

Smith-Obolensky Media Interviews its Staff About Libraries

At Smith-Obolensky Media we all share a love for literacy, education, and the empowerment of contextual knowledge, and for us a large part of that development within our own lives came from our time at libraries, whether at school, as part of our work, or in the selection of our private libraries. We interviewed each other in writing to share our experiences.

Mary Jo

You have an amazing history as a teacher, first at the age of four teaching your housekeeper how to read and write as you yourself were learning, then you learned from your mother the technique she had developed to teach English and gave private lessons before and after school, starting at the age of 14. What was the earliest age you experienced a library?

My mother had an extensive library at home and was constantly going to bookstores and libraries to get more books. She had a very wide range of interests and was a poet and writer herself. I was reading existentialism in my early teens, then occult and Castañeda collections, and early and modern classics. Her library was very fascinating, like she was. From an early age I grew up around books and bookish people. In elementary school I didn't use the Catholic school library much. In high school I was always there, constantly reading. It is the best escape and the best way to get oriented to the world and its people! They had a great library with bilingual collections, and it was great to read authors in their original language. I also got two High School diplomas, the US one and the Colombian one. Each had its own literature class. That education gave me a wide field of knowledge.

In England, I was in the library constantly. The lectures did not have textbooks, so you had to get the books the lectures were based on to figure it out. That was a horrible system with not enough books for the students. You had to check out the books and check them back in very quickly. The library was very impressive, with shelves on end and high.

When you came to the US, what were your first impressions of their public library system?

I loved that you could request books and never run out of possibilities. Libraries are friendly, cozy places. They are temples of sorts; you can escape the mad world outside and find a place to read or look up references. With the Internet, accessing knowledge opened up so much, and that area keeps expanding. But there is nothing like getting a book from the library shelf, sitting at a table quietly and enjoying the silent yet profound world of a library. Or to have a pile of books you need to go through to write a paper.

In all of your travels and experiences with various libraries, does one stand out as your favorite?

The New York Public Library! It turns out it was put there by John Jacob Astor's will, Ivan's great grandfather.

As an educator in the US, both with homeschooling your children and teaching adult literacy, what were some of the best resources the library offered?

Books for all levels of literacy. Helpful librarians that can direct one to helpful sources. They are full of knowledge and wisdom, and I think they are taken for granted and not utilized to their full capacity.

Ivan

You have a deep history with reading, and your childhood summer home had an extensive library, much like Percy and Johnny have at Rhinebeck. What comes to mind when you think of libraries?

To me a library is a place where anything is possible to be learned. It is a repository of learning, stories, and the history of our species. It is the legacy of the past to be accessed by those of the present. It is a monument to the best that we can offer.

Which were your favorite public libraries to visit when you were growing up?

I did not go to that many public libraries when I was growing up but the libraries of the schools I went to were always refuges of peace, quiet, and reading. They had a particular smell mixed with lemon wax that was intoxicating to me.

In your travels as a student, what were some impressive school libraries you encountered?

Hill School had a really good one. I could also order any book I wanted, and it would arrive within a week or two. I remember being able to order books on galactic astronomy or on Soviet Naval Strategy, which was of interest to me at the time.

You have an incredible collection of books on your Kindle and at home, and you have frequently donated books to schools and libraries. What are your criteria for selecting books to keep versus which ones you will gift?

Nowadays, it is a question of either usage (if I refer to the book a lot like references, textbooks, and manuals) or if it has a special place in my heart, like the works of Raymond Chandler, or Xenophon's Anabasis. I also keep books that are out of print and not available on Kindle. I like to keep important—and I suppose controversial—writings that will likely be censored or deleted. We may not be aware of it, but we live in an enlightened time where book confiscation and censorship are relatively unknown. That has not been the case for most of the history of books. Reading an Encyclopedia Britannica from 1936 is an eye-opener compared to the same topic in a current edition. Times have changed but so has the way our thoughts and opinions are maneuvered. Is what you are reading on Kindle what was actually written? How are you to know?

Given the substantial changes in how information is available, disseminated, and propagated electronically, in social media, and in sound bytes, what do you consider the greatest strength a library offers its community?

A written indelible record is the most important and least appreciated benefit of a library. Want to know what was written? Pull out the hard copy. It is the *only* way to be sure.

Joanna

What is your earliest memory of public libraries?

It was the best place to hide from bullies. No one could talk smack in a library without being hushed, and there was a sort of force field around a library—it was like every person in there was invisible to everyone else, and yet there were always these watchful eyes, looking out

for you. As long as you had your library card, you could tuck away into a corner and read for hours without anyone becoming suspicious of your motives. It was also a treasure hunt deciding which books I would get to tote home.

What was your favorite discovery in a library?

There were always these fantastic and odd things to discover in a library, but my favorite thing was when I was 9, and found a real typewriter on display.

I was so excited because my parents had both used typewriters (and computers were the big desktops with keyboards and command prompts at the time; Windows NT was out but not in common use) so I put in a piece of paper in the slot of the typewriter, wound it in and punched the keyboard—nothing. I was used to the computer keyboards and the typewriter required some oomph. I gave several versions of my strength and finally got one key to clack against the page. The effort to get out one sentence left me in considerable pain, and that was the end of my love affair with typewriters. However, it was marvelous that I could still experience it, and it makes me smile in remembrance to this day.

Another lovely thing about the libraries was that, while children had their own section, you could freely go through all the aisles and look at all the books. It didn't matter whatever the world was like outside the library—inside it, there were untold teachers and friends, soulmates and kindred spirits. It made it almost impossible to feel lonely.

What was your school library like?

I attended a private school that taught K-12, so it had two libraries: one for kids and one for grownups (by my estimation at the age of 6, the “tall people” about 16+). There was a big wall for each library, with shelving floor to ceiling, separated by a room. I loved reading from my earliest memory: The Children's Illustrated Classics, the Sweet Valley Twins, the Boxcar Children, Encyclopedia Brown, Roald Dahl, the Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys Super Mysteries, and even dictionaries like the Encarta World English dictionary. Once I had read everything of interest, I started on the grownup section (at about age 11). Eventually I was advised the sections were separate for a reason, but I managed to convince them I could at least read John Grisham and Sue Grafton.

When I ran out of available books from school, I discovered the most amazing thing at the local library: “Friends of the Library” had a corner with books for sale for a quarter (now they are a dollar, but back then change was worth something). I could access all sorts of books and buy them with my own money, and I felt like the richest person in the world.

In your estimation, how has the function of a library changed in your generation?

The initial function, in terms of being an intrinsic and irreplaceable element of a community, probably hasn’t changed so much as it has become overlooked with the excessive amount of “information” we now have access to. In the mid-80s, people went to libraries for books and audiobooks, and they were the primary sources of educational material. If you wanted, you could spend days reading all sorts of encyclopedias and newspapers, but now people use Wikipedia and Britannica online. Dictionaries have gone online, with definitions shortened and etymology even omitted. Chat GBT offers ready-made research material, but it is not the same as actually studying many sources of information yourself and coming to your own conclusions. Libraries safeguard the opportunity to find original material that has yet to be tampered with, or edited, or prepackaged, but in the last ten years or so such a concept of “mass information” has become so prevalent I’ve almost forgotten what life before it was like. It makes me somewhat concerned about the generation that comes after me will immediately turn to their phones or mobile devices when they want to know something.

I was excited when Google was about five years old (and had gone through its initial awkward stage) because it meant I wouldn’t have to work so hard hunting down material for my studies, and I could research many sources at once. Now I find myself missing days spent at the library, hunting down tomes and dictionaries. I have to make “time” for libraries now, when going to them used to be second nature.

Is there anything else you would like to share related to libraries?

Mary Jo: I would love to create a campaign of “Get Your Library Card” and have everyone belong to their public library. Make it cool to have your card, showing your support, using the resources, benefiting from the privilege. We can’t take libraries for granted, ever. We need to use the spaces to get away from the noise and give ourselves those precious moments. It is our library; all the books are there and yes, we must have some special ones at home. Libraries are treasure troves!

Joanna: I really recommend everyone get a library card, and a lot of public libraries allow online applications. The public library systems are always looking for more ways to engage in their communities so it's a marvelous treasure hunt (without the X marking the spot). Libraries will always be a source of sanctuary, protection, education, and empowerment. Any safeguarding force for books, knowledge, and the application of tools, must be a required element of a community like air and water are indivisible from human survival.

Ivan: Libraries have marked the high points and low points of civilization. The Alexandria library was burnt more than once, and I cannot get my wits around or even express how much was lost and how impactful that deficit is even today in terms of ancient knowledge and thought. It is incalculable. The Islamic Empire of 700-900 AD instituted Houses of Wisdom (libraries) and without them and the Toledo School of Translators, it is likely there would have been no renaissance, or if one took place, it would have been very different. We all enjoy the Internet and sing its praises but it, too, could be gone in a day or the past changed incrementally without our even knowing. Only a hard copy will tell you and those can be found in libraries. To my sorrow, I saw books being carted out of a public library by the hundreds of volumes. They were being sent to be burnt. Why? No room. And which were being burnt? Only the old ones.

[For more on the subject of lost knowledge, see the [video adaptation](#) of Ivan Obolensky's article, "How Fragile is Our Knowledge Base?".]