

The Year the Libraries Closed, We Still had the Libraries

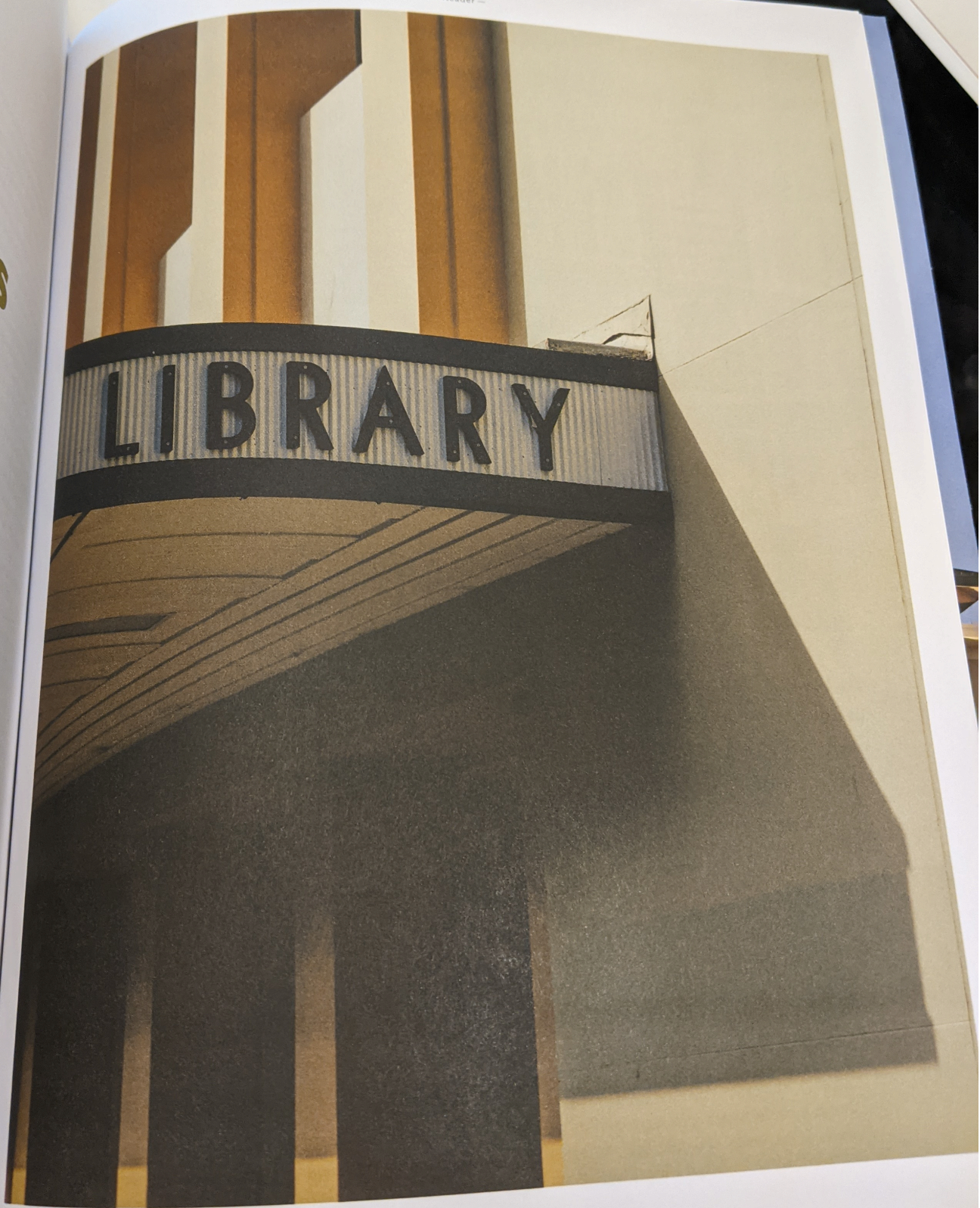
BY MICHELLE ANYA ANJIRBAG

It is not only the books we love that leave an imprint, but also the places we learn to love them in. Libraries have been such a large part of my life that not being able to visit them during a pandemic became the sore spot, the sign that these were not normal times. In searching for a substitute space, I found my way back to some favorite books, and the libraries and studies hidden inside them.

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IN ONE OF HIS books for young readers, Oliver Jeffers writes about “a child of books”; I, however, am as much a child of libraries as I am of what they contain. No matter where in the world I am, libraries smell like home; they carry the perfume not just of old paper and dusty shelves, but also of years of readers, their hopes, dreams, loves, and fears.

I will never forget the feeling of being set loose in my hometown library, the Scranton Memorial Library in Madison, Connecticut. On the weekends, after swimming lessons or soccer games, I would run in, bouncing from the children’s section to the “teen” shelves and then to the rest of the library, scooping up as many books as I could carry—often more than I could realistically manage. I found my people there: librarians who loved sharing authors and titles with me, who never eyed the piles of books on the counter and asked me, “Do you really want to take out all of those?” I was spoiled for choice with libraries in my home state, where there are more public libraries than distinct towns—full of light and tables, play spaces, maker spaces and, of course, the collections. A membership to one Connecticut library is extended to almost all of the libraries in the state. It’s no wonder that one of the first things I have always done when I move somewhere new is to become a member of the local public library.

“As I considered my options in this parched literary landscape, I remembered that it wasn’t only real libraries that I had once fallen in love with.

Each time I have left Connecticut to study in the United Kingdom, I have felt a need to return to my favorite spaces before I’ve left: the unassuming brick building with large windows on all sides of the Essex Public Library; the blended colonial and contemporary building overlooking the town green of the Guilford Free Library; and even UConn’s Homer Babbage Library and its little lobby reading nooks. These were spaces I worked from, or where I grabbed an hour of peace in a busy day. When I return home, I always go back to these places at least once.

In my new home in the United Kingdom, the libraries where I’ve spent my time have been grand, and not so grand—a public library tucked away on top of a shopping center in the middle of Cambridge; the British Library, within which is the King’s Library (thousands of books

collected by King George III) ensconced in glass as a reminder of all we will never know, but should still strive to learn; the Edinburgh Central Library and its children’s library, with the perfect reading nooks for all ages. I’ve hunted books down in the Cambridge University Library, with its maze of doors to the stacks that let you enter, but require you to find another exit; Edinburgh University’s Main Library with its work spaces above the stacks, and beautiful lobby space to just grab a few minutes of people-watching; the National Library of Scotland with its long tables filled with readers; and the Faculty of Education Library at Cambridge with its big glass windows, warm wood interiors, and warmer staff. I’ve loved—I love—them all, and more that I’ve left behind as my life has moved me to different places.

Now we’re in a pandemic, and it is no longer possible to enter these spaces of refuge, knowledge and community. When I first heard that Cambridge University buildings and libraries would be closing in March of the third and final year of my PhD, there were frantic trips to various university and faculty libraries, to try to cover all the bases that might need covering for both myself and my handful of students who had already been sent home from their colleges. And then, nothing. I was a dragon with her hoarded trove of things both owned and borrowed, with only memories of working in front of the big courtyard windows, being lost in the stacks, or browsing old favorite sections of the public library in hopes of a new discovery.

As I considered my options in this parched literary landscape, I remembered that it wasn’t only real libraries that I had once fallen in love with. Embedded in the pages of books I had found on library shelves were libraries and studies belonging to some of my favorite characters—spaces stuffed full of books and riches. And although I couldn’t check out books from these fictional repositories, I could certainly visit them as often as I wished.

I discovered Patricia C. Wrede’s *Enchanted Forest Chronicles* as a child in one of my school libraries, and in it was not only the treasure room of Kazul, King of the Dragons, but also Kazul’s library, filled with everything from ornate scrolls of magic to recipes—this was her real wealth, the hoard that she valued most. Words were a treasure as much as any jewel or magical weapon, and that, perhaps alongside a certain Beast’s library as drawn in a Disney film, filled my dreams for years.

Later, while reading the *Abhorsen* series by Garth Nix, I explored The Great Library of the Clayr, which was locked away in a glacier. I have meditated often on the impermanence of both libraries and glaciers, and on the perfection of an inhabited glacier as a place for a library:

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knowledge there would warm its seekers, while becoming part of the life-giving waters glaciers so jealously guard. Similarly, I yearned for entry into the study in Abhorsen's House, to be granted access to arcane knowledge that can only be read in secret, guarded spaces. These libraries were dangerous, magical, thrilling, and full of wonder.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, I discovered Mr. Bennet's study sanctuary—filled with books, and space that was his—away from the chaos of the rest of the house. I adored the thought of a room of one's own, so often historically afforded to men without a second thought. I thought, yes, to be a Regency-era country gentleman would be an ideal life—if I could have it with all my modern conveniences like electric lights that let me read late into the night and running water for easy cups of tea.

When the world becomes too much, I hide from it in the restricted section of the library at Hogwarts. When I need to feel powerful, I read from the heavy, iron-bound books in the library on Eld Mountain, from Patricia A. McKillip's *The Forgotten Beasts of Eld*. I return to the New York Circulating Material Repository of Polly Shulman's books when I want to check out not books, but items—objects from fairy tales in a secret garden entered through

a set of Tiffany windows (for example). I remember that these fictional places are embodiments of living stories, waiting to launch readers on new adventures, to build new stories of their own without necessarily ever leaving the space of the libraries in the pages of the books.

I remember these spaces as if I have walked their physical halls, brushed my hands across their shelves and stacks. I know their sounds and smells, their corners and cubbyholes. Returning to these spaces, I know that I will be able to visit my physical sanctuaries again. But while I cannot enjoy libraries as my sacred spaces, as my homes away from home on every continent, I can at least return to those encoded in the books I have at hand. With every further turn of the page I go home, and go home, and go home once again. ■

Michelle Anya Anjirbag is a long-time bibliophile and Connecticut transplant completing a PhD at the University of Cambridge. She has worn many different hats in her life, and when not reading or watching bad TV, she can usually be found baking something. More of her writing can be found on michelleanjirbag.com. She's also on Twitter @anjirbaguette and Instagram @michelle_anya.