

Jorge Luis Borges said “I have always imagined that Paradise will be a kind of Library”. Libraries of every kind have changed in form and function in recent years, but after twenty five years as a librarian, I still recognize libraries as miraculous.

I felt this magical appeal of libraries early. The memory of the excitement of bicycling at twelve into Poughkeepsie’ Adriance Memorial Library to walk through its glass floored book stacks and the intellectual clarity and serenity of my university’s book lined leather chaired reference room were determinant in a career changing decision to pursue my graduate degree in library science.

Perhaps it is the academic image, or one like it, that Borges had in mind when he imagined his library paradise. When I began my own library studies, I too had thought to find work in one of the great academic or research libraries. However, in time I discovered that the reality of public libraries, such as the one we find ourselves in now, was even more wondrous than an exclusive paradise or even a *Book of Imaginary Beings*.

The Public Library, like jazz perhaps —played elsewhere in the world and maybe well, but still— is in essence a uniquely American institution and it is truly remarkable. Born in mid-nineteenth century New England from lending or subscription libraries that charged members a subscription fee —a means of reader economy first set up by Benjamin Franklin— the first “Free” public libraries were frequently established by local philanthropists who made initial gifts of land and/or building funds. Town governments then appropriated operating monies with the purpose of providing free lifelong educational opportunities and establishing an informed citizenry with access to a range of balanced information —the essential requirement of a functional democracy or republic.

The continuing commitment to support free information and unstructured educational opportunity in the form of public libraries whose doors open to all is remarkable within world history. That this nation continues that commitment amongst so many competing demands is no less remarkable.

Public libraries have fulfilled this original core mission based in books since the nineteenth century. Since then it has expanded to provide Children’s Services (a great Boston Public Library innovation) and to meet the recreational needs of the entire population. The printed word is augmented by the electronic word, the book can be heard on CD or downloaded in audio format from the Internet, DVD’s and video films (based in written screenplays) and lyrical music are all public library collection basics.

In a still greater transformation, public libraries are no longer silent. The spoken word is heard at reference desks, book stack reader’s advisory, summer reading programs, lectures, music programs, film series and in community discourse in meeting rooms.

Library staff, paid at least as well as writers, are not only keepers and selectors of collections, but skilled in fielding the incredible array of needs that a diverse public brings to the library hourly. They are the authors of the ever fascinating daily public library story.

Montclair is fortunate to have a gifted array of library staff authors writing the community's tale. They work in facilities and security, in the Business Office and in Information, in Collections and Technology, in Young Adults and with Children, in an Adult School Department and Circulation, in a modern glass structure and in a Carnegie jewel.

To conclude, that while as a public library director I cannot say that I find every day to be a library paradise, and sometimes wonder whether the book of the *Divine Comedy* I find myself in is indeed *Paradise*, I can assure you that no day is ever dull or without the highest value on earth or in heaven.

David Hinkley, Director of the Montclair Public Library

Tax-deductible donations to the Montclair Public Library Foundation's annual fund drive, now underway, may be made to the Foundation at montclairplf.org or by mail to 50 South Fullerton Avenue, Montclair, N.J., 07042.