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### Without Libraries

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**Without Libraries**  
Emily Bruce

The science fiction writer Ray Bradbury said many passionate things about the importance of libraries. As a historian, I find one of Bradbury's statements especially attractive. In a magazine interview, he asked, "without them [that is, libraries], what have we? We have no past and we have no future."<sup>1</sup> I use that quotation at the top of a library scavenger hunt assignment that the Briggs Librarians have often helped my students with, and it's where I found the title for this talk—Without Libraries. Although I did consider selecting another quote on that assignment, from one F. Scott Fitzgerald, quote: "I've been drunk for about a week now, and I thought it might sober me up to sit in a library."

But, living in this science fiction future of a global pandemic as we are, Bradbury's zeal for how libraries help us know ourselves seemed more fitting for today. Indeed, in March 2020, we suddenly did have to live *without libraries* for a little while, and it might have seemed reasonable to fear that COVID-19 would keep us away from libraries for the duration. Reasonable, that is, if you don't know any librarians. With their care and creativity, librarians around the world like LeAnn, Peter, Angie, and Naomi; Sandy, Renee, Amanda, Kristi, and Steve; and our great student workers have

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<sup>1</sup> <https://quotepark.com/quotes/1194691-ray-bradbury-without-the-library-you-have-no-civilization/>

made the virtual community spaces and resources of libraries even *more* vital over the past two years.

It has been a privilege of my rather travel-filled childhood and professional life to visit various types of libraries around the globe—cities here are marked in red where I've been connected to research libraries, community & public libraries, prison libraries, and academic libraries. Speaking not as an expert in library sciences, but as a user of these institutions, I've taken the opportunity of tonight's invitation to reflect on what the world would miss without each of these different types of libraries. I will freely confess that there is some nostalgia fueling my particular library tour. But I hope that it will inspire you to reflect on your own memories of the various libraries that are important to you—including, of course, this one.

My first book, published last year, depended entirely on libraries—not only our own wonderful Briggs, but also about twenty rare book & archival collections in Europe and the US. Examining historical children's books at rare book libraries is a fabulous part of this job. One of my early experiences with this type was an undergraduate project with German-American picture books held at the Newberry Library in Chicago. I found myself staring around a reading room full of serious scholars poring over giant early modern Bibles and official documents, waiting and waiting for my order to be delivered. When I finally went out in the hall to investigate the hold-up, I discovered

three professional research librarians cooing over the darling little books that I had requested.

But I understood it! I've gotten to look at some pretty cool things in these rare book libraries. That includes eighteenth-century music folding out from the backs of magazines for young readers. It also includes some unusual architectural features of library spaces, like these continuously running, doorless elevators in Frankfurt. (Apparently this type of elevator is called a paternoster, not because you should say a prayer as you take your life in your hands by stepping into one, but because the compartments run by like rosary beads.)

When it comes to unusual library architecture, I haven't done research anywhere stranger than the Mitterand site of the National Library in Paris. The architect Dominique Perrault designed it in the 1990s with four skyscraper towers housing the books, while the library users are relegated underground of a dystopian concrete plaza. Although the design won aesthetic awards, librarians and patrons have been more skeptical over the years. For example, because the glass towers turned into a "solar oven," they famously had to add shutters to protect the books. Last March, the historian Martin Hurcombe started an hysterically funny Twitter thread on how to recreate at home the experience of researching at the BnF while the pandemic prevented travel. Among his and others' proposals for simulating this library space in your own house were to overcharge yourself for lunch, walk around the whole space at least twice

before figuring out which corner hides an almost undetectable bathroom, and drink infinite small cups of espresso. Hurcombe also related, quote, “I’m planning some loud whispered mid-afternoon conversations with myself, whom I haven’t seen for ages.”

You can enjoy some historical treasures from the canon of children’s literature closer to home; Europe doesn’t have a sole claim to this type of library. (For example, there is our own fabulous Kerlan Collection in Minneapolis!) While working in the collection at the Cotsen Children’s Library now held at Princeton University, I encountered this wonderful source, a geography board game for youth from more than two hundred years ago. Some time later, when I collaborated with then Morris undergraduate Elise Klarenbeek on a publication about this game, we realized we should play it at least once while studying the educational effects. And who better than to gather for playing a two-hundred-year-old board game than a bunch of librarians? (If you can’t see it, that’s an acknowledgement thanking LeAnn, Naomi, and Angie, among others.)

From one more example of a research library that has been essential to my work, this is a 1781 German girls’ periodical held at the Staatsbibliothek Berlin Kinder- und Jugendbuchabteilung—otherwise known, in sentimental German slang fashion, as the “Stabi.” The library is known for its Gutenberg Bible and the original score of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. But it also contains one of the largest historical collections of children’s books in the world. In a week when we’ve learned of a US

school board banning Art Spiegelmann's graphic narrative of the Holocaust, *Maus*, I can't help but add that the Unter den Linden location of the Stabi where I originally worked is across the street from the Bebelplatz, the site of a major Nazi book burning in 1933. Standing over that memorial forces sobering reflection on what it means to be "without libraries"—losing the contributions to humanity that knowledge and those people could have made. For my own part, without research libraries, we wouldn't be able to tell the story of our past, which, I'm confident this audience knows, remains critical.

Through international travel, I've also explored different types of public-facing or community libraries in other countries—although these are rarely as holistic in the services they provide or as accessible as their US counterparts. The library landscape of Beijing has changed dramatically since I lived there briefly as a child, and is changing now again. Because there weren't many options resembling the public libraries we had left behind, visiting bookstores was especially exciting at that time. In the mid-1990s, all Chinese bookstores sold what seemed like exactly the same list of English-language titles. This is why I can say half of my sixth-grade education was simply reading Agatha Christie mysteries without much exaggeration. But I did find this much-loved and waterlogged copy of an early twentieth-century New England college story incongruously presented with facing pages of Mandarin.

The American Library in Paris, where my family and I spent time in the early 2000s, is an extraordinary institution that nevertheless remains only a partial imitation of community libraries back home. Most importantly, it is subscription-based rather than truly free and open to all. But it is the largest English-language circulating library in Europe, and has a storied history as the legacy of books GIs had been sent by American supporters and then left behind after the First World War. The library's motto is "Atrum post bellum, ex libris lux" ("after the darkness of war, the light of books"). Today the library offers programs from famous expats like David Sedaris and entertains many English-reading kids of Paris. For me, the respite of finding community libraries abroad has always been a reminder that without libraries, we would miss out on so much *fun*.

It is true that one consequence of traveling the libraries of the world is recognizing that public libraries in the United States today present a rare instance of genuine American exceptionalism. It's evident in their mission, their services and resources, and the manifold roles they play in their local communities. In the acknowledgments of my book, I tell the story of my great-grandmother Isabel Hoover Bensberg ("Issy"), who left high school after two years for a position as Second Assistant Librarian in Fresno, California. The family story was that among the Armenian children she read to in the library basement was William Saroyan, the future

novelist. This seems unlikely, as Saroyan lived in an orphanage in Oakland from 1911 to 1916. Nevertheless, that tale still speaks to the importance of libraries for marginalized communities like immigrant children, even in 1910.

I enjoyed carrying on Issy's tradition through a public library storytime group when I was an undergraduate. While I lived in the "bubble" that so many liberal arts students often enjoy, the public library offered the strongest town-gown connection for me to the community in which I attended college. Years later, I got to participate in storytime at our own Morris Public Library once through the University Choir's outreach activity. (Some of you might recognize this event!) I'm glad to see Morris students taking advantage of and supporting our local library while they are in school here.

My great-grandmother is not the only family connection I have to the good work of public libraries. I grew up in Illinois with an absolutely superb town library, where I volunteered in the Children's Department as a high school student, washing the plastic covers of picture books. (Ever since I've relished being able to say that I used to wash books.) This newspaper article documents a campaign my mother helped lead to extend free library services to all Urbana addresses. At the time, a significant number of the rural Urbana residents required to pay for their library cards lived in trailer parks and were among the poorest families in the district. I was old enough at the time to understand that injustice but also still be bewildered at the idea of doing without a

library. Today, my parents live in Wellfleet, Massachusetts, where my mother is, of course, the president of their Friends of the Library group. Their humongous summer book sales have been on hold during the pandemic, but this group of library lovers, average age perhaps 85, has managed to learn how to Zoom and meet monthly since April 2020. It is unfathomable how much our communities would lose without the many contributions of public libraries.

My mother “trained” for the Friends of the Wellfleet Library book sales through another special project managing book donations, but for a very different readership. Her volunteer work with the Urbana Champaign Books to Prisoners project in the early 2000s granted my first awakening to the carceral state and the critical work of prison education—and indeed, prison abolition. The UC Books to Prisoners project has sent more than 150,000 books to more than 23,000 incarcerated people throughout the state of Illinois since 2004. Volunteers respond to letters from inmates and select titles that have been donated and most closely match prisoner requests—depending on a dizzying array of ever-changing restrictions by prison authorities. The project also staffs circulating libraries in the local county jails. Before Books to Prisoners got involved, the Champaign County Jail “library” was, quote, “a seldom used rolling cart containing approximately 100 paper back books in poor condition.” Now there is an active lending library with more current titles that are actually of use and interest to those in jail. In his

autobiography, Malcolm X commented extensively about the transformation of his learning and literacy in prison, which began, as so many requests to the Urbana Champaign Books to Prisoners project still begin, with a dictionary. He writes, quote, “No university would ask any student to devour literature as I did when this new world opened to me, of being able to read and understand.” Books-to-prisoners projects are an answer to the fact that without libraries, liberation is made harder and more obscure.

Just in case it seems like I’m only bragging about my mother, I should probably also mention that my father taught at what was then the Graduate School of Library and Information Sciences at the University of Illinois (our own Angie’s alma mater!). And although he is far from a conventional scholar of library studies, his work with educators and institutions around the world has certainly shaped my experience and understanding of libraries.

In this last section of my comments, I’ll share some examples of academic libraries like the wonderful one in which we meet today.

I worked as a shelver at my high school library during my senior year, and also belonged to this club, RIF RAF—“Reading Is Fun, Read And Frolic.” (To make it clear how very cool I was, especially with a classicist as President of the Briggs Library Association, I’d like to point out that I’m wearing a Latin Club T-Shirt in the library club

photo.) These green volumes of the *Reader's Guide to Periodicals* are another memory of that time—one of those once crucial but still ephemeral information technologies.

The Chapin Rare Book Library is really a research library and I might have spoken about it earlier in this presentation. But my encounters with it were as a student, much as Steve Gross makes the treasures of our Archives available for the education of Morris students. I took a course in college called “The Historian as Detective” in which each student carefully transcribed a letter from the Thomas Jefferson collection as a final project. Mine happened to be from the Cheshire farmers who sent a 1200-pound cheese to Jefferson as a sign of support (later immortalized by the TV show *The West Wing*, if this sounds familiar). (In the photo on the bottom right, you can see me and one of the 26 extant copies of the Declaration of Independence, if you squint.)

And of course, the academic library that brings us together this evening: Briggs. I'm so proud of the Briggs Library Associates for making possible some of the many, many essential activities and knowledge this library advances. From classroom instruction to community-building game nights, from much appreciated pedagogical material to presentations by world-renowned artists, what *would* we do without this library? The work of the Briggs librarians absolutely makes possible my research and my teaching, and I'm only one of many who can say that. Without academic libraries like the University of Minnesota system, we wouldn't be able to create new knowledge or to pass it on to new generations.

You might not believe this, but I did try to restrain myself in this ode to libraries of the world, tried to hold back on the images I might have included. So yes, Ray Bradbury, thank goodness we are not without libraries! Thank goodness for this library, and to all of you for supporting it.