

CHAPTER 9

Language Libraries

If it had been possible to build the Tower of Babel without climbing it, it would have been permitted.

Franz Kafka

LIBRARY: JOHN & FRANCINE HASKELL LIBRARY FRENCH INSTITUTE ALLIANCE FRANÇAISE

Address: 22 East 60th Street (between Park and Madison Avenues)

URL: <http://www.fiaf.org/library/about.shtml>

Telephone: (212) 388-6655

E-mail: library@fiaf.org

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/fiafny>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/fiafny>

In the 1970s I worked in the Fine Arts section of the Phoenix Public Library. When times were slow, I would look through the books in ready reference. Once I was looking through a set of *Film World Annual*, and I noticed a picture of a young girl in a Paris park in semiprofile. Later I saw the same picture in the newspaper with the news that the film *The Aviator's Wife* would be shown that night in Scottsdale. My wife and I went, and I thought the film was wonderful. The director, Éric Rohmer, showed a world in France in which young people were all kidding themselves, and your job as the audience was to determine what they were really all about. I became a fan of Rohmer for life and even created a Website for other Rohmer fans. They even quoted me in the *Irish Times* when Rohmer died. I have been to France only once, but it left a lasting impression on me. When I first visited the French Institute Alliance Française library to set up an appointment, I felt like I was entering a slice of Paris on the Upper East Side. There are lots of white and red, comfortable chairs and marble statues of Americans, such as Benjamin Franklin.

Weeks later, I met with Katharine Branning, Vice President of the Library, who took an hour out to tell me the story of her library. The tale begins in 1911, when The Museum of French Art, the French Institute in the United States was founded, with a provision in its charter for the establishment of a library. Like most of the older institutions I visited, the first incarnation was in Lower Manhattan. True to their word, the library appeared a year later along with the museum. The library served up information on French arts, sciences, and literature for Institute members and the general public. By 1915, the Institute had moved up to 48th Street and Fifth Avenue. By this time it had established a circulating literary library for members only.



Main reading area of the library.

I always ask about famous people who have visited a library, but Branning had information that trumped everyone else. The artist and writer Marcel Duchamp worked at the library when he arrived in New York in 1915, and he stayed there for two years. It is said that he was greatly responsible for the organization of the library.

A decade later the library was moved into a building on East 60th Street, where it remains to this day. By this time, the collection of around 10,000 titles was substantially centered on French decorative arts, but they were starting to build a collection of literature as well. The library weathered the Depression years with decreased hours and a nonexistent budget for new acquisitions. At this point, the nonfiction collection had all been reference, but they loosened this restriction and now all titles could be borrowed by members.

By the early 1950s, the library was in a sad state, and an effort was made to improve working conditions and stop relying on gifts to expand the collection, although a professional librarian was not hired until the 1960s. In 1971 the French Institute merged with the Alliance Française de New York, which had been founded in 1848, and became the French Institute Alliance Française, or FIAF, and the library enjoyed decades of prosperity, becoming the first department of the Institute to get a computer and e-mail. In 1995 the library was further upgraded, thanks to a challenge grant by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This enhancement also included a restructuring of the collection to concentrate on the current image of contemporary France and devote fewer resources to the historical aspect. The final result of this was a complete reconstruction of the library and computerization of the operation. The new library was inaugurated by Catherine Trautmann, Culture Minister of France in 1998. In addition to the library, the FIAF includes a 170-seat amphitheater and a 400-seat full theater.

Currently, the library has 2500 subscribing members, and the library's services are offered to the users of the Institute's many educational programs. During Branning's time at the library, they have developed a major program for juvenile services. A \$95 fee entitles members to use all library services, including book circulation, and gives them access to the library's digital collection of e-books and 250 online periodicals. It also grants them free admission to the weekly screenings of French films. The library now owns more than 45,000 titles, with a major collection of books focusing on France in all subject areas. Branning told me that most of the books are in French, although there are also titles in English about France. In addition, they have a substantial collection of language learning materials in all formats. There is also a large collection of French films on DVD.

Branning has been the library director here for 20 years. She has seen the major upgrades and also steered the library through some tough times. She is intense about her advocacy for this library—she gave me the impression that she is awake nights thinking of new ways to move the library forward. I asked her some of the standard questions, such as which item they consider to be their flagship holding, but I was told that they no longer keep rare books, so all the holdings here serve the practical purpose of promoting the French experience, and there is no one title that they are particularly proud of. Famous people who have used the library include the President of France, actress Catherine Deneuve, and authors Gay Talese and Louis Auchincloss.

LIBRARY: GOETHE-INSTITUT

Address: 30 Irving Place, New York, NY 10003

URL: <https://www.goethe.de/ins/us/en/sta/ney/bib.html>

Telephone: (212) 439-8688

E-mail: circulation@newyork.goethe.org

Access: Browsing open to the public; circulation of books and media for a modest membership fee

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/goetheinstitut.nyc?fref=ts>

Twitter: https://twitter.com/GI_NewYork

Every family has someone who steps up and maintains information about their family tree. This is usually a thankless job (9/10 of my family could not care less). I have done enough of it to know that most of my family is composed of people from the Deep South who did not make much money and were not good at talking to the census man. The one exception is my mother's side, which we have traced back to my great great grandparents, who were German immigrants. I did not know this in college when I took German from the delicate-natured Frau Koppock. I took German because I had a fantasy that I would somehow pass higher math and become an astronomer. I passed the two-year language mark, even though I was not very good at it. The point is that I have a German connection, however slight.

Timing sometimes works in my favor. When I first started contacting the Institute, they were closed for renovation. I sent a note out and heard that they expected to reopen well before my library visit time was complete, so we kept in contact. My visit was eventually set for mid-April, after they had been open in their new location for three weeks.



Library entrance: I thought this was a clever idea.

I was met by their librarian, Katherine Lorimer. I was immediately struck by the strikingly attractive design of the library—all white walls and hardwood shelving, with a bust of Goethe himself by the door.



Goethe among his works.

I am told that the building itself used to be a Rosicrucian Hall and that it was full of mysterious images all over the walls. This is the third location for the library. At first it was housed in a mansion across the street from the Metropolitan Museum. It was a fabulous building, but never quite right for serving as a library. In 2009 the Institute was moved to SoHo, where it was housed on a high floor in an office building. It suffered from a lack of visibility. This was not the case when it was moved to Irving Place; there was a line down the street to get in on opening day. When those people came in, they were immediately presented with a reception desk, which struck me as a great way to humanize a library. It is a fact that libraries can be intimidating, even to other librarians, so touches like this are pure gold.



Periodicals area.

To the left of that door, a double-width display rack of periodicals shows the latest issue of time-tested magazines like *Stern* and *Der Spiegel*. That side of the room also contains a meeting room that comfortably seats about 100

guests for readings and movies. The room is bordered by shelves of books that can be swiveled to allow more or less inclusiveness in the meeting room.

I was told that there are about 8000 physical books and an equal number of e-books. About 80% of these are in German and the rest are English books about Germany. There is no one book that they are particularly proud of, given the nature of the library—they provide good contemporary information on their subject and do not have a rare books effort. They *do* have a wide variety of formats, including a substantial collection of DVDs. Lorimer told me that three-week loans of DVDs are a part of library membership (\$10 per person and half-price for seniors like myself). “One problem is that most of these are in PAL format, so you need a special machine to play them,” she told me. I lit up at this point because I have such a machine to play my *Éric Rohmer* films from France. Also, I noted that they had an entire shelf of my favorite German director, Werner Herzog.

Their online catalog is part of the vast German language consortium, and their holdings are included in WorldCat. They use modified Dewey for their nonfiction, which seems to be a minority of the collection. Famous visitors in recent times include Wallace Shawn, famous for *My Dinner with Andre* and *The Princess Bride*, as well as author Günter Grass. Back in the 5th Avenue days they remember celebrities such as Andy Warhol and the German film director Rainer Werner Fassbender.

The Institute does not just passively support German literature. They are involved in an annual contest to find the best translators of German works into English. The Gutekunst Prize is awarded each year to a promising young translator. They also have an active program of language classes, and the library supplies materials in all formats to support the curriculum. To me, this appears to be a blend of library and neighborhood so perfect as to seem magical.

LIBRARY: INSTITUTO CERVANTES

Address: 211 East 49th Street, New York, NY 10017

URL: http://nyork.cervantes.es/en/library_spanish/library_spanish.htm

Telephone: (212) 308-7720, Ext. 4

E-mail: bibny@cervantes.org

Access: Open to the public; circulation for members

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/InstitutoCervantesNewYork?fref=ts>

I made a preliminary visit to Instituto Cervantes late in winter when I was visiting other libraries on the Upper East Side. Even knowing the street address, I almost walked past the location. You walk down a corridor and end up in a beautiful courtyard, which manages to invoke the feel of a Spanish mansion. Above the library entrance there is a porcelain cat sitting on the roof.



Library seen from the courtyard.

I went in and introduced myself. The man behind the circulation desk alerted the library director, Carmen Delibes, that I was writing a book about specialty libraries and would like to set up a meeting to talk with someone in authority. Five minutes later, I was upstairs. Delibes's desk was at the end of the book stacks with no barrier between her and her patrons. I thought that sent a very appropriate message. She struck me as a young, thoughtful, and soft-spoken person, although at my age most people seem young. She could not answer questions that day, but we did set up a meeting later in the spring.

When I came back to visit her, she was ready with three pages of information addressing my questions. The building dated back to a carpenter's shop in the 1870s, and after many restorations, the site was purchased by the Spanish government in 1999 and totally remodeled to include a library, classrooms, and offices. The library dated back to 1979, but it opened its doors to the public on a 42nd Street location in 1994. In 2003, the library was relocated to its current spot and named after the author Jorge Luis Borges. I was impressed with that choice, as Borges and I share an August birthday. Since then, typical users have included the general public, students, Hispanists, and scholars. It is entirely open to the public during operating hours. Members may check out books and audio for 14 days or movies for 7 days. Basic membership fees are \$75 for adults or \$35 for seniors and students.



Part of the Borges Library's extensive media collection.

The size of the collection is 75,000 monographs and magazines, 8000 videos, and 5000 audio recordings. The Jorge Luis Borges Library is part of the Instituto Cervantes Library Network, RBIC, the most extensive network of Spanish libraries in the world, and one of the most

important open-access Spanish language libraries in the United States. The online catalog at the library displays the holdings for all of the libraries.



1st floor book stacks.

The library wants you to know that they offer unique resources and reference works for students and teachers of Spanish, including specialized dictionaries for studies on literature and the history of the language as well as for research on texts from across Spain and the Americas. In addition there are basic general collections in philosophy, social sciences, art, music, linguistics, geography, and history. The areas of the collection that the library is particularly proud of include Spanish and Latin American literature and the major collection of films and audiovisual materials. After our talk, I was given a tour by Assistant Librarian Richard Heyer. As we were moving through the three floors he gave me one of my better leads for another library to visit—the Hispanic Society in far north Manhattan. That turned into a very valued visit, so this library did its job as an excellent source of information.

LIBRARY: ITALIAN CULTURAL INSTITUTE

Address: 686 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10065

URL: http://www.iicnewyork.esteri.it/IIC_NewYork/Menu/La_Biblioteca/

Telephone: (212) 879-4242

E-mail: iicnewyork@esteri.it

Access: Open to the public

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Italian-Cultural-Institute/178877595493731?fref=ts>

Transportation: Subway line 6 to Hunter College

In several cases I ran up against libraries that were currently closed to the public owing to renovation. For some of these, the libraries were left out of the book because they would not be open for a substantial time. In the case of the Goethe and Italian Institutes, I was able to visit around the time of the reopening.

I learned that the library is part of a network of Italian Cultural Institutes found the world over. The library was established in 1961 by a Columbia professor. It is named after Lorenzo Da Ponte, a lyricist who worked with Mozart on what are, arguably, his three greatest operas—*Don Giovanni*, *The Marriage of Figaro*, and *Così Fan Tutte*. In a very long and somewhat bizarre career, Da Ponte became a priest, took a mistress, fathered two children, was convicted of immorality, and was banished from Venice for 15 years. Eventually, he ended up in the United States, where he taught music at what was then Columbia College. The librarians told me that he was the first Columbia professor to earn tenure.

When I asked what holding they are most proud of, I was told that they own very early editions of the *Divine Comedy*, including one illustrated by Botticelli. The 10,000 books in the reading room are not arranged in Dewey or Library of Congress order, and there are 15,000 more books in nonpublic stacks in the floors above. There used to be more books, but there was a major reorganization in 2000 that caused them to deaccession quite a few titles. Their online catalog is part of the worldwide Italian Cultural Institute network.



Main public collection area.

I asked which famous person had used the library and was told that Jennifer Beals had once been in. Like most librarians, they were eager to talk about which restaurants they recommend to their researchers. “Anything on Lexington Avenue” was the first response, and then they got more specific. “Bernstein’s Deli on Third is great.” There were also raves for Mariella Pizza.

FURTHER READING

Article about Da Ponte: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lorenzo_Da_Ponte.

Bernstein’s Deli: <http://pjbernstein.com/>.

Eric Rohmer page: <http://www.terryballard.org/rohmer.htm>.

George Luis Borges article: <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Jorge-Luis-Borges>.

Gutekunst Translation Prize: <http://www.goethe.de/ins/us/lp/kul/mag/lit/gut/enindex.htm>.

The Internet Culturale: <http://www.internetculturale.it/opencms/opencms/it/>.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Johann-Wolfgang-von-Goethe>.

Making sense of Marcel Duchamp: <http://www.understandingduchamp.com/>.

Mariella Pizza: <http://www.menupages.com/restaurants/mariella-pizza-4/>.

Werner Herzog: <http://www.wernerherzog.com>.

Yelp review of FIAF: <http://www.yelp.com/biz/french-institute-alliance-fran%C3%A7aise-new-york-4?osq=fiaf+library>.

Yelp review of Instituto Cervantes: <http://www.yelp.com/biz/instituto-cervantes-new-york-2>.