'A loving and diligent portrait of a particular place and its history' *Financial Times*

THE LIBRARY BOOK

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author of

THE ORCHID THIEF

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Published by arrangement with Simon & Schuster, Inc.

First published in Great Britain in 2019 by Atlantic Books, an imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd.

Th is paperback edition fi rst published in Great Britain in 2019 by Atlantic Books.

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

E-book ISBN: 978-1-78239-227-9
Paperback ISBN: 978-1-78239-228-6

Interior design by Carly Loman

Printed in Great Britain

Atlantic Books
An Imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd
Ormond House
26–27 Boswell Street
London
WC1N 3JZ

www.atlantic-books.co.uk

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Memory believes before knowing remembers.

—William Faulkner, *Light in August*

And when they ask us what we're doing, you can say, We're remembering.

—Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*

I have always imagined Paradise as a kind of library.

—Jorge Luis Borges, *Dreamtigers*

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1.

Stories to Begin On (1940)
By Bacmeister, Rhoda W.
X 808 B127

Begin Now—To Enjoy Tomorrow (1951)
By Giles, Ray
362.6 G472

A Good Place to Begin (1987)
By Powell, Lawrence Clark
027.47949 P884

To Begin at the Beginning (1994)
By Copenhaver, Martin B.
230 C782

Even in Los Angeles, where there is no shortage of remarkable hairdos, Harry Peak attracted attention. "He was very blond. Very, very blond," his lawyer said to me, and then he fluttered his hand across his forehead, performing a pantomime of Peak's heavy swoop of bangs. Another lawyer, who questioned Peak in a deposition, remembered his hair very well. "He had a lot of it," she said. "And he was very definitely blond." An arson investigator I met described Peak entering a courtroom "with all that hair," as if his hair existed independently.

Having a presence mattered a great deal to Harry Omer

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Peak. He was born in 1959, and grew up in Santa Fe Springs, a town in the paddle-flat valley less than an hour southeast of Los Angeles, hemmed in by the dun-colored Santa Rosa Hills and a looming sense of monotony. It was a place that offered the soothing uneventfulness of conformity, but Harry longed to stand out. As a kid, he dabbled in the minor delinquencies and pranks that delighted an audience. Girls liked him. He was charming, funny, dimpled, daring. He could talk anyone into anything. He had a gift for drama and invention. He was a storyteller, a yarn-spinner, and an agile liar; he was good at fancying up facts to make his life seem less plain and mingy. According to his sister, he was the biggest bullshitter in the world, so quick to fib and fabricate that even his own family didn't believe a word he said.

The closeness of Hollywood's constant beckoning, combined with his knack for performance, meant, almost predictably, that Harry Peak decided to become an actor. After he finished high school and served a stint in the army, Harry moved to Los Angeles and started dreaming. He began dropping the phrase "when I'm a movie star" into his conversations. He always said "when" and not "if." For him, it was a statement of fact rather than speculation.

Although they never actually saw him in any television shows or movies, his family was under the impression that during his time in Hollywood, Harry landed some promising parts. His father told me Harry was on a medical show—maybe *General Hospital*—and that he had roles in several movies, including *The Trial of Billy Jack*. IMDb—the world's largest online database for movies and television—lists a Barry Peak, a Parry Peak, a Harry Peacock, a Barry Pearl, and even a Harry Peak of Plymouth, England, but there is nothing at all listed for a Harry Peak of Los Angeles. As far as I can tell, the only time Harry Peak appeared on screen was on the local news in 1987, after he was arrested for setting the Los Angeles Central Library on fire, destroying almost half a million books

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and damaging seven hundred thousand more. It was one of the biggest fires in the history of Los Angeles, and it was the single biggest library fire in the history of the United States.

Central Library, which was designed by the architect Bertram Goodhue and opened in 1926, is in the middle of downtown Los Angeles, at the corner of Fifth Street and Flower, on the downslope of a rise once known as Normal Hill. The hill used to be higher, but when it was chosen as the site of the library, the summit was clawed off to make it more buildable. At the time the library opened, this part of downtown Los Angeles was a busy neighborhood of top-heavy, half-timbered Victorians teetering on the flank of the hills. These days, the houses are gone, and the neighborhood consists of dour, dark office towers standing shoulder to shoulder, casting long shafts of shade across what is left of the hill. Central Library is an entire city block wide, but it is only eight stories high, making it sort of ankle-height compared to these leggy office towers. It projects a horizontality that it probably didn't in 1926, when it debuted as the high point in what was then a modest, mostly four-story-tall city center.

The library opens at ten A.M., but by daybreak there are always people hovering nearby. They lean against every side of the building, or perch half on and half off the low stone walls around the perimeter, or array themselves in postures of anticipation in the garden northwest of the main entrance, from which they can maintain a view of the front door. They watch the door with unrewarded vigilance, since there is no chance that the building will open earlier than scheduled. One recent warm morning, the people in the garden were clustered under the canopy of trees, and beside the long, trickling watercourse that seemed to emit a small breath of chilled air. Rolling suitcases and totes and book bags were

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stashed here and there. Pigeons the color of concrete marched in a bossy staccato around the suitcases. A thin young man in a white dress shirt, a hint of sweat ringing his underarms, wobbled on one foot, gripping a file folder under his arm while trying to fish a cell phone out of his back pocket. Behind him, a woman with a sagging yellow backpack sat on the edge of a bench, leaning forward, eyes closed, hands clasped; I couldn't tell if she was napping or praying. Near her stood a man wearing a bowler hat and a too-small T-shirt that revealed a half-moon of shiny pink belly. Two women holding clipboards herded a small, swirling group of kids toward the library's front door. I wandered over to the corner of the garden, where two men sitting by the World Peace Bell were debating a meal they'd apparently shared.

"You have to admit that garlic dressing was good," one of the men was saying.

"I don't eat salad."

"Oh, come on, man, everyone eats salad!"

"Not me." Pause. "I love Dr Pepper."

Between each volley of their conversation, the men cast glances at the main entrance of the library, where a security guard was sitting. One of the doors was open, and the guard sat just inside, visible to anyone passing by. The open door was an irresistible conversation starter. One person after another approached the guard, and he deflected them without even blinking an eye:

"Is the library open yet?"

"No, it's not open."

Next: "Ten A.M."

Next: "You'll know when it's time."

Next: "No, not open yet."

Next: "Ten A.M., man"—shaking his head and rolling his eyes—"ten A.M., like it says on the sign."

Every few minutes, one of the people approaching the

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guard flashed an identification badge and was waved in, because the library was actually already in gear, humming with staff members who were readying it for the day. The shipping department had been at work since dawn, packing tens of thousands of books into plastic bins. These were books requested at one of the city's seventy-three libraries, or that had been returned to one in which they didn't belong and were being repatriated, or they were brand-new books that had been just cataloged at Central Library and were now on their way to one of the branches. Security guards are at the library around the clock; the guards on duty had started their shift at six A.M. Matthew Mattson, who runs the library's website, had been at his desk in the basement for an hour, watching the number of website visits surge as the morning advanced.

In each of the eight subject departments throughout the building, librarians and clerks were tidying shelves, checking new books, and beginning the business of the day. The reading tables and carrels were empty, each chair tucked under each table, all enfolded in a quiet even deeper than the usual velvety quiet of the library. In the History Department, a young librarian named Llyr Heller sorted through a cart of books, weeding out the ones that were damaged or deeply unloved. When she finished, she pulled out a list of books the department wanted to order, checking to make sure they weren't already in the collection. If they passed that test, she would look at reviews and librarian tip sheets to make sure they warranted buying.

In the Children's Department, children's librarians from around the city were gathered in the puppet theater for their regular meeting. The topic being discussed was how to run an effective story time. The thirty full-size adult humans who were wedged into the tiny seats of the theater listened to the presentation with rapt attention. "Use an appropriate-sized

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teddy bear," the librarian running the session was saying as I walked in. "I had been using one I thought was the size of a baby, but I was wrong—it was the size of a very premature baby." She pointed to a bulletin board that was covered with felt. "Don't forget, flannel boards are wonderful," she said. "You may want to use them for things like demonstrating penguins getting dressed. You can also hide things inside them, like rabbits and noses."

Upstairs, Robert Morales, the library's budget director, and Madeleine Rackley, the business manager, were talking about money with John Szabo, who holds the job of Los Angeles city librarian, in charge of all the libraries in Los Angeles. Just below them, the main clock clicked toward ten, and Selena Terrazas, who is one of Central Library's three principal librarians, stationed herself at the center axis of the lobby so she could keep watch over the morning rush when the doors officially opened.

There was a sense of stage business—that churn of activity you can't hear or see but you feel at a theater in the instant before the curtain rises—of people finding their places and things being set right, before the burst of action begins. The library entrances have been thrown open thousands of times since 1859, the year that a public library first existed in Los Angeles. Yet every time the security guard hollers out that the library has opened, there is a quickening in the air and the feeling that something significant is about to unfold—the play is about to begin. This particular morning, Selena Terrazas checked her watch, and the head of security, David Aguirre, checked his as well, and then Aguirre radioed the guard at the entrance to give the all-clear. After a moment, the guard clambered off his stool and pushed the door open, letting the buttery light of the California morning spill into the entry.

A puff of outside air wafted in and down the hall. Then, in an instant, people poured in—the hoverers, who bolted from

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their posts in the garden, and the wall-sitters, and the morning fumblers, and the school groups, and the businesspeople, and the parents with strollers heading to story time, and the students, and the homeless, who rushed straight to the bathrooms and then made a beeline to the computer center, and the scholars, and the time-wasters, and the readers, and the curious, and the bored—all clamoring for *The Dictionary of Irish Artists* or *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* or a biography of Lincoln or *Pizza Today* magazine or *The Complete Book of Progressive Knitting* or photographs of watermelons in the San Fernando Valley taken in the 1960s or *Harry Potter*—always, *Harry Potter*—or any one of the millions of books, pamphlets, maps, musical scores, newspapers, and pictures the library holds in store. They were a rivering flow of humanity, a gush, and they were looking for baby-name guides, and biographies of Charles Parnell, and maps of Indiana, and suggestions from a librarian for a novel that was romantic but not corny; they were picking up tax information and getting tutored in English and checking out movies and tracing their family history. They were sitting in the library, just because it was a pleasant place to sit, and sometimes they were doing things that had nothing to do with the library. On this particular morning, in Social Sciences, a woman at one of the reading tables was sewing beads onto the sleeve of a cotton blouse. In one of the carrels in History, a man in a pin-striped suit who had books on his desk but wasn't reading held a bag of Doritos under the lip of the table. He pretended to muffle a cough each time he ate a chip.

I grew up in libraries, or at least it feels that way. I was raised in the suburbs of Cleveland, just a few blocks from the brick-faced Bertram Woods branch of the Shaker Heights Public Library system. Throughout my childhood, starting when I

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was very young, I went there several times a week with my mother. On those visits, my mother and I walked in together but as soon as we passed through the door, we split up and each headed to our favorite section. The library might have been the first place I was ever given autonomy. Even when I was maybe four or five years old, I was allowed to head off on my own. Then, after a while, my mother and I reunited at the checkout counter with our finds. Together we waited as the librarian at the counter pulled out the date card and stamped it with the checkout machine—that giant fist thumping the card with a loud *chunk-chunk*, printing a crooked due date underneath a score of previous crooked due dates that belonged to other people, other times.

Our visits to the library were never long enough for me. The place was so bountiful. I loved wandering around the bookshelves, scanning the spines until something happened to catch my eye. Those visits were dreamy, frictionless interludes that promised I would leave richer than I arrived. It wasn't like going to a store with my mom, which guaranteed a tug-of-war between what I wanted and what my mother was willing to buy me; in the library I could have anything I wanted. After we checked out, I loved being in the car and having all the books we'd gotten stacked on my lap, pressing me under their solid, warm weight, their Mylar covers sticking a bit to my thighs. It was such a thrill leaving a place with things you hadn't paid for; such a thrill anticipating the new books we would read. On the ride home, my mom and I talked about the order in which we were going to read our books and how long until they had to be returned, a solemn conversation in which we decided how to pace ourselves through this charmed, evanescent period of grace until the books were due. We both thought all of the librarians at the Bertram Woods Branch Library were beautiful. For a few minutes we would discuss their beauty. My mother then always mentioned that if she could have

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chosen any profession at all, she would have chosen to be a librarian, and the car would grow silent for a moment as we both considered what an amazing thing that would have been.

When I was older, I usually walked to the library myself, lugging back as many books as I could carry. Occasionally, I did go with my mother, and the trip would be as enchanted as it was when I was small. Even when I was in my last year of high school and could drive myself to the library, my mother and I still went together now and then, and the trip unfolded exactly as it did when I was a child, with all the same beats and pauses and comments and reveries, the same perfect pensive rhythm we followed so many times before. When I miss my mother these days, now that she is gone, I like to picture us in the car together, going for one more magnificent trip to Bertram Woods.

My family was big on the library. We were very much a reading family, but we were a borrow-a-book-from-the-library family more than a bookshelves-full-of-books family. My parents valued books, but they grew up in the Depression, aware of the quicksilver nature of money, and they learned the hard way that you shouldn't buy what you could borrow. Because of that frugality, or perhaps independent of it, they also believed that you read a book for the experience of reading it. You didn't read it in order to have an object that had to be housed and looked after forever, a memento of the purpose for which it was obtained. The reading of the book was a journey. There was no need for souvenirs.

By the time I was born, my parents' financial circumstances were comfortable, and they learned how to splurge a little, but their Depression-era mentality adhered stubbornly to certain economies, which included not buying

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books that could be gotten very easily from the library. Our uncrowded bookshelves at home had several sets of encyclopedias (an example of something not convenient to borrow from the library, since you reached for it regularly and urgently) and a random assortment of other books which, for one reason or another, my parents had ended up buying. That included a few mild sex manuals (*Ideal Marriage: Its Physiology and Technique* is the one I remember best, because of course I read it whenever my parents were out of the house). I assume my parents bought the sex books because they would have been embarrassed to present them at the checkout desk of the library. There were also some travel guides, some coffee table books, a few of my father's law books, and a dozen or so novels that were either gifts or for some reason managed to justify being owned outright.

When I headed to college, one of the many ways I differentiated myself from my parents was that I went wild for owning books. I think buying textbooks was what got me going. All I know is that I lost my appreciation for the slow pace of making your way through a library and for having books on borrowed time. I wanted to have my books around me, forming a totem pole of the narratives I'd visited. As soon as I got my own apartment, I lined it with bookcases and loaded them with hardcovers. I used the college library for research, but otherwise, I turned into a ravenous buyer of books. I couldn't walk into a bookstore without leaving with something, or several somethings. I loved the fresh alkaline tang of new ink and paper, a smell that never emanated from a broken-in library book. I loved the crack of a newly flexed spine, and the way the brand-new pages almost felt damp, as if they were wet with creation. I sometimes wondered if I was catching up after spending my childhood amid sparsely settled bookcases. But the reason didn't matter to me. I actually became a little evangelical about book ownership. Sometimes I fantasized about starting a bookstore. If my

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mother ever mentioned to me that she was on the waiting list for some book at the library, I got annoyed and asked why she didn't just go buy it.

Once I was done with college, and done with researching term papers in the stacks of the Harold T. and Vivian B. Shapiro Undergraduate Library, I sloughed off the memory of those wondrous childhood trips to the Bertram Woods branch, and began, for the first time in my life, to wonder what libraries were for.

It might have remained that way, and I might have spent the rest of my life thinking about libraries only wistfully, the way I thought wistfully about, say, the amusement park I went to as a kid. Libraries might have become just a bookmark of memory more than an actual place, a way to call up an emotion of a moment that occurred long ago, something that was fused with "mother" and "the past" in my mind. But then libraries came roaring back into my life unexpectedly. In 2011, my husband accepted a job in Los Angeles, so we left New York and headed west. I didn't know Los Angeles well, but I'd spent time there over the years, visiting cousins who lived in and around the city. When I became a writer, I went to Los Angeles many times to work on magazine pieces and books. On those visits, I had been to and from the beach, and up and down the canyons, and in and out of the valley, and back and forth to the mountains, but I never gave downtown Los Angeles a second thought, assuming it was just a glassy landscape of office buildings that hollowed out by five o'clock every night. I pictured Los Angeles as a radiant doughnut, rimmed by milky ocean and bristling mountains, with a big hole in the middle. I never went to the public library, never thought about the library, although I'm sure I assumed there was a public library, probably a main branch, probably

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downtown.

My son was in first grade when we moved to California. One of his first assignments in school was to interview someone who worked for the city. I suggested talking to a garbage collector or a police officer, but he said he wanted to interview a librarian. We were so new to town that we had to look up the address of the closest library, which was the Los Angeles Public Library's Studio City branch. The branch was about a mile away from our house, which happened to be about the same distance that the Bertram Woods branch was from my childhood home.

As my son and I drove to meet the librarian, I was flooded by a sense of absolute familiarity, a gut-level recollection of this journey, of parent and child on their way to the library. I had taken this trip so many times before, but now it was turned on its head, and I was the parent bringing my child on that special trip. We parked, and my son and I walked toward the library, taking it in for the first time. The building was white and modish, with a mint green mushroom cap of a roof. From the outside, it didn't look anything like the stout brick Bertram Woods branch, but when we stepped in, the thunderbolt of recognition struck me so hard that it made me gasp. Decades had passed and I was three thousand miles away, but I felt like I had been lifted up and whisked back to that time and place, back to the scenario of walking into the library with my mother. Nothing had changed—there was the same soft *tsk-tsk-tsk* of pencil on paper, and the muffled murmuring from patrons at the tables in the center of the room, and the creak and groan of book carts, and the occasional papery clunk of a book dropped on a desk. The scarred wooden checkout counters, and the librarians' desks, as big as boats, and the bulletin board with its fluttering, raggedy notices were all the same. The sense of gentle, steady busyness, like water on a rolling boil, was just the same. The books on the shelves, with some subtractions and additions,

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were certainly the same.

It wasn't that time stopped in the library. It was as if it were captured here, collected here, and in all libraries—and not only my time, my life, but all human time as well. In the library, time is dammed up—not just stopped but saved. The library is a gathering pool of narratives and of the people who come to find them. It is where we can glimpse immortality; in the library, we can live forever.

So the spell libraries once cast on me was renewed. Maybe it had never really been extinguished, although I had been away long enough that it was like visiting a country I'd loved but forgotten as my life went galloping by. I knew what it was like to want a book and to buy it, but I had forgotten what it felt like to amble among the library shelves, finding the book I was looking for but also seeing who its neighbors were, noticing their peculiar concordance, and following an idea as it was handed off from one book to the next, like a game of telephone. I might start at Dewey decimal 301.4129781 (*Pioneer Women* by Joanna L. Stratton) and a few inches later find myself at 306.7662 (*Gaydar* by Donald F. Reuter) and then 301.45096 (*Dreams from My Father* by Barack Obama) and finally 301.55 (*The Men Who Stare at Goats* by Jon Ronson). On a library bookshelf, thought progresses in a way that is logical but also dumbfounding, mysterious, irresistible.

Not long after my son interviewed the librarian, I happened to meet a man named Ken Brecher who runs the Library Foundation of Los Angeles, the nonprofit organization that champions the city's libraries and raises money for extra programming and services. Brecher offered to give me a tour of Central Library, so a few days later, I drove downtown to meet him. From the highway, I could see the quiver of dark skyscrapers in the center of the city that surrounded the

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library. The summer and fall had been rainless. The landscape around me was bright and bleached, blasted, with an almost ashy pallor. Even the palm trees seemed sapped of color, and the reddish rooftops were whitened, as if dusted with sugar.

I felt new here, and the sheer breadth of Los Angeles still astonished me. It seemed like I could drive and drive and the city would just keep unfurling, almost as if it were a map of Los Angeles being unrolled as I drove over it, rather than a real city that started and stopped somewhere specific. In Los Angeles, your eye keeps reaching for an endpoint and never finds it, because it doesn't exist. The wide-openness of Los Angeles is a little intoxicating, but it can be unnerving, too—it's the kind of place that doesn't hold you close, a place where you can picture yourself cartwheeling off into emptiness, a pocket of zero gravity. I'd spent the previous five years living in the Hudson Valley of New York, so I was more used to bumping into a hill or a river at every turn and settling my gaze on some foreground feature—a tree, a house, a cow. For twenty years before that, I'd lived in Manhattan, where the awareness of when you are in or out of the city is as clear as day.

I expected Central Library to look like the main libraries I knew best. New York Public Library and the Cleveland Public Library are serious buildings, with grand entrances and a stern, almost religious aura. By contrast, the Los Angeles Central Library looks like what a child might assemble out of blocks. The building—buff-colored, with black inset windows and a number of small entrances—is a fantasia of right angles and nooks and plateaus and terraces and balconies that step up to a single central pyramid surfaced with colored tiles and topped with a bronze sculpture of an open flame held in a human hand. It manages to look ancient and modern at the

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same time. As I approached, the simple blocky form of the building resolved into a throng of bas-relief stone figures on every wall. There were Virgil and Leonardo and Plato; bison herds and cantering horses; sunbursts and nautiluses; archers and shepherds and printers and scholars; scrolls and wreaths and waves. Philosophical declarations in English and Latin were carved across the building's face like an ancient ticker tape. Compared to the mute towers around it, the library seemed more a proclamation than a building.

I circled, reading as I walked. Socrates, cool-eyed and stony-faced, gazed past me. I followed the bustle of visitors to the center of the main floor, and then I continued past the clatter and buzz of the circulation desk and climbed a wide set of stairs that spilled me out into a great rotunda. The rotunda was empty. I stood for a moment, taking it in. The rotunda is one of those rare places that have a kind of sacred atmosphere, full of a quiet so dense and deep that it almost feels underwater. All the rotunda's features were larger than life, overpowering, jaw-dropping. The walls were covered with huge murals of Native Americans and priests and soldiers and settlers, painted in dusty mauve and blue and gold. The floor was glossy travertine, laid out in a pattern of checkerboard. The ceiling and archways were tiled with squares of red and blue and ocher. In the center of the rotunda hung a massive chandelier—a heavy brass chain dangling a luminous blue glass Earth ringed by the twelve figures of the zodiac.

I crossed the rotunda and walked toward a large sculpture known as the Statue of Civilization—a marble woman with fine features and perfect posture and a trident in her left hand. I was so stirred by the library's beauty that when Brecher arrived to give me my tour, I was chattering like someone on a successful first date. Brecher is as thin as a pencil and has bright eyes, pure white hair, and a brisk, barking laugh. He began a running commentary about each

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fixture, each carving, each plaque on the wall. He also told me about his path to the library, which included stints living with a preliterate tribe of indigenous people in the Central Amazon and working for the Sundance Institute. He seemed electrified by everything he told me about the library, and between his electricity and my excitement, we must have made quite a lively pair. We inched along, stopping every few feet to examine another feature of the building, or to eyeball another shelf of books, or to hear about this or that person who had importance to the place. Everything about the library had a story—the architect, the muralist, the person who developed each collection, the head of each department, the scores of people who worked at the library or patronized it over the decades, many now long gone but still somehow present there, lingering in the wings, a durable part of its history.

We finally made our way to the Fiction Department and stopped near the first row of shelves. Brecher took a break from his commentary and reached for one of the books, cracked it open, held it up to his face, and inhaled deeply. I had never seen someone smell a book quite like that before. Brecher inhaled the book a few more times, then clapped it shut and placed it back on the shelf.

"You can still smell the smoke in some of them," he said, almost to himself. I wasn't quite sure what he meant, so I tried this: "They smell like smoke because the library used to let patrons smoke?"

"No!" Brecher said. "Smoke from the fire!"

"The fire?"

"The fire!"

"The fire? What fire?"

"The fire," he said. "The big fire. The one that shut the library down."

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On April 29, 1986, the day the library burned, I was living in New York. While my romance with libraries had not been renewed yet, I cared a lot about books, and I am sure I would have noticed a story about a massive fire in a library, no matter where that library was. The Central Library fire was not a minor matter, not a cigarette smoldering in a trash can that would have gone without mention. It was a huge, furious fire that burned for more than seven hours and reached temperatures of 2000 degrees; it was so fierce that almost every firefighter in Los Angeles was called upon to fight it. More than one million books were burned or damaged. I couldn't imagine how I didn't know of an event of this magnitude, especially something involving books, even though I was living on the other side of the country when it occurred.

When I got home from touring the library with Brecher, I looked up the *New York Times* from April 29, 1986. The fire had started midmorning, Pacific time, which would have been early afternoon in New York. By then, the *Times* would have already published that day's paper. The front-page stories were the usual fare, including the postponement of mobster John Gotti's trial; a warning from Senator Bob Dole that the federal budget was in trouble; and a photograph of President Reagan and his wife, Nancy, waving goodbye as they embarked on a trip to Indonesia. On the right side of the front page, over a skinny, single-column story, was the headline SOVIET ANNOUNCES NUCLEAR ACCIDENT AT ELECTRIC PLANT/MISHAP ACKNOWLEDGED AFTER RISING RADIATION LEVELS SPREAD TO SCANDINAVIA. The next day, the headline on the follow-up story grew to panic size, announcing SOVIET, REPORTING ATOM PLANT "DISASTER," SEEKS HELP ABROAD TO FIGHT REACTOR FIRE with a place line of Moscow, U.S.S.R. There was also a special three-page section that began with NUCLEAR DISASTER: A SPREADING CLOUD AND AN AID APPEAL. By the second

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day, the fear about the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear plant triggered what was then the largest single-day point loss in the history of the American stock market.

The burning of Central Library in Los Angeles was finally mentioned in the *New York Times* on April 30, in a story that appeared on page A14. The story laid out the basic facts, mentioning that twenty-two people were injured in the blaze and that the cause of the fire was unknown. Another brief story provided a few more details on the fire and included interviews with residents of Los Angeles speculating about how it would feel to have the library closed indefinitely. There were no other stories about it in the *New York Times* that week. The biggest library fire in American history had been upstaged by the Chernobyl nuclear meltdown. The books burned while most of us were waiting to see if we were about to witness the end of the world.

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2.

The fire as seen from Fifth Street

Fire!: 38 Lifesaving Tips for You and Your Family (1995)
By Gibbons, James J.
614.84 G441

Fire Behavior and Sprinklers (1964)
By Thompson, Norman J.
614.844 T474

Fire: Friend or Foe (1998)
By Patent, Dorothy Hinshaw

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X 634 P295-2

Fire! The Library Is Burning (1988)
By Cytron, Barry D.
X 614 C997

April 28, 1986, was a peculiarly hot day in Los Angeles. Instead of the silky twinkle of spring, the day had a sullen, leaden feel. But by the next morning, April 29, the heat lifted. The air felt fresh. The sky was the bluest blue.

It had been a strange, sad year, beginning in January, when the *Challenger* spacecraft exploded, killing its crew of seven astronauts. The week of April 28 buckled under its own share of bad news. An earthquake rocked Central Mexico. Fires broke out in several British prisons, and scores of inmates escaped. The United States and Libya were in a tense standoff. Closer to the library, a bulldozer at a construction site in Carson, California, sheared off a main sewer cap, and raw sewage was gushing into the Los Angeles River.

On April 29, Central Library opened as usual at ten A.M., and within minutes it was humming. About two hundred employees were already in place around the building, from the shipping docks to the circulation desks to the stacks. Glen Creason, a reference librarian who'd worked at Central since 1979, was at his desk in the History Department. Sylva Manoogian, a World Languages librarian, had just gotten a new car, so she parked it with extra care in the library lot before coming in for her shift. Two hundred or so patrons were inside, browsing the shelves or settling in at the reading tables. Four docents herded a large, giggly group of schoolkids on a tour of the building. Elizabeth Teoman, the head librarian at Central, was in her office with Norman Pfeiffer, a New York City architect who'd been hired to renovate and expand the building. Pfeiffer was thrilled about

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the commission. He loved the Goodhue Building—"The first time I saw it, I thought I had died and gone to heaven," he told me—and was eager to get to work renovating it and adding a large new wing. The construction plan was the result of almost twenty years of debate about what to do with Central Library, which was over sixty years old, dilapidated, and too small for the city's needs. Pfeiffer's drawings were spread on Teoman's desk. He draped his suit jacket, with his hotel and rental car keys in the pocket, on a chair at the back of the room.

At the time, the library's fire prevention consisted of smoke detectors and handheld fire extinguishers. There were no sprinklers. The American Library Association, known informally as the ALA, always advised against sprinklers, because water damage was even worse for books than fire damage. In 1986, however, the ALA reversed its position and began advising libraries to install sprinklers. That morning, in fact, down the hall from Elizabeth Teoman's office, a colleague of Pfeiffer's, Steven Johnson, was meeting with the fire department to discuss how the sprinklers could be placed inconspicuously in the library's historic rooms. The library was built before the development of fire-resistant doors, which are now standard in all large buildings because they halt the spread of fire from one section of the building to another. Fire doors are so effective that new buildings all have them, and older buildings are usually retrofitted with them; they are required by law in most states. Funds for putting them in the library had been in the city budget for more than five years, but somehow, they kept getting overlooked; finally, that day, workers were getting around to installing them.

For years, the library had been written up repeatedly for multiple fire code violations. At this particular moment, there were twenty violations waiting to be resolved. Most were "operational," including blocked exits, exposed lightbulbs,

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frayed electrical cords, and the missing fire doors, rather than structural problems with the building. New violations were brought to the fire department's attention all the time. A number of architectural preservationists suspected that someone was exaggerating the violations to bolster the argument for demolishing the building and replacing it. Even if they were slightly overstated, the building's problems were real. Twenty years earlier, in 1967, a fire department report had concluded that the probability of a major fire at the library was "very high." A few years later, the *Los Angeles Times* called the library "part temple, part cathedral, and part fire hazard." When Elizabeth Teoman was in library school, she wrote a paper outlining the building's problems, saying the library was seriously overcrowded but that the large number of fire and safety hazards was even more troubling. She got an A on the paper.

Things are always coming in and going out of a library, so it's impossible to know what it contains on any given day. By 1986, Central Library's contents were valued, for insurance purposes, at roughly $69 million. That included at least two million books, manuscripts, maps, magazines, newspapers, atlases, and musical scores; four thousand documentary films; census records dating back to 1790; theater programs of every play produced in Los Angeles since 1880; and telephone directories for every single American city with a population over ten thousand. It had America's finest assemblage of books on the subject of rubber, donated in 1935 by Mr. Harry Pearson, a noted rubber authority. It had a Shakespeare folio; a quarter million photographs of Los Angeles dating back to 1850; car repair manuals for every single make and model of automobile starting with the Model T; five hundred folk dolls from around the world; the only comprehensive patent collection in the western United States; and twenty-one thousand books about sports. It housed the largest collection of books on food and cooking in the country—twelve

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thousand volumes, which included three hundred on French cuisine, thirty on cooking with oranges and lemons, and six guides to cooking with insects, including the classic *Butterflies in My Stomach*.

A few minutes before eleven A.M. on April 29, a smoke detector in the library set off an alarm. The library telephone operator called the fire department dispatcher, saying, "Bells ringing at Central Library." Security guards spread out through the building, instructing patrons to leave. No one was particularly panicked. The library's fire alarm went off all the time, for all sorts of reasons—a cigarette tossed in a wastebasket, the occasional crackpot bomb threat, and, most often, for no reason at all except that it was an old, crotchety alarm system prone to spasms of hyperactivity. For the staff and regular patrons, the fire alarm had come to possess all the shock value of a clown horn. Packing up and leaving the building was so tiresome that some librarians were tempted to hide out in their workrooms and wait for the all-clear. Most of them left their personal belongings behind when they went out for the alarms, assuming they'd be right back.

When the alarm went off, Norman Pfeiffer began gathering his drawings and his jacket, but Teoman told him not to bother, since she was sure the interruption would be momentary. Some regular patrons also didn't bother to pack up when they cleared the building. That morning, a real estate broker named Mary Ludwig was in the History Department doing genealogy research. She'd just discovered she was related to a man in Vermont named Hog Howard when the alarm went off. Rather than disturb all her materials, she left them on the reading table, along with a briefcase containing two years' worth of research notes, and headed to the exit.

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