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Making Books Work

A GUIDE TO THE USE OF LIBRARIES

by

Jennie M. Flexner

READERS' ADVISER AT

THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY



贈送書



Simon and Schuster, New York, 1943

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WITH GRATITUDE
TO THE READERS AND THE STAFF
CIRCULATION DEPARTMENT
LOUISVILLE FREE PUBLIC LIBRARY
1912-1928

Foreword

THIS BOOK is intended to put the reader, the user of books and libraries, in the way of finding what he wants. It recognizes and will endeavor to suppress the many diverse inhibitions created by library buildings and their architectural arrangements and to erase the artificial barriers between those who sit behind desks and the reader and the book. It will try to lessen the confusion created by having to use unfamiliar library tools or select one from several books on the same subject. It is hoped that the reader can be made to realize that there is an efficient technique for helping him to find what he wants. This technique can be clearly explained by the librarian who has devised it and successfully used by the man or woman for whom it has been developed.

The library and its contents will be described in nontechnical terms, or the technical terms will be translated into plain English. The library's organization insofar as it interests users and its functions of preservation as well as of distribution will be made clear. All of the ways and means of helping the reader to select what he wants from a collection of books will be set down in an effort to show that a library is a live influence in a community. It is able to prove its usefulness by answering not only emergency demands but also the everyday questions of the casual user and the steady requests of the student and of the habitual reader who must have easy access to books.

What may a reader of any age or any intellectual level expect to find for his own use in the library? What will be offered him in the way of general or special assistance in a large, well-organized library or in a village library open for a few hours a week? Is there some-

one with whom he can discuss his needs without feeling that he is interrupting what the library is supposed to regard as more important work?

What will the children's librarian, the school librarian, the reference or circulation librarian, and the highly specialized division chief have to contribute in building up the effective reader service needed? There are confused but intelligent readers who wish the New York, the Detroit, or the Boston Public Library could be as good as that which they have used so satisfactorily in East Orange or Port Huron or Brookline. How can they be enlightened and made to recognize the resources of great collections of books? How can the curse of bigness be exorcised? This question is logically followed by another: how can the curse of inadequacy imposed on a community by a small collection of books be eliminated?

What is taught about the use of books and libraries in school or college may be adequate at that time. But libraries are making constant efforts to improve. The catalogue is always changing. It is a growing, shifting, flexible record. For these reasons it is made on cards in this country, and not printed in books. A new book in a field not heretofore covered may, when added to the library and made easily accessible, make a great difference to the reader, especially to one in the changing technical, professional, or vocational fields. Librarians, alert to current trends of public interest, try to interpret and incorporate usefully in the catalogue what they see and hear in everyday life. What phrases or terms are used by people asking for information they cannot find? What is being said over the radio, on the forum platform, in motion pictures, in the changing speech of the people that should be weighed and incorporated in library records? The relation of the librarian to all these problems of the user will be stressed throughout this book.

The description of this constant change and expansion will involve the discussion of professional procedure and problems if the reader is to understand what the librarian is trying to do for him. A thorough understanding of them and of their relation to live

questions should lead to an appreciation of the library and its contribution to the community and should justify its maintenance and normal growth.

The questions asked will be those which have come to a desk where librarians are seeking to open the ways to books, to pamphlets, to periodicals, and to newspapers for the adult reader who needs more guidance and assistance than he can find in crowded rooms at busy desks. The answers will be those devised for these various purposes and should be illuminating for the reader seeking anywhere to use the library and its books more effectively.

This book has grown through the experience of many years. It has been contributed to by countless readers whose questions have indicated the ways in which professional procedure could be adapted to their needs. Many librarians keenly interested in broader and better book service for the communities with which they work have argued and weighed the problems here set down.

Acknowledgment is gratefully made to the staffs with which I have been associated, especially to the readers' advisers of The New York Public Library. Expert assistance in the sections of this book dealing with the catalogue and with reference books has been given by G. Kathleen Hill and Robert E. Kingery of The New York Public Library, and to them I am deeply indebted.

JENNIE M. FLEXNER

New York
December, 1942

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JENNIE M. FLEXNER, a native of Louisville, Kentucky, in 1905 began her professional career in the Free Public Library of that city. Seven years later she became head of the circulation department, and during her fourteen years' tenure of office circulation figures shot up from less than 100,000 annually to 1,000,000. In 1928 she was invited to join the staff of The New York Public Library as readers' adviser. Before writing *Making Books Work* she produced three books: *Circulation Work in Public Libraries* (1927), *A Readers' Advisory Service* (1934), in collaboration with Sigrid A. Edge, and *Readers' Advisers at Work* (1941), in collaboration with Byron C. Hopkins.

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Making Books Work

CHAPTER I

Where You Begin

WHETHER YOU are a boy on a summer day with a bat and a dog, or a woman whose crab apples will not jell, whether you are a lawyer with a question that cannot be answered at the law library, a student with a research problem, or a secretary looking for the right book to fill a free hour, or whether you are just someone wanting some good book for the moment or the mood, the library is approached hopefully. It is a familiar place, large or small, a natural source of assistance in meeting or in escaping from the problems of the day. So, because the reader turns to it at one time with questions that are very specific and at another with a more or less vague desire for something to read, the library must necessarily be organized to meet the varied demands made constantly on its books and on its staff.

Almost everybody who has been to school in this country knows something about using the library, though, with the passage of time, these skills may have deteriorated. The library you use as an adult may not be the one with which you, the former student, are familiar. Sometimes you may wish as an adult reader to forget the experiences you had in using a library—to start over again. Even a bookish person pausing at the entrance to a library new and unknown to him may find within himself a strange reluctance to approach what he regards as the barriers between him and the books he wants.

This reluctance should be brought out and investigated by the would-be reader. Is it just strangeness, the type of innate timidity often found when you go into new places? It is not the same reaction to marble walls and unaccustomed surroundings that one has

on stepping into a museum or cathedral. A library's possessions are more difficult to use, more personal, for the relation between a reader and what he reads is unique and not wholly comparable with other experiences. Perhaps your hesitancy is based on memories of required readings in youth—using books under orders which spoiled the pleasure that might have resulted from a freer contact. If you had discovered Cooper, Scott, Dickens, Thackeray, Macaulay, and many others for yourself you might have liked them better. Perhaps you find the remains of a deep-rooted resentment of restrictions imposed on the exuberance of youthful spirits. Perhaps a library somewhere seemed unfriendly and hard to use. Perhaps, also, there are pleasant memories of kindness and service which make anything else discouraging. SILENCE and NO SMOKING are signs which have been found in libraries. But time passes quickly and books multiply rapidly and attitudes change, too. What should one ask for? How does one find it in a library today? These and many other points will weigh with the reader investigating his own reactions to the library. Besides, a reader may have a natural unwillingness to start over again, to admit ignorance to someone who knows all about it.

In the effort to meet the adult reader's needs, to enable him first to find his way about, and next to ask intelligent questions, in the answering of which he needs the expert skill of the librarian, the following chapters have been written.

WHAT THE READER WANTS TO KNOW

First, how to use comfortably and successfully its general collection of books and, next, how to use its special tools.

It is well for you—the reader, the browser, the research worker, or the student—to face and hold to the fact that any library is built, assembled, arranged, and supplemented primarily for the benefit of its users, its readers. Especially is this true of our public libraries, which, if looked at imaginatively, can well be seen to reflect the interests of the community.

For the purpose of this book it will be assumed that the articulate reader is an asset to the library and that his expressed needs, if stated clearly and forcibly, will and should serve as the basis of public library service and will be important in determining the policies as well as guiding in the choice of the books that make the book collection. The reader should recognize, even if thus far he has not, that his interest in the well-being, the maintenance, the advancement of the library is, besides being the mainstay of the librarian, part of his personal civic responsibility.

If this situation, this manifest interest were more common, if taxpayers grumbled about the library and other public services to city fathers and not to each other and to the librarian, the public could be better served. Also, there would be more books and the citizen would be better acquainted with his library and more familiar with the way it works.

If a reader's interest and his thinking about what a library can and should do are controlled by previous experiences in school or college libraries, it is well for him to investigate and to see whether these memories, good or bad, have a direct relation to what he finds in a different institution. Nearly every reader at one time or another has a problem or an idea about his own reading which calls for skill in handling—skill which he does not possess but which he may acquire with guidance. Are you one of those readers, like the man who suddenly waked up after walking in and out of an excellent library every week or two for years, taking a book or two from its shelves on each visit? "I have been drawing books from this library for a long time. How does one *use* it? What resources are here for my assistance?" Or are you one of those who think of the library first and turn to it with assurance for the information you can find there? In any event, at some early phase of your contact with any book collection in any public library you need to make the acquaintance of a librarian who is a competent representative of the institution, a public servant who has been trained for his duties. He is much more than a curator. He is a