Libraries That Don’t Respect Books

by [Jeff Plude](#) (February 2020)

The Library, Jacob Lawrence, 1960

I was at one of the libraries that I go to occasionally in the Albany suburbs to pick up a book that I needed sooner than later. I got talking to one of the circulation librarians, who was helpful and very friendly. I asked her why she thought Albany Public Library decided a year ago to do away with fines

for overdue books and DVDs. Los Angeles recently announced that it's doing the same thing, as has Chicago and other city public libraries in what seems to be a new trend.

She talked in an audible whisper, like the librarians did when I was a kid. She said in a roundabout way, to be diplomatic, that the new policy is intended to not discourage people from borrowing library materials. And especially their small children, since the parents often check out books for them. When she says people, I think what she really means is people with low incomes.

"I think that's insulting to poor people," I said. "What has being poor got to do with not returning what you borrowed on time? People who weren't rich returned books when I was a kid."

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She smiled at me as if to say: "I know that and you know that, but I can't say that." She said: "There are a lot of things people used to do thirty years ago that people don't do anymore." (She was being very kind with the number of years, since I'm a bit older than that.)

Fines at Albany's seven branches were ten cents a day for overdue books and DVDs. Negligible, in other words, as long as the borrower didn't keep the book or DVD longer than a couple

of weeks past its due date (or not return several items on time). And even if the checked-out item had been kept longer, the most such a patron would have had to pay to be allowed to borrow library materials again is five bucks, no matter how long it had been overdue.

If such fines seemed like too much money to some borrowers, then maybe they should have been more conscientious about returning their library books and DVDs; after all, it costs them nothing but a little time and effort. The fact that other people may want to read or watch the borrowed book or DVD doesn't seem to matter anymore. The point of the fine to begin with, like all fines, is to discourage people from breaking the rule or law, in this case from keeping a book or DVD indefinitely. Shouldn't somebody who does this be held at least partially accountable for depriving other patrons of the enjoyment or use of the book or DVD?

If the item is never returned, the library has to buy a new copy that can cost upwards of $20 or more (depending on the amount of wholesale discount from book distributors). In rare cases the book might not be able to be replaced at all if it's old or out of print.

Albany Public Library, like other city libraries, is paid for by taxes collected from residents. But the upscale suburban library I recently visited—smallish, clean, bright, well-stocked for its size— is funded by "Friends of the Library," or donors. It still imposes fines on delinquent borrowers of books and DVDs.

Fines for unreturned books have been part of the American public library system from the beginning.

Nearly three centuries ago the first public library was established in what would become the United States. In 1730, Benjamin Franklin, only twenty-four, was a member of a literary-philosophical club in Philadelphia. In his *Autobiography* he says that there were no bookshops in the colonies at the time, and books had to be ordered from England. So he suggested that each club member bring his own books to the clubroom so that they could not only consult them during their weekly discussions, but could borrow the other members' books and read them at home.

Mr. Franklin then thought of extending that benefit to the whole community. So he drew up a plan and rules, and solicited people to pay 40 shillings up front and 10 shillings annually to pay for books, a building, upkeep. He found fifty takers, mostly young tradesmen like himself.

The new library was open one day a week to subscribers. Interestingly, each subscriber had to sign a promissory note agreeing to pay double the value of the book if he didn't return it (Franklin didn't say how much time would have to elapse before the fine was charged). Nowadays such a fine would set back such a booknapper $60 for the average hardcover—a far cry from five bucks. This was a society that put its money where its mind was.

Thus the American public library was born, and grew into one of the great democratic institutions of the new nation.

Franklin said it didn’t take long:

> The Institution soon manifested its Utility, was imitated by other Towns and in other Provinces, the Libraries were augmented by Donations, Reading became fashionable, and our People . . . became better acquainted with Books, and in a few Years were observed by Strangers to be better instructed & more intelligent than People of the same Rank generally are in other Countries.

But for some time now it seems that the public library in America has been in a prolonged midlife crisis. What is its real purpose? What should it be?

One thing is certain: a public library is no longer merely a house of books, and by that I mean ones printed on real paper. (Is it possible that all print books in libraries, or even most of them, will eventually be transmuted into e-books? Not to mention the pleasures in the hand and ease on the eyes of ink on paper bound between covers.) It is now also an internet cafe, a video shop of free DVDs, a community center with a range of classes, a private tutoring space, even a hodgepodge of stuff you can borrow, from fishing poles to musical instruments.

Many probably see this as an evolution of Franklin’s original idea: an economical way to enhance knowledge. (Except for the fishing poles, though my working-class father used to call fish “brain food.”) But what’s the cost of this newfangled library that tries to be all things to all people? Fewer books, since desktop monitors and DVD shelves and meeting

rooms take up space that could have been used for bookshelves.

A full disclosure: my wife and I also borrow DVDs from the library. But I'd be glad to trade all the DVDs for more physical books.

That's all well and good for me, some people might say, I'm a writer; but what about everybody else? This assumes that writers are the only ones who like to read "real books"—literature, history, philosophy, etc. I won't go into that here other than to say there are many other kinds of books I'd include that all kinds of people may enjoy: how-to books, for instance, and self-help, and genre fiction. What's next in the library? I might say in defense: a gym?

In short, I think the proper place for the rest of what the library now has come to include under its roof would be better suited to a separate building.

Maybe the public library has become too familiar for its own good and is now looked on by some if not quite with contempt, at least with condescension.

For instance, one well-known millennial commands his readers to *not* check books out of the library. Ryan Holiday, who's thirty-two, rose to fame eight years ago when his best-selling book *Don't Trust Me, I'm Lying: Confessions of a Media Manipulator* was published. It's about how he hoaxed mainstream media outlets on behalf of his marketing clients and was now outing himself as a public service to not trust the media.

(Though it also didn't seem to hurt his public obscurity and his personal bank account. His personal character is another story.)

On his website he warns his readers to stay away from the public library:

> . . . I don't check books out from the library and haven't since I was a child . . . You should be keeping the books you read for reference and for re-reading. If you are OK giving the books back after two weeks you might want to examine what you are reading.

In contrast to Mr. Holiday, previous generations venerated the public library. Malcolm Gladwell, for instance, can't seem to say enough in praise of it. He has said that his mother would drive him every Wednesday to the public library when he was a kid:

> The library was a magical place that gave me—a kid from a tiny town—a window on the whole world. I've never lost that feeling . . .

> Since I moved to New York City 20 years ago to become a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, I've relied on public libraries.

Mr. Gladwell, who is fifty-six (around my age), also considers the public library superior to Google for research, since

Google only tells you what you want to know—instead of what you don't know you might want to know.

Mr. Holiday seems not to even have heard of browsing in person, much less felt its wonders and joys. When it comes to finding intriguing books, I know firsthand that it's a great loss to only find what you're looking for.

Going back further in time, Ray Bradbury liked to say that because he didn't have enough money in the late thirties to go to college, he "graduated" from the L.A. public library after ten years of faithful attendance. He also wrote *Fahrenheit 451* on one of the library's public typewriters, which cost a dime a half hour to use, though I'm pretty sure he would've written the novel even if the library had had only books. Mr. Bradbury maintains that the novel is not about censorship, as many believe, but about a society that does not even want to read books.

Which brings me back to the Albany Public Library. I visit its main branch about once a month, and nowadays it seems more like an extension of the main social services branch that is just down and across the street from it.

As I walk to the library I have to pass by a large bus shelter at one of the main intersections. My nostrils are instantly filled with the pungent smell of pot, which can be so powerful that it sometimes follows me past the library's electronic glass doors and into the vestibule.

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Once inside I usually check out the new nonfiction first, which is near the circulation desk. Sometimes there are a couple of people, mostly African-Americans but not all, up at the front desk (Albany's poorest neighborhood is just behind the main branch and is predominantly black). Many in line are young black women with young children in tow. My wife was here one day and heard a little girl in line with her mother who was there to buy a bus pass ask the librarian behind the desk where the children's' books are, and then ask her mother if they could go upstairs to look at them. "No!" her mother said sternly. The little girl pouted and looked like she was going to cry.

I then sometimes mosey through the rest of the stacks. Then I often head over to the quiet section at the back of the library to sit at a table and scan my take.

On a recent visit, I forgot to account for the change of seasons: it was now in the low thirties and windy, which means the quiet section was anything but.

A sign in a plastic holder on several of the tables said *Quiet Area*