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Accidental Finds

Julie Fortenberry

fortenberryillustration@gmail.com

A couple of years ago I moved from Mt. Kisco, New York, to the Chapel Hill area of North Carolina. At the time, the Chapel Hill Public Library was located in a shopping mall while a new library building was being constructed. At first, I didn't know the library location was temporary. I just thought, "What a great place; the malls here have libraries in them!" It seemed like a smart way to attract people who might not otherwise visit a library—people waiting for family members to finish shopping and parents with limited time. I loved the idea that someone might enter a mall with the intention of buying stuff but leave with library books. The books of the Chapel Hill Public Library are now at home in a magnificent new building, but I was a little sad to see them leave the University Mall.

A New York City zoning ordinance states that every oversized skyscraper must provide some sort of public space. Likewise, I think every new proposal for a shopping mall should include some type of library. Of course this is not going to happen. And really, I'm always suspicious when I hear plans about a public-private

partnership. Every vulnerable tax-based institution plagued by the forces of privatization should be championed and free from the restraints of corporate sponsorship. So my "every mall with a library" idea would need some serious ground rules—rules that would keep the library autonomous. I want my government to prop up



the valuable things that have little (or no) market value. I believe in taxpayer support for parks and libraries—the wide open spaces and small, quiet places necessary for mental health. Central Park, for example, works as a pressure-relief valve for the city, providing elbowroom for hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers. It's a vacation spot for those with no opportunity to take a vacation. Like Central Park, libraries function as places to let off steam (albeit quietly).

I can think of teenagers who spent countless lunch hours in the school library because the cafeteria was too much of a social minefield. Inside the stacks they found a life beyond high school. They might have entered the library to hide out but left it having a world opened to them. They could have spent the hour reading *The Iliad* or *Scrapbooking Made Easy*; it doesn't matter. That's the beauty of the library.

Recently, I was talking with my husband about high school. He recounted that in the tenth grade he sometimes cut school and took the city bus to Baltimore's Enoch Pratt Free Library, and he has no memory of a librarian speaking to him. The benign neglect,

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intentional or not, was liberating. He was left alone to wander, listen to records, and read. The library confirmed his suspicion that there was more to be discovered just below the surface of things. To this day he loves exploring the library for the accidental find—the books he didn't even know he wanted and the out-of-print books that can't be found at Barnes and Noble. It was at the library, not his vocational high school, that he learned to love reading.

Sarah Vowell, in her 2008 column "Bringing Pell Grants

to My Eyes," has called her liberal arts education "a trap door to a bottomless pit of beauty." This seems like a fitting metaphor for finding a great novel. One minute you're walking along minding your own business, then *wham*, the floorboards open below you. I confess that I watch a lot of TV, but when I stumble into a book I love, the experience feels like something magical.

Reading starts as something we're doing but can change into something being done *to* us. Just think of the words we use when

we talk about great writing. It takes hold of us. It pulls us in and carries us away. In her essay "On Rapture" Nora Ephron has compared getting sucked into a good book with the rapture of the deep—the disorientation that happens when deep-sea divers spend too much time at the bottom of the ocean (2008). In a time when we are encouraged to live our lives on the surface (and sell our Facebook personalities as some kind of brand), a library is still somewhere to dive down deep and lose ourselves.

Julie Fortenberry was born in southern California and moved to New York City to attend Hunter College where she earned an MFA in painting. Her abstract artwork has been exhibited in New York galleries including White Columns and the Whitney Museum of American Art. She's illustrated several picture books, including *Pirate Boy* by Eve Bunting (a 2012 Children's Choices book). Julie's recently published picture book *The Artist and the King* is her first book as both author and illustrator. She lives in Chatham County, North Carolina, where she shares a studio with her husband, Don. To learn more about her work, go to www.juliefortenberry.com.

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