

Chapter One

In chapter one, Orlean describes her memories of visiting the local public library as a child, with her mother. She notes that “[t]he library might be the first place I was ever given autonomy,” adding, “in the library I could have anything I wanted.” As an older child and teen, Orlean walked to the library by herself, often, though her mother still accompanied her there sometimes. Then, during and for some years after college, Orlean ceased visiting the library, preferring to buy books, until her son had a school assignment that brought her back to the library.

--Did you visit the library as a child? With whom?

--Did you feel a sense of autonomy or agency while there, or were your visits more structured? Were there other feelings you associated with the library?

--Were there limits to what you could borrow? Who set those limits? Why?

--Did you continue using libraries throughout your childhood and adolescence, or did you go through a period where you used the library less? Why?

“On a library bookshelf, thought progresses in a way that is logical but also dumbfounding, mysterious, irresistible.” Orlean wrote this specifically of browsing the nonfiction section, which is arranged first by subject according to the Dewey Decimal System (at Memorial Hall and in the library she describes) and then by author.

--What is your experience of navigating the Dewey Decimal System? Do you feel familiar with it? Or do you find it inscrutable?

Orlean is surprised to learn that there was a large fire at the Central Branch of the Los Angeles Library. The fire occurred on April 29, 1986—the same day as the disaster at Chernobyl started making news in the U.S. The nuclear disaster garnered far more coverage than the fire, despite the fact that it was the country’s largest library fire.

--Were you aware that there had been an enormous fire at the Central Branch of the Los Angeles Library? If so, did you know at the time or find out later? If you learned much later, as did the author, were you surprised that it hadn’t garnered more press?

Chapter Two

In Chapter Two, Orlean describes the fire in vivid detail, though she focuses mainly on the science of the fire and the physical conditions of the building that fostered the flames. She also spends a little time describing the bewilderment of the firefighters who had never faced such a conflagration before, as well as the tears and shock of many of the librarians watching from the street.

--How did you feel reading or listening to the description of the burning library? Were any parts more upsetting to you than others? Why?

Chapter Three

Orlean writes that “library fires in the United States are almost always what are known in fire terminology as ‘incendiary’—namely, a fire caused by human intervention. Most are the result of casual vandalism that gets out of hand.”

--Does this fact surprise you? Why or why not?

--Why might someone want to set fire to a library?

Chapter Four

Orlean gives some information on arson suspect Harry Peak’s family and education, noting that “Harry stayed and got his [high school] diploma. He was the first one in the family to do so,” and that they considered him to have a bright and promising future as a result of this.

There were, perhaps, more dark sides than bright options for Peak. He experienced trauma: “When he was a teenager, he smoked marijuana with a counselor at summer camp, and then the counselor molested him. According to his sisters, the assault devastated him, and afterward, he tried to commit suicide several times.” Peak also had a “girlfriend who miscarried their twins” in his hometown, but the relationship didn’t last.

As for his character, Orlean writes that Peak was kind but “so flaky that he drove everyone crazy” and “got jobs and lost them almost as fast.” While he wanted desperately to become an actor, he never achieved fame on the screen.

--What impressions of Peak do you get from reading Orlean’s description of him in this chapter? What words might you use to describe him?

--The chapter ends with the reminder that Peak was accused of setting the LA Central Library fire. Based on his description in this chapter, do you think he is a likely or unlikely suspect? Or do you feel you don’t know enough about him to have an opinion on the likelihood of his involvement with this crime? Why?

Chapter Five

“Burning a book was incredibly hard for me to do. Actually, doing it was a breeze, but preparing to do it was challenging. The problem was that I have never been able to do harm to a book... I can’t throw a book in the trash, no matter how hard I try... Once words and thoughts are poured into them, books are no longer just paper and ink and glue: They take on a kind of human vitality.”

--How do you think you would feel if you tried to burn a book? If you have burned a book, why did you do it and how did you feel about it?

--How do you feel about recycling or throwing away books? Why?

--For Orlean, books seem almost human, or to have a soul. Do you share this feeling? Why or why not? What do books—not specific ones, but books as physical objects, as ideas—mean to you? Why?

Chapter Six

“It seems simple to define what a library is—namely, it is a storeroom of books. But the more time I spent at Central, the more I realized that a library is an intricate machine, a contraption of whirring gears.”

--How would you define a (public) library? What does it mean to you?

The Atlanta library system was “one of the last library systems in the South to integrate—until 1959, it served only white patrons... and racial issues continued to dog the library for decades.”

--Libraries in the U.S. today tend to pride themselves on serving and welcoming everyone, but this has not always been, and is still not always, the case. Does this history (and present) surprise you? Why or why not?

Orlean also describes a scandal in Atlanta in the early 2000s where seven white librarians were demoted in favor of African American librarians to increase staff diversity. While this approach resulted in a lawsuit and large settlement, there is still very little diversity among librarians across the U.S.: According to an article from the May/June 2017 issue of *Public Libraries Online*, a 2014 study by the American Library Association found “87.1 percent of librarians identify as white and 81.0 percent identify as female.”

--Why do you think this is? What positive actions—excluding illegal demotions or firings such as those in Atlanta—might be taken to change this situation?

--If you have never considered pursuing a career as a librarian, why not? Are there factors (race, money, etc.) that have kept you from considering it beyond a lack of interest in the job? Might these factors be some of the ones that contribute to the lack of diversity among librarians?

Los Angeles City Librarian Szabo “had developed a reputation in the library world as being one of the few directors who was figuring out the transition from pre-Internet to omnipresent-Internet, and who was successfully rigging the library to sail into the future not as a gigantic, groaning, fusty pile of books, but as a sleek ship of information and imagination.”

--Assuming you used libraries before the Internet, how do you feel the Internet has changed libraries? Do you think these changes are better, worse, or just different? If you weren't a library-user in pre-Internet days, how might you imagine the Internet changed libraries?

--What do you see as the relationship between libraries and the Internet? If you don't see a relationship between the two, why not?

“The publicness of the public library is an increasingly rare commodity. It becomes harder all the time to think of places that welcome everyone and don’t charge any money for that warm embrace.”

--Do you agree or disagree with the above statement? If you disagree, what similar spaces can you think of?

--What makes you feel welcome at the library? What makes you feel unwelcome at the library?

Chapter Seven

“The Central Library staff came to work, but they weren’t sure what ‘work’ meant in a library that was now closed to the public and empty of books.”

--Covid has also caused many libraries to close to the public all at once. What services did Memorial Hall Library offer while closed that you took advantage of? If you used none, why not? What services would you have liked to see while closed?

Chapter Eight

“In Senegal, the polite expression for saying someone died is to say his or her library has burned.”

--Orlean discusses her interpretation of the above statement. What does it bring to mind for you? How might an individual life be like a library?

Chapter Nine

“It is almost as if the flamboyance of the Nazi *Feuerspruche* confirmed that burning books was an easy way to land a vicious blow on a community, and the idea was adopted by other repressive regimes.”

--Why or how does burning a community’s books hurt that community? How would you feel if all or most of the books in your town were burned for any reason?

“Books are a sort of cultural DNA, the code for who, as a society, we are, and what we know... Destroying those books is a way of saying that the culture itself no longer exists; its history has disappeared; the continuity between its past and its future is ruptured.”

--Do you think the advent of digital or electronic books (and other cultural media) has changed or reduced the power of burning physical books? If yes, how so, and if not, why not?

Chapter Ten

In this brief chapter, Orlean describes a few interactions between one of the circulation clerks and various patrons.

--Does this match with your idea of what it would be like to work at the circulation desk? Did anything surprise you? If so, what? What qualities do you think are most important to working at the circulation desk? What about the reference desk or in the teen or children's room?

Chapter Eleven

Orlean notes that, in terms of the city budget, "[t]he money to restock the library [after the fire] simply didn't exist." She then describes the collaboration of many people from different spheres to engage in a library fundraising campaign called "Save the Books." These included an oil company executive whose headquarters was nearby, a local Pentecostal preacher, and author Ray Bradbury--as well as a variety of contributors including celebrities, schoolkids, the Getty Museum, and a bunch of regular people.

--Did the lack of city funding for replacement books surprise you? Why or why not?

--Why do you think so many people were willing to contribute to the "Save the Books" campaign, either by organizing or contributing?

Chapter Twelve

A major early library in Los Angeles was opened in January 1873. At that time, the building bordered "an outdoor arena where weekly slave-labor auctions were held" at which "white people [bought] Native American children as 'apprentices' and... 'bid' on Native Americans who were declared vagrant." In addition to its location in a neighborhood that would likely not have been appealing to Native Americans, the cost to join the library was prohibitive to all but the wealthy, Orlean notes, and women were prohibited from the main collection, limited to a separate reading room. Children were also excluded.

--Why do you think the library was so exclusive? Why not take an approach of charging more people less money to join?

--Children's services are an integral part of libraries today. Does it surprise you that children were initially barred not only from this library, but from others as well? Why or why not?

"When [Carnegie] reached middle age, he decided to commit the last third of his life to giving away his money. The disappointment of not being able to afford the local library had stuck with him, and he chose libraries as one of the main beneficiaries of his philanthropy. He offered large grants to libraries in communities that would commit to supporting them with tax revenues."

--Why do you think Carnegie required a commitment of tax revenues to the library for towns to receive his grants? What do you think of this stipulation?

--If you had a fortune to give away, what causes would be your main beneficiaries? What might you require of the beneficiaries to qualify? Why?

Chapter Thirteen

“He hired a blacksmith to make a branding iron in the shape of a skull and crossbones—the poison warning symbol—and used it to brand the frontispiece of the offending [pseudoscience] books. He also created warning cards to insert in the questionable books.” (The cards were bookmarks where librarians could list better books on the topic.)

--What do you think of this strategy? Why? Why do you think this is not common practice in libraries?

--How would you feel if a book you were interested in borrowing had the poison brand inside? Would you also look at the other recommended titles on the bookmark? Why or why not?

--Do you think libraries have an obligation to include books that are popular but deemed inaccurate or fraudulent by experts in the fields of their subjects? Why or why not?

Chapter Fourteen

Orlean describes disorganization as “a cardinal sin in a library, where the commitment to findability is absolute.”

--What are your experiences with finding items in libraries? Are there things you would change to make items easier to find? If so, what?

--If you have a collection of books (or other items) at home, how do you arrange them? Why? Why might this type of system not work on the much larger scale of a public library? Or why would it work well in a public library?

Chapter Fifteen

“A month after the fire, a woman named Melissa Kim called the tip line and said that her brother’s roommate looked just like the man in the composite sketch. She also said that the roommate, Harry Peak, told her brother that he had been at the library at the time of the fire. She said Harry had recently applied for a job at the Santa Monica Fire Department but had failed the exam.”

--If you had received this tip, would you have considered it probable or improbable, useful or not? Why? What about when added to the information that he cut his hair and mustache shortly after the fire and claimed he couldn’t remember if he’d cut his hair lately? And the fact that he claimed to have smelled smoke and that people were yelling “fire” when he left the library, neither of which anyone else observed?

Chapter Sixteen

“A craze for self-improvement and reinvention thrived in this fresh new place conjured out of the scrubby desert. The library was part of that craze, since it offered the tools for fashioning a new self.”

--Do you see libraries as a place of potential for self-improvement? Why or why not?

--Have you turned to a library for self-improvement? Or for education outside of an academic context? What were you looking to improve or learn? Were you successful? Why did you turn to the library? If you have not used libraries in this way, why not?

Chapter Seventeen

This is a brief chapter that details an afternoon in the Central Library's Literacy Center, partly with a class of adults learning English, partly with a tutor for people who drop in with language questions.

--What did you find interesting about this chapter? About the variety of people using these services and the questions they asked?

--Have you ever learned another language? Would you have found/did you find services like these useful?

Chapter Eighteen

When the Goodhue-designed Central Library first opened—the first dedicated public library building in Los Angeles—Orlean writes that “[t]here was an air of elation, as if the library were not just a new municipal property but also a civic achievement, a communal wish that actually materialized.”

--How do public libraries represent their communities? What would you think of a town without a public library? What about towns without dedicated library buildings—perhaps that share space with a town hall or other department?

Reference by phone—a new innovation in the 1930s—was so popular for people working crosswords that the city librarian at the time forbade staff from answering those questions.

--Do you think there are some questions, or types of questions, that public librarians should not answer or be expected to answer? Why or why not?

This chapter includes a list of questions that the Reference Department at LA's Central Library received in 1937. It starts with “What Romeo looked like” and ends with “Whether immortality can be perceived in the iris of the eye.”

--Did these questions surprise you? Why or why not?

--How (if at all) do the descriptions of reference services in this chapter change your concept of what reference librarians can offer and what reference services comprise?

Chapter Nineteen

This chapter mostly focuses on the teen department at LA's Central Library, including the unofficial role of teen room librarians as truant officers and the description of a program about healthy relationships.

--If you had teen library services available to you as a teenager, did you take advantage of them? Why or why not? If you didn't have them, do you wish you had? Why or why not?

--Did the types of teen services and supports offered surprise you? Why or why not?

Chapter Twenty

While the Central Library in Los Angeles was a building of architectural interest and importance, it was not practical for staff or patrons. Orlean notes that, before the fire, coffeemakers used too much power for the building's weak wiring, the stacks both leaked and were underlit because stronger bulbs were also too much of a strain on the building's wiring, there was no air conditioning and the heat often ran in summer, resulting in interior temperatures in the 80s and 90s, and the boiler regularly needed to be doused in water to prevent its demise.

--Before the fire, would you have advocated to save the Central Library building or to replace it with a new one? Why?

--Do you think you would have advocated differently if you were working there in 90-degree heat in summer or pouring water on a faulty boiler in winter? Why?

--Do you think the fire would have changed your opinion of replacing or renovating the building? Why?

During the 1960s, as Los Angeles was experiencing white resistance to the Civil Rights movement, "[e]ven the library became an arena where racial hostilities played out," with librarians finding offensive, anti-Black bookmarks randomly tucked into books on the shelves.

--What feelings does this invoke for you?

--Starting her sentence with "even" ("Even libraries became an arena...") implies that libraries might be considered to be generally separate from the events of the wider world. Does that assessment resonate with you or seem unrealistic?

Chapter Twenty-One

In this chapter, Orlean details the many varying accounts Harry Peak gave to friends, family, and investigators about his activities on the morning of the library fire. The arson team made a temporary arrest based on six of eight library staff's identification of Harry's driver's license photo and the fact that he mentioned a detail—knocking over and helping up an elderly lady—that he couldn't have known if he hadn't been there, as it had not been covered in the news.

--If you were on the arson team and had access to the information in this chapter, would you have tried to arrest Harry Peak? Why or why not?

--Do you think he was guilty of setting the library on fire? If yes, do you think it was intentional or compulsive or accidental? If no, why not?

Chapter Twenty-Two

This brief chapter follows a busy Monday morning at the Central Library's InfoNow Department. They receive questions about grammar, etiquette, obituaries, celebrities, and—of course—books.

--Does the variety of questions surprise you? What about the presence of repeat callers?

--Why do you think people call with questions that are not strictly library-related?

--Where do you most commonly turn for answers to questions? Why? What about when you can't find answers in your typical sources?

Chapter Twenty-Three

This brief chapter outlines further difficulties of working in an aging but architecturally and historically important building.

--What do you think should be the balance between historic preservation and current usability? How do you think working in such a building might affect your opinion? What if it was a building you had designed or had fond memories of?

Chapter Twenty-Four

Orlean, before discussing the business at Central Library's Computer Center, notes that "[l]ibraries saw the Internet coming, and they extended a hand."

--What do you see as the role of the Internet and computers in libraries? Do you see them in conflict or as a natural pairing? Do you think libraries should be doing more with new technology? Less?

Orlean quotes the head of library security as saying "'Here's the thing about library security... Library users are eighty percent male, and librarians are eighty percent female, so that's something to keep in mind.'"

--What do you make of this?

"Every problem that society has, the library has, too, because the boundary between society and the library is porous... Often, at the library, society's problems are magnified," Orlean writes.

--Given that libraries are open to everyone, including people defined as "problematic" by society's standards, what do you think is the role of libraries in managing social problems within the building?

Forty-six members of the LAPD work as library security, paid by the library, as of the book's publication in 2018.

--Given contemporary discussions around race and policing, what do you think is the role of police in the library, if any? Why?

--If police should not handle routine security and rules enforcement, who is better suited to the job?

--Would the presence of security officers make you feel more or less comfortable in a library? Why?

One of the security guards, having done research on Sri Lanka at the library, plans to move there after his retirement.

--Would you move across the world based only on research? Why or why not?

Chapter Twenty-Five

The LA City Council decided it wouldn't look good to accept money from tobacco giant Philip Morris to help finance the Central Library's expansion and renovation.

--Would you have made the same choice, if you were on City Council, or would you also have looked for other ways to raise or find the money?

Chapter Twenty-Six

Harry Peak sued the City of Los Angeles a couple of years after the fire, mostly on the grounds of slander and mistreatment during his arrest. Orlean was surprised at this turn of events because Peak "simply didn't seem like the sort of person with the resolve to sue the city." She speculates that one of the lawyers Peak knew and sometimes ran errands for may have encouraged that suit. In response, the city decided to pursue Peak in civil court, which has less rigorous standards than criminal court.

--Why do you think Peak decided to bring a suit against the city?

--What do you think of the city's response of a counter-suit?

Chapter Twenty-Seven

"After two years of being frozen, the books were ready to be thawed, dried, fumigated, sorted, cleaned, repaired, or rebound," Orlean writes. She briefly describes the intense, aerospace-grade equipment used to dry the books, as well as the criteria for determining whether they could be reshelfed, repaired and reshelfed, or whether they had to be discarded.

--What did you think about the book recovery process? Were you surprised at its difficulty?

--Have you ever tried to dry a wet book or repair a broken or damaged book? What were your experiences?

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“There are a lot of surprising things in the library; a lot of things you don’t think of when you try to imagine all of what a library might contain.”

--What surprising things have you encountered in libraries?

“Los Angeles has more working musicians than any city in the United States. It also has one of the few libraries in the country that loans out musical scores. The coexistence of these facts doesn’t seem like an accident.”

--Have you encountered community-specific collections at libraries? If so, what were they?

--Are there local-interest collections that you think would be particularly appropriate to Andover? If so, what and why?

Chapter Twenty-Nine

“As hard as I tried, I couldn’t completely convince myself that Harry [Peak] set the fire,” Orlean writes, describing the evidence that she finds compelling and the clues that don’t add up.

--Are you convinced it was Peak? Why or why not?

“The first scientifically based report on how to examine fires was published in 1992, six years after the fire at Central Library,” Orlean notes, adding that this report also challenged the notion of negative corpus—that is, if no cause can be determined, the fire must be arson, comparing it to assuming a person was murdered if no natural cause can be found, even if no evidence indicates foul play. Furthermore, “Central Library had bad ventilation and ramshackle floor fans and sizzling light sockets and an extremely high ‘fire load,’ which is the measure of flammable contents per square foot.”

--Are you convinced the library fire was arson at all? Why or why not?

Chapter Thirty

Orlean talks to the then-head librarian at Central, Eva Mitnick, who “sees libraries as information and knowledge centers rather than simply as storehouses of material. She is one of a large cohort of library people who believe that libraries will remain essential to their communities.”

--How does this match with your idea of libraries? How is it different?

--What do you see as the future of libraries? How, if at all, has the pandemic affected this?

“Libraries are old fashioned, but they are growing more popular with people under thirty. The younger generation uses libraries in greater numbers than older Americans do,” according to Orlean.

--Does this surprise you? Does it reflect the people you typically see at the library? If not, why do you think that is?

At the end of this chapter, focused on the future of libraries, Orlean concludes, “Perhaps in the future, OverDrive will be where our books will come from, and libraries will become something more like our town squares, a place that is home when you aren’t at home.”

--What do you think the future holds for libraries? Do you think the pandemic will affect the future role of libraries as it has affected their present service capacities? Or do you think, once the pandemic is history, libraries will return to business as it was before?

Chapter Thirty-One

In 1991, five years after the fire, the restored and expanded Central Library was nearly ready to reopen. The civil case against Harry Peak, and his suit against the city, were also still in limbo. By October of 1991, however, the city agreed to settle with a gravely ill Peak, awarding him \$35,000 (instead of the \$15 million Peak had sought). Peak died in April of 1993, of complications due to AIDS.

--What do you think of the city’s settlement with Peak?

--How do you feel about the impossibility of closing the library fire case?

Chapter Thirty-Two

Orleans posits that the act of collecting books in a library “declares that all these stories matter, and so does every effort to create something that connects us to one another, and to our past and to what is still to come.” She also remarks that “[a]ll the things that are wrong in the world seem conquered by a library’s unspoken promise: Here I am, please tell me your story; here is my story, please listen.”

--What does the act of collecting books for use by the public signify to you?

--What do you see as the library’s unspoken promise?