluperfect, a harvest of contradictory possibilities scattered and paradoxical. What library futures have emerged since the millennium began?

Back in 2003, I tried to imagine my as-yet-unpublished book finding a place in the library. It's been gratifying to see *Library* find