

A Love Letter to Libraries, Long Overdue

The New York Times sent photographers to seven states to document the thrum and buzz in buildings once known for silence.

By [Elisabeth Egan](#) and Erica Ackerberg; Feb. 14, 2023

Step into a public library and you know what to expect.

First, there's the smell: a paper bouquet of nothing and everything, including notes of vanilla, sawdust, wet coats, rubber soles and school. Then there are the spines lined up like soldiers, snug in plastic jackets. There are the shelves — metal, wood, sturdy as trees — stretching in every direction.



At the Northtown branch of the Chicago Public Library, a young reader curled up with a picture book. Credit Todd Heisler/The New York Times

There are the rolling step stools. The windowsill ferns. The free bookmarks. The bulletin board papered with fliers advertising firewood, a 10-speed bike, free kittens, CPR class.

There are the sturdy armchairs, the picked-over magazine racks, the award-winning dioramas on loan from adolescent creators, the study carrels etched with decade-old graffiti. There's the water fountain spouting the coldest beverage in town, a different vintage from the lukewarm dribble in the school gym or the violent torrent at the Y.M.C.A.



Siblings explored the children's room at the Bemidji Public Library in Bemidji, Minnesota. Credit Jaida Grey Eagle for the New York Times



Leon Sykes read "My Papi Has a Motorcycle" to his son and a friend at the 81st Avenue Branch of the Oakland Public Library. Credit Jim Wilson/The New York Times



Pint-size bookworms made themselves at home in the Hialeah Gardens Branch Library in Hialeah Gardens, Fla. Credit...Rose Marie Cromwell for The New York Times



A young patron focused intently on a writing exercise during homework help time at the Hialeah Gardens Branch Library. Credit...Rose Marie Cromwell for The New York Times



At the Hialeah Gardens Branch Library, a pair of budding musicians strummed guitars in the YOUmedia space, where teenagers can make podcasts, design video games and explore technology. Credit Rose Marie Cromwell for The New York Times

There are the overhead lights casting their fluorescent glow, occasionally flickering, flattering no one except people who live on the page. Still, they get the job done.

And above it all — hovering over the murmurs and coughs and scraping of chair legs and gurgle of fish tanks and crackle of plastic covers — there is a weighted blanket of quiet, that reassuring hush we're hard-wired to expect from our inaugural visit to the children's room. Whether you first crossed that threshold in the scrum of a class trip or clutching your mom's hand; whether your hometown library was on a country road or at a busy intersection; whether you put your library card to good use or used it to pick locks; odds are good that, at some point, someone touched an index finger to their lips and shared the universal password for the kingdom of words: "Shhhh."



In Littleton, Colo., bookworms of all ages gathered outside the Edwin A. Bemis Public Library to hear a story read by Donna Stephenson, a children's librarian, as part of the weekly Books & Blankets program. Credit David Williams for The New York Times



Figure 1 Linda Velarde, an associate librarian, loaded a van with books and movies bound for patrons enrolled in the Bemis Library's Doorstep Delivery program. Credit...David Williams for The New York Times



In Littleton, Colo., Sandra Weeder marveled at her monthly installment of new entertainment. Credit...David Williams for The New York Times



Phillip Pollreis played patriotic songs during a meeting of the Senior Social Club at the Bemis Library. Credit David Williams for The New York Times

But this sentiment doesn't really apply anymore. It hasn't for a long time.

Just as reading has changed (from paper to pixel to audio) and tools for research have streamlined (sorry, World Book), so have the places that house the goods. Silence is no longer a requirement; versatility is.

It's easy to romanticize libraries. But, the fact is, they're not "just" about the written word. Were they ever? As local safety nets shriveled, the library roof magically expanded from umbrella to tarp to circus tent to airplane hangar. The modern library keeps its citizens warm, safe, healthy, entertained, educated, hydrated and, above all, connected.



Valerie McCormick, an outreach librarian in Minnesota's Kitchigami regional library system, completed paperwork during a bookmobile stop at Foothills Christian Academy in Backus, Minn. Credit Jaida Grey Eagle for The New York Times



The bookmobile has been a fixture of the library system in Cass County, Minn., since 1966. Here, a kindergarten class took stock of the offerings. Credit Jaida Grey Eagle for The New York Times



Reagan Morgan, a library assistant, made sure the books were neat and orderly in Bemidji. Credit Jaida Grey Eagle for The New York Times

Imagine a teacher who's responsible for a mixed-age classroom where students are free to wander in and out as they please, all opinions are welcome and detention is not an option. This person is also the principal, the guidance counselor, the school nurse and, occasionally, the janitor. This person is your local librarian.

Yet somehow librarians still find time to match people with the books they need. These selections may be second-guessed by irate taxpayers who don't know the difference between F. Scott Fitzgerald and L. Ron Hubbard or don't understand that ideas and stories aren't contagious; the only disease they'll infect you with is empathy. Nevertheless, librarians persist. One could argue that they distribute more wings than an airline pilot. Put yours to good use and you can fly anywhere.

Libraries have always been a place of worship for a certain type of person, but they're also community centers, meeting houses and pop-up medical clinics, offering vaccines, homework help, computer classes, craft sessions and tax advice. Perhaps you need fresh needles, marigold seeds, a loaner guitar, a hammer, a venue for your knitting club or a donation box for your old eyeglasses? Head to your local library. It might have you covered and, if it doesn't, someone there will know where to send you.



The Oakland Tool Lending Library has over 5,000 tools for patrons to borrow, including shovels, hedge shears, staple guns and cordless drills. Credit Jim Wilson/The New York Times



D.I.Y.-minded patrons of the Tool Lending Library have access to home improvement books, DVDs and a variety of workshops on projects such as plumbing and tiling. Credit Jim Wilson/The New York Times

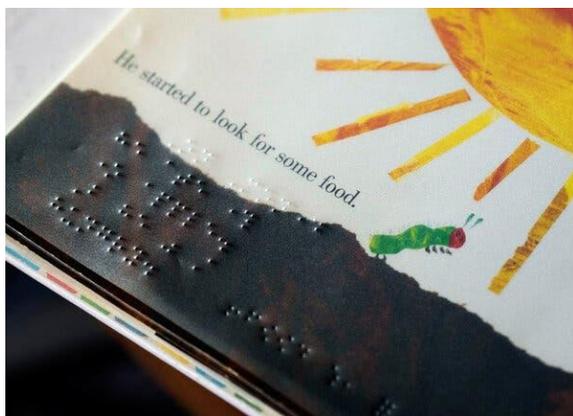


Here are a few future vegetables at Oakland's African American Museum and Library. Credit Jim Wilson/The New York Times



At Oakland's 81st Avenue Branch Library bike repair clinic, a child worked on a scooter. Credit Jim Wilson/The New York Times

Best of all, you never need a reason or an invitation to go to the library. You aren't required to make a reservation ahead of time or purchase a cup of coffee while you're there. You can pop in when your Wi-Fi is on the fritz or you need a break from your roommates. You might go there to dry off or to cool down. To study for algebra or to read a romance novel. To stock up on thrillers or to take stock of your less-than-thrilling life. To meet a friend or to be alone. For a bit of excitement or for a moment of calm.



In Seattle, the Washington Talking Book & Braille Library provides services to people who are unable to read standard print material. Eric Carle's "The Very Hungry Caterpillar" is part of the collection. Credit Ruth Fremson/The New York Times



Esha More, a volunteer audiobook narrator, spoke into a microphone in Seattle. Credit Ruth Fremson/The New York Times



Another volunteer, Rick Sipe, recorded a novel. Credit Ruth Fremson/The New York Times



This 14-year-old patron, who is visually impaired, moved with her family from India to Seattle after her father discovered the Washington Talking Book & Braille Library while he was on a business trip. He felt that there would be more opportunities for her in the United States. Credit Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

Last fall, The New York Times sent photographers to cities, suburbs and rural areas in seven states to document how different libraries respond to the needs of their communities, and the many ways in which patrons find a haven in each one.

At the time, the news was full of grim dispatches from the land of letters. In Colorado, two branches [closed because of meth contamination](#). In McFarland, Calif., city leaders debated whether to [convert a library into a police station](#). In New York City, Mayor Eric Adams proposed massive budget cuts that would [slash library hours and programming](#). The American Library Association announced that attempts to [ban books were accelerating across the country](#) at a rate never seen since tracking began more than 20 years ago.



At the Carver Branch Library in Austin, Texas, a mural on an exterior wall hinted at the vibrancy of the community inside. Credit Miranda Barnes for The New York Times



Wanda Johnson attended a meeting of Top Ladies of Distinction, a nonprofit educational and humanitarian organization that started meeting at the Carver Branch Library more than 30 years ago. Credit Miranda Barnes for The New York Times

It was enough to make you wonder if the ancient tradition of book lending was going the way of card catalogs. Then the photos started to roll in, and they told a different story. In this version, toddlers tried to catch bubbles on the loose in the library. Grateful seniors welcomed monthly deliveries of movies and crime novels. Teenagers strummed guitars together. Children and caregivers gathered beneath technicolor trees to listen to a picture book read by a beaming librarian. In a different time zone, another librarian worked contentedly in the cozy oasis of a bookmobile.



Toddlers chased bubbles in Chicago's Northtown Branch Library. Credit Todd Heisler/The New York Times



A cubby of your own? It's available at the Northtown Branch Library. Credit Todd Heisler/The New York Times

It was impossible to look at these pictures and not feel hopeful about the state of humanity, especially with several seasons of isolation still fresh in our minds. Remember when you were craving the casual comfort of strangers? Remember when the simple act of checking out a book felt like a small miracle?

to library, state to state, we were unexpectedly moved by the color, light and joy at our fingertips. These glimpses into lives of strangers were a reminder that copies of the books piled on our desks at the Book Review will soon land on shelves in libraries across the country and, eventually, in the hands of readers. You'll pass them to other people, and on and on.

We all know that books connect us, that language has quiet power. To see the concentration, curiosity and peace on faces lit by words is to know — beyond a shadow of a doubt, in a time rife with shadows — that libraries are the beating hearts of our communities. What we borrow from them pales in comparison to what we keep. How often we pause to appreciate their bounty is up to us.



A small reader returned “Choo Choo Clickety-Clack!” at Colorado’s Bemis Library. Luckily, there’s more where this picture book came from. Credit David Williams for The New York Times