

When I arrived to the United States at age 14, the concept of a public library was a novelty. In my country, Peru, we didn't really have them. Yes, the capital had the "Biblioteca Nacional," which carried historical documents and encyclopedias, but it wasn't easily accessible and it didn't have a lending system. All the books had to be read there. It was only a place for academics doing heavy historical research. My school in Lima had a tiny library—a little room with only few books—but I absolutely loved it. That's where I discovered *Tin Tin* and *Asterix*. And my father got us books wherever he could find them.

In most Latin American countries books are scarce and expensive and my father had one of the biggest libraries I had ever seen. We had very few toys but we enjoyed a good collection of Greek and Roman mythology. By every account, my sister and I had more exposure to books than most people in my country. Even in schools, students didn't really read much. I was taught spelling and grammatical rules. Period. (Pun intended!) That was it. No creative writing. No reading the classics. I do remember memorizing a few 17<sup>th</sup> century Spanish poems. I had no idea what they meant but I had a great short term memory, and I'm pretty sure I aced those tests.

The first public library I visited in the US was my neighborhood library in Boston. Walking into it was as surreal experience. An entire building full of books and quiet spaces to read and study? An entire building just for my neighborhood? What in the world is this magical thing? As a new immigrant who was just learning English and enduring her first New England winter, I experienced a flurry of feelings every single day. The library was a respite from all that. It was a warm, safe space that slowed down my thoughts and gave me some much needed quiet time. After finishing my math homework and trying to get through a few pages of my assigned book for English class, I would spend hours going through the art books in the library's shelves. A new world opened up for me—a new world, which started me on the path of the arts as a career.

When it was time to apply to colleges my family had no idea what the process was like. We didn't even know the names of the colleges in our region or the basic information about college life in the US. In my old country, you take an exam and if you pass it you're in. So my sister and I went to the library. There we learned what schools seemed like a good fit for us and how to apply. The library became our guide for the basic life steps that a teenager must face. The library became our lifesaver.

Now that I have two little kids, I find that I'm still not completely used to the concept of a public library. I want to buy every book that my kids are interested in, maybe because books were so scarce when I was little. My husband has to remind me that we can get many of the books I want to buy at our library. Visiting the Montclair library with my two little boys has become a sweet, wonderful experience. It is clear in my mind how magical and unique public libraries are because I've experienced a world where they don't exist. We are so privileged to have them. I love my library.

Carla Gutierrez is a documentary film editor and a mother of two energetic boys. She came to the United States from Peru in 1990.

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