

A Table in the Stacks

The library in the middle of the campus was as cool as a cave and nearly empty in July. It was in places like this—solemn and welcoming, high and dim and paneled in dark wood and going on in many directions---that Kit's dreams often took place.

John Crowley *The Translator*

It is rare to find a commonplace book in even the finest bookstores or the Web in an electronic version. Instead, to read a published commonplace book, you have to place an order for it and hope that it is still in print or visit a nearby library that may, again if you are lucky, have one or two volumes. However, to read most of the really interesting contemporary and historically important commonplace books or any of the rare and largely unknown treasures of the Classical and Renaissance eras, you really have to go to one of the major university libraries in the United States or Europe.

While I've never been able to visit any of these collections, I have had the good fortune to spend a large portion of my life in several much-loved libraries stretching back to the very early days of my youth. During World War II in the neighborhood where I lived, a small lending library of current fiction and non-fiction books was maintained in a nearby home. Anyone could pay a modest fee to borrow a book for a week or so, making it unnecessary to purchase a copy or wait until one became available at the distant public library. It wasn't so easy to buy books during those wartime years so the little lending library around the block became a popular and much appreciated neighborhood center. Whatever happened to those small private lending libraries? Outside of New York, I suspect they have all but vanished from this country.

About the time I entered Junior High, I began to study at the Beverly Hills Library. It was a small library located in the City Hall of what was then a village, albeit no less fashionable than now. The library was not far from my home and eventually I began biking or taking the bus there several times a week. It was quiet. The tables were hidden from one another in between the open stacks that filled the rooms. The books that I needed then were readily available. But mostly I would go to study and read. It was more than enough to simply be amongst those books for an hour or two in the afternoon.

I recall an older man was always there when I arrived. Now that I think about it, he must have been about the same age as I am now. Perhaps he was a writer for he was always scribbling something diligently on a pad of yellow paper. I recall being impressed by his devotion to his craft and the seriousness of intent. Strangely, after all of these years, I've not forgotten him or that strange blend of paper, leather, and dust that I inhaled each time I stepped foot in the little library on the second floor of the Beverly Hills City Hall.

Since then I have been to many fine libraries: Widener, Bodleian, the libraries at Stanford and Berkeley. I am overwhelmed with gratitude each time I step foot in one of these places. The first time I wandered in to the great reading room of the New York Public Library I had to stop and catch my breath. Before me were row upon row of tables with hundreds of readers peering at their books. I walked down one of the long aisles lined with book shelves glimpsing the titles of reference books most of which I didn't even know existed, crossed over to the other side that housed a comparable collection that I would love to be able to get my hands on. It was hard to leave. While I usually work alone in my study, after being in that room, I realized for perhaps the first time that I could actually read and write in the reading room of the New York Public Library and that if I lived in New York, I would probably go there every day. I can't imagine a better reason to move there.

And yet, in spite of the resources of the New York Public Library and other comparable collections, the Beverly Hills Library, like any first love, will always remain my favorite. It is where I would want to be when it comes time to read my last book. I am sure the card catalogue will still be there. After all, the librarians at the Beverly Hills library would never think of abandoning it for something as racy as a computer.

I met my wife in the library at Stanford. She claims she saw me studying in the main reading room. She recalls I was wearing kaki pants and tweed sport coat, with my feet propped up on the table. She said I looked like an interesting person, an impression that turned out to be woefully off the mark. Be that as it may, I often wonder if we would have ever met if the library had been nothing more than a room full of digital workstations?

Early in my freshman year at Stanford I began working at the Library. In those days the great collection of books in the stacks was not open to the students. At the circulation desk I would receive the student request card, try to recall on what level the book's call number was located, head into the stacks, down the stairs, through the long and dark aisles, until I came to the right shelf, run my hand along the spine of the books, glancing from time to time at the titles, wishing I could stop to read one or two, scanning the Dewey Decimal numbers, collect the book if it was there, head back down the aisle, up the stairs and pass the book on to the staff to be checked out after stealing a glance at its introductory pages.

That sounds pretty tedious. It wasn't. I liked wandering around the shelves, always intrigued by the books that were stored there, the new topics and areas of study that I didn't know existed, stopping every now and then to grab a book to bring upstairs to read until I had to head down again to fetch another. Eventually I became eligible for one of the study tables located on each floor of the stacks. There I could keep my textbooks and other volumes that I had checked out from

the library and do my class work in a setting that is about as favorable as they come. I spent most of my days and many nights at that table in the stacks of the Stanford Library. It was utterly peaceful there, no one else was around and I could come and go whenever I pleased. Since I was in the throes of academic discovery, it was the best of all possible places.

And so I have mixed feelings about the news that Google is embarking on a major program to add the contents of the books in the world's major libraries to its database. The librarian at Stanford, Michael Keller, predicted: "Within two decades, most of the world's knowledge will be digitized and available, one hopes for free reading on the Internet..." Later he went on to dispute the claim that once this is done it will make the "physical books redundant." "I disagree," he said. "In fact, I believe having books in digital form will actually increase the use of the physical books. The digital files will be great for searching and targeting material for study, but many of us prefer the hard copy original in hand for careful reading."¹

Yes, that may be true for his generation and mine, but I am led to wonder if will also be true for the generations raised in the digital world. Why would anyone want to want to go to the library to read a book when it can be read anywhere online? Who will need to go to the library when that happens? I imagine there will still be many good reasons to buy books, from the simple pleasures of having them nearby, to preserving and collecting them and, in my case, making notes in the margins and inside cover. Is there anything more annoying than taking a book out of the library only to find that a previous reader or several have made extensive comments and underlines throughout the text?

¹ *Stanford Alumni Magazine*, Spring 2005.

In the old days, we went to the library to find a book; now it can be ordered online and be at your doorstep the next day. With increasing frequency books can now be read (or listened to) by downloading an electronic version to their computer or portable music player. In the old days we went to the library to read a back issue of a periodical; many are now on the web and can be read with a couple of clicks. Look how easy it is. Go to Google, type the title of the report, scroll down the search results, click on the title shown in the search result page, bingo there it is, print and staple, all in a flash. Now it is articles and reports. Soon it will be books and entire libraries. Even the venerable New York Public Library has placed online its "collection of prints, maps, posters, photographs, illuminated manuscripts, sheet-music covers, dust jackets, menus and cigarette cards."² Is this how Google and the other library digitizers are going to empty out the great reading rooms of the world?

In a recent essay *The New Yorker's* film critic, David Denby, writes about Susan Sontag's devotion to the cinema. He refers to her essay, *A Century of Cinema*, that in light of Denby's praise, I wanted to read. Naturally I began Googling it. No luck. The complete article, originally published in *Frankfurter Rundschau* in 1995, did not show up on any of Google's citations, although it was referred to several times. Denby also said that a shorter version had been reprinted in the *New York Times*. So I did a search on the *Times'* website. It duly informed me that my search for *Century of Cinema* by Susan Sontag returned 0 results in all fields.

It was clear what I had to do. I had to get on the bus, go down to the library, track down the 1995, issue of *Franfurter Rundschau* and read the original article itself in the libraries bound volume of the journal. Fortunately, I still knew how to do that. In a word, far from everything is on the web. And it is hard to imagine that all the print materials, the books, the journals, the documents in all the libraries scattered

² *New York Times* March 03, 2005.

throughout the world will ever be digitized. There will always be a goodly sum of materials that will never find their way to the Web.

Even if they do, isn't the central issue the benefits of using print materials for detailed research and analysis, behaviors that are not readily carried out online, at least in my experience? Maybe the younger generation, raised on computers in a way I was not, is able to do so. But I am dubious and am growing increasingly concerned that students are simply not willing or able to conduct the kind of comprehensive literature search and subsequent analysis that I was taught to carry out with books that I found in the library.

The other day I received word of an experiment conducted by a graduate student that virtually replicated one I had done several years ago. I wanted to find out if my study was discussed or even referenced by the student. In due course, I received a pre-publication copy of his study from a colleague over the Internet, to be sure. I searched in vain for any mention of my study or its citation in the set of references. My study has been widely cited and is barely 12 years "old." Surely it would appear in even a casual bibliographic search of the topic. Yes, this is a single example but the claim that students are getting lazy about their research, especially bibliographic research, is one I often hear expressed by academic colleagues and professional librarians.

Is anyone going to the library now? To find out I went over to the Portland State University library the other day. I walked in the main entry and was immediately confronted by a room full of computers, with a student working at each console and a long line of other students waiting for an opening. I counted about 50 workstations and as I walked up and down row upon row of workstations. I failed to see a single person reading a book. Some were taking notes from a website, others were writing text, while still others were composing e-mails. I went upstairs

and observed much the same at about a dozen round tables each with five radiating computer stations, fully occupied with students peering at the screen.

As far as I could tell, no one was reading from a book. Where were the books, anyway? What a barren place I thought. Off to the side there were a few scattered readers. Most of them were taking notes from textbooks not anything from the library collection. However, I did see a fair number of students listening intently to their iPods and talking enthusiastically on their cell phones.



Up to the third, fourth and fifth floor with progressively fewer students but almost without exception each one working away on their laptops. These floors were largely devoted to the library's open stacks, aisle after aisle of book shelves crammed full of books, journals, and monographs. I walked down the central aisle of each floor, glancing to my left and then to my right and I did not see a single individual browsing through these books. I did see a few library personal returning books to the shelves. That was reassuring. And there were a small number of students reading at the largely empty tables on the perimeter of each floor, but not one by a pile of books that they had collected from the stacks or checked out from

the library. So many books, so many unopened, untouched books, so few, if any, readers, year after year.

Still more and more books are being printed each year. The number of library books in circulation is not growing in tandem as most librarians report that their circulation figures are holding steady or decreasing. In contrast, electronic usage has increased significantly with a dramatic raise in “hits” to library electronic databases. Another result of the digital revolution is the allocation of library funds with a major shift away from books to electronic resources. As a case in point, in 1998 the library at the University of Texas in Austin spent roughly 5% percent of its annual materials budget on electronic resources and 30% on monographs. In only three years, those allocations have been reversed so that in 2001 20% was spent on electronic materials and only 15% on monographs.³ Virtually every library in this country reports comparable trends.

Library response to their increasingly serious book storage problem is another sign of their transformation by the digital age. New library designs, as well as renovations of older ones, call for storing books in buildings apart from the library computer centers. A major renovation at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities library removed the books from the stacks and relocated them to the basement or elsewhere on the campus to provide space for computer labs and a digital media center. The University of Texas recently moved all of its 90,000-volume collection from the main library to other areas of the campus to open up the area for a “24 hour electronic information commons.” This increasing widespread trend will make it more and more difficult to actually obtain printed volumes. One member of Marquette University’s Library Planning Committee commented:⁴ “Despite everyone’s best efforts, it will signal to the students that books and journals are old-

³ *The Library Journal*, September 1, 2001.

⁴ *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 12, 2002.

fashioned, and that computers and the World Wide Web and e-learning are modern and up-to-date.”

It seems inevitable that libraries will cease to be places where we go to find the books we would like to read, or to search for others we would like to review. Indeed, they will no longer be there. The new bookless libraries will cease to be “a place in which literary and artistic materials such as books, periodicals, newspapers, pamphlets, prints, records, and tapes, are kept for reading, reference or lending.⁵” Nor will they be centers of book collections where students and faculty go because of the sheer pleasure of being there, to inhale the old paper and the leather bindings, or to run into an old friend or one might like to befriend. Instead, they will become buildings full of computers, media centers, and other electronic gadgetry. Those who are there will devote themselves to database searches, reading text on small rectangular screens, and preparing their next PowerPoint presentation.

What will be gained and lost by the digital transformation of libraries? When I was studying at my table in the stacks during undergraduate days, every once in a while, I’d take a little “study break” to wander up and down the aisles to check the titles of the books that caught my eye. This kind of exploration will no longer be possible in the new bookless library. There will no discovery of that unknown book that you subsequently find indispensable. Thomas Benton has recently described the importance of such moments in the process of doing research.

I remember one time I was writing about Edgar Allan Poe and phrenology when I found a box of ephemera—not catalogued in any detail—that included a pamphlet for a book by an early psychologist who analyzed Poe on the basis of daguerreotypes of the poet. I

⁵ *New American Collegiate Dictionary*, 2nd Edition. Houghton Mifflin

*quickly found the book in another area of the same library, and discovered a sequence of pages that purported to show that Poe was suffering from a disorder that affected only one hemisphere of his brain and that revealed itself in the asymmetry of his face...that accidental discovery—the centerpiece of a subsequent article—would never have been made but for the serendipity and convenience of the stacks.*⁶

How often I recall a similar experience in my own research in the library. I would go in search of a particular bound volume of a journal. Accidentally I'd pick out the wrong volume and begin scanning the pages only to discover another article, perhaps even more important than the one I was searching for and that, in turn, led me on a path of further inquiry that would never had occurred if I had searched for the article online. Who has not had the pleasure of discovering such an article by thumbing through the journals of their discipline?

To be sure searching on line can be a rich source of information and unexpected sources do appear sometimes. But the search is a targeted one, a rather narrow one. You are looking for a particular document and you find it or something close. As a friend wrote to me in describing her own online experiences: "There is no room in that equation for the serendipitous discovery. When all goes well, you find what you are looking for. But sometimes what you need to find is what you are not looking for."

A few months ago I went back to the library to try to locate the date of an article in *The New Yorker* that I had copied many years ago. Fortunately, the bound volumes of the magazine that has been published week after week since 1925 were still on the shelves in the stacks. I thought for more than a moment about the remarkable treasures contained within those pages. And then I wondered what will

⁶ Thomas H. Benton, *Stacks' Appeal*. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 18, 2005.

become of all those volumes in the new bookless library? I do know that every page of every issue of the *Magazine* from February 1925 through April 2007 is now available on a portable hard drive. I guess that will settle the matter--no more going to the library; instead load the hard drive and start reading. However, I also know that will never provide the pleasure of thumbing through those well-worn, slightly yellowing pages of the *Magazine* found on the shelves of the libraries of yesteryear.

The only places where the traditional library seems alive are the private subscription or lending libraries, not unlike the little neighborhood lending library where my mother worked for a while during World War II. Most of these venerable institutions are located in the United Kingdom. However, one of the most notable is The Society Library in New York City, which to my mind remains what an ideal library might be if one could create one from scratch. Part club, part collection of books, part haven for writers and readers since 1754, David Halberstam writes that the Society Library is really more of a "sanctuary than a library."⁷

According Halberstam, the library has become a place for writers to gather and work by themselves without being entirely by themselves. He says: "I don't necessarily talk to them and they don't necessarily talk to me, but for the moment I feel a little less alone." Wendy Wasserstein said she has done much of her writing there. "The Society Library is an almost perfect place to work: it is pleasant, it is quiet, it has a surprising number of books that you may want and it is genteel. Besides the neighborhood is filled with a number of good places for a late lunch..." What writer or reader has not dreamed that there was such an old fashioned library in their neighborhood?

⁷ *The New York Times*, December 19, 1997.

I have always wanted to be able to join a library club like the New York Society Library. To the best of my knowledge there are only a few of its kind in this country, none of which are located in the town where I live. A private reading/discussion club has always been my model of a third place—quiet rooms to read, others to write, and still others for good conversation. That would be a library at its best. Warm wood-paneled walls of bookcases, row after row of richly-bound volumes, with their “intoxicating mixture of vellum, paper and dust⁸”—this is the library of my youth, the library that is one by one fading away, overcome by the digital revolution. One wonders if it will also carry away respect for the culture of serious scholarship that it sustains.

One night recently I went to the university library again hoping to find some recent journal articles that I couldn't locate on the Web. I arrived about 7 pm. The place seemed empty. I went down to the basement to locate the first journal. I had been misinformed. The library didn't have it. Most of the lights were out. It seemed very dark. I thought there must have been a power outage or an electrical problem. I hiked up to the fifth floor to find the next journal. The volume I wanted was missing. The lights were out up there, as well. Down to the second floor for the last one. It wasn't on the shelf either. But I found another with an interesting report. Down to the first floor to copy it. No. The copy room was closed. Eventually I realized that the entire library was closed. It had been closed all the while I was there. They were about to lock up the place. How delightful, I thought, to be locked up in the library with all those books and journals all night.

⁸ Ben Macintyre, Paradise is Paper, Vellum and Dust. *London Times Online*, December 18, 2004.