

PREFACE

Like a lot of good stories, this book starts with a dog. A friend of mine named Marilyn Johnson wrote a book called *This Book Is Overdue!* She had been an obituary writer and noticed that the most interesting obits were from departed librarians, so she decided to embed herself in the world of librarians and learn what makes us tick. One of the libraries she visited was the American Kennel Club library in New York City. When I read that, I thought “I didn’t know there was a library devoted to dogs in New York. What other libraries could there be?” Once I started looking into it, the list grew precipitously. I could identify more than 35, and I figured there must be at least 50. There are. I also speculated that these lesser-known libraries are run by people who have a story to tell and who want their library to be better known than it is.

So I devised a plan. I would visit 50 libraries in Manhattan; write about what I see, what the librarians have to say about their institutions, and how to get there on public transportation; and take a few pictures. I would ask each library a series of simple questions such as “What is your source of funding?” “How long has your library been in existence?” “What online catalog do you use?” “Dewey, Library of Congress, or homemade?” “What are your accomplishments or plans for digitization?” “Who is the most famous person to use your library?” (Hint—there were some amazing answers.) “What do you consider to be your flagship holding?”

I put the idea out to a few publishers—one of them thought about it for a year and then passed. Too New York. Too library. Then, in a great stroke of luck, Chandos, who had published my last book, was expanding their repertoire of library writing, and my editor George Knott encouraged me to send a proposal. Around Thanksgiving week I got the go-ahead and began to map out the particulars. Chandos had wanted me to expand the scope a bit and cover all five boroughs. This turned out to be an easy change, although I had a hard time with Staten Island.

Over the next months I visited libraries in all circumstances. Some were barely holding on, and some were fabulously well endowed. The most important requirement for inclusion in this book is access. The library has to be available to interested members of the public, even though about half of them require an advance appointment. For this reason, most academic libraries were left out. There were more law libraries open to the public

than I could cover, but medical libraries were nearly impossible to find. As I went along with my visits, I added new libraries to the list—the best suggestions came from the visited libraries. Several librarians pointed out that the American Society for Psychological Research had a library on the Upper West Side.

As the winter stretched into the spring of 2015 I found that the plan of visiting 50 libraries could be a bit grueling for a senior citizen, but one important thing kept me going. The enthusiasm for this project among the visited librarians was a wonder. I have heard many people say “I can’t wait to get a copy of this book. What a great idea!”

A few friends had pointed out that there were already directories of special libraries in New York. I found this news to be less than compelling, because I knew that the book I write will have a far more interesting tone than, say, the phone book. This will be filled with a series of “wow” moments, such as holding a piece of balsa wood from the *Kon-Tiki* and seeing Mark Twain’s pool cue, e.e. cummings’s desk, and Helen Keller’s Oscar statuette. At the Louis Armstrong archive, I got to hold Satchmo’s trumpet. At the Morgan Library I held a long letter from Mark Twain to his publisher explaining how he got his pseudonym. I also learned why there is a secret shelf in Morgan’s private office. Just a block away from the Morgan, I brought the project full circle by visiting the American Kennel Club library.

The book is the result of the stars lining up in my life. As I approach the year 2016 it will mark the 50th anniversary of my first job in a library. I joined the Phoenix Public Library in September of 1966 as a very junior part-time clerk, and then became a paraprofessional. In 1989 I took advantage of a satellite program from the University of Arizona in Tucson and got my MLS. I’m told that the motto of the University of Arizona library school is “Get your library degree and see the world.” In my case it was New York. We rented out our house, packed up the dog, and moved 2300 miles north and east. During the next 25 years I enjoyed a career that was everything I could have imagined.

That leads to the second Valentine in this book—New York. When we first moved to Long Island in 1990 the plan was to spend two or three years making a reputation, which I could ride to better job opportunities in Arizona. Then something strange happened. New York got its hooks into me. I had always been a Mets fan, but now we started getting swept up in Yankee resurgence. I found that I was more suited to academic librarianship than public, and there was an enormous selection of colleges and universities

in the area. After working 24 years in one library I found it refreshing to try new things every few years.

New York is, quite simply, a cultural treasure chest. Early in our time here, we saw Pavarotti sing and Tom Robbins read in Central Park. We stood on the banks of the East River in 1994 to see the regatta of boats celebrating the 500th anniversary of Columbus's voyage. At the New York Public Library we saw the Dead Sea Scrolls. At the Morgan Library we saw a Gutenberg Bible for the first time. We saw live national broadcasts of *The Today Show*. At the Book Expo conferences in the spring we saw too many authors to remember, but my favorite moment was making Michael Moore laugh. Two years in New York stretched into five, then 10, then 25.

So now I offer my view of the New York City Library world. I hope that you will find a library or two that you cannot wait to visit. After writing about technology for years, I hope that this will provide information that is more enduring. These are all libraries that have survived through the economic crash of 2008 and Hurricane Sandy, so I think they are in it for the long haul. In most cases, I want to go back myself, when I'm not in a hurry, and savor the joys to be found in these enduring libraries.