

## Libraries, Bookstores and the Internet-An Essay

### Preface:

My impetus to write a story or essay or even an entire book is often a response to something in the news or what I'm reading. Frank Bruni wrote a column in the NYT Aug 31, 2019, "Dogs Will Fix Our Broken Democracy". It wasn't about his dog, but rather about getting out meeting all sorts of people on his regular walks with his five and a half year old mixed breed Australian shepherd and Siberian husky in Central Park. He describes her as not just smart but telepathic and uses her as (his) "pivot into a lament about the degradation of our country's civic culture and suggestions how to push back at that process.".... When he leaves the house with Regan (his dog) "he has actual conversations with strangers, who are from all sorts of categories: young and old, black and white, rich and not, fit and fat...there's mutual curtesy and reciprocal generosity with strangers...gifting poop bags to strangers...when you're

about to bend down and pick your beloved (dog's) odiferous bequest, there's no snobbery and no timidity, only solidarity (my emphasis).

“ In Central Park, there's a whole vibrant society of those of us with dogs...when I let Regan lead the way she decides who to wrestle with.

They're not chosen by some social- media algorithm, sorted by ...income level, screened by political affiliation. Which is to say that that these communions are gloriously out of step with the times...our increasingly homogeneous enclaves...our fine grained tiers of influence and our microclimates of privilege which are reflected by the neighborhoods we settle in, the vacation spots we flock to...the schools we send our children to...technology speeds us to people who think precisely as we do and filters out anyone who might challenge us.”

Bruni writes about public spaces in NEW York, the Highline and parkland on the waterfronts in Manhattan and Brooklyn; the open spirit in Austin Texas... the more parks the better, not just in relatively affluent neighborhoods. Public spaces draw the city's residents out of their customized cocoons and into the light...

And let's throw public libraries into the mix, I'm delighted to read about renewed attention to them and the re-imagining of them as community centers that can draw heterogeneous crowds with a mix of needs...as Eric Kleinberg discussed in his recent book "Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization and the Decline of Civil Life." They're one road out of the tribalism that's tearing us apart (Bruni).

This same idea was the lead essay in Zadie Smith's (reprinted by Penguin Books 2019) "Feel Free: Essays". As reviewed in The Guardian Aug 31, 2012 by Alison Flood:

"[Zadie Smith](#) has described local libraries as "absolutely essential" as campaigners in the UK battle to protect the hundreds of branches which are under threat of closure.

Speaking on Radio 5 Live on 30 August, Smith said that she owed her "whole life to books and libraries". The novelist, who joined campaigners fighting to save Kensal Rise library in Brent (where she

lived as a child), said that "like a lot of kids in this country, if you don't have middle-class, educated parents you need to find ways to get books. A lot of people don't have books on their shelves. The library was the place I went to find out what there was to know. It was absolutely essential."

Bruni and Smith agree that not only are libraries a place to read for free what is not available at home but that they are essential to a community to gather, chat, meet your neighbors, have a cup of coffee and buy some books in the local book shop. But the local council closed the classic Victorian library and replaced it with a modern all-purpose library with rental 'flats' above:



*An 1894 drawing of Willesden Green Library-  
The Victorian Society*



*Oxyman/geograph.org.uk*

## A Preface to an Afterword:

From my earliest years , I was a kid who loved reading two kinds of books, books on sports and biographies of my sports heroes, mostly the Brooklyn Dodgers , and when I was a little older historical and war novels, but always as well the ‘other kind’- comic books -which I didn’t know my mother disapproved of until she threw them out while I was at a sleep-away camp the summer I was nine years old. There was a branch of the Newark public library a twenty minute bike ride from my home in the Weequahic section, the same neighborhood where Philip Roth grew up, a middle class neighborhood of mostly businessmen and some professionals. My father, who with my aunt Shari, my mother’s older sister, owned a small infant’s wear manufacturing business in downtown Newark . He worked long hours and usually fell asleep exhausted after dinner. He read two newspapers daily and magazines, the ‘Saturday Evening Post ‘ and ‘Colliers’, but never a book.

Our bookcase was a perfect spot for our fish tank (tropical fish, mostly guppies, guramis and zebra fish) but no books except those I brought home bi-weekly from the branch library and piled on my desk in the 8x10 bedroom I shared with my brother. My mother read, mostly family sagas or romances which she rented for five cents a day from a local stationery store, which I biked home with and returned for her.

Libraries can't function without librarians, people who take a personal interest and are ready to provide guidance and suggestions; they are specialized professionals who select books, read books and ask questions to match the tastes and ages of the people they serve. They also expect we may pick some books off the shelves at random, sit or as the case may be with children snuggle in a comfy small couch or bean bag chair. and browse independently. Book stores now provide chairs for adults and children's sections with small tables, and knowledgeable guidance at the check-out counter or someone on duty for more special guidance if you ask for it. I am belaboring what is familiar to anyone who visits megastores or independent local bookstores even when they have access to the internet and the pop-up suggestions decided by

algorithms chosen on your past buying selections. My bias is that both have a place but the personal, non-robotic experience has pride of place; a parent or librarian or the personal recommendation of a friend or book reviewer over an Amazon marketing tool that knows what I've bought but not what I am interested in now or who I'm buying it for.

Of course as an elderly senior, I grew up without the internet so it's a moot point for me and my generation. As an author I write books that are published in paperback only and self-publish books on Kindle Direct that offer paperback and Kindle versions ; and I buy books in both hard cover and kindle for my convenience- because I like the feel of real paper and the look of attractive book jackets on my shelves. Also, I read from my books at local bookstores and sign copies, personalized as the buyer wishes. I am mindful that some people, even highly educated people don't read books and haven't read a book since it was mandatory in high school or college or prefer listening to books on CD, which they call reading. We don't even have to read in our native language because there are apps that will translate, e.g. Portuguese into English. Let's not forget the prevalence of You Tube videos on everything.

When I moved into our home I bought a books on basic home repair, outdated now but still on my library shelf. You tube is owned by google which now has even more information to sell us something, a blessing or a curse, you decide.

Let's return to those comic books I had bought, borrowed but not returned, that I resented my mother for disposing of because she believed reading them would interfere with my reading books and my academic performance. Ha. She's the parent who would not give my grammar school permission to skip me from sixth grade to eighth grade because she understood that social interaction with my peers and their interests was as important, even more important, than fast tracking me to high school and college. My peer group read books and comic books too, and now kids play videogames with kids from around the planet via wi-fi. How can you throw out wi-fi ? My mother, with limited high school education, meant me no harm but I nonetheless held a grudge until several years ago I when I wrote "The Comics Live Again"-For me they never died- Batman and Robin, Superman, Super-boy and Super-



baby, Captain Marvel and Mary Marvel and Wonder Woman. I could not publish it because of copyright restrictions, but I could read it to my grandchildren so that they would know who my heroes were. Now Marvel is making blockbuster action movies of those heroes and my grandchildren are too old to care about reading “The Comics Live Again”.

Afterword:

A story published in “All Aboard” (IPBooks, 2018, Howard L. Schwartz, M.D.) but originally written for “The Adventures of Kenny and Benny” (unpublished): In the story everyone in the family reads, including the dad. The library is the Maplewood library where the author and his characters live.



Maplewood Library (Photo by author)

Kenny liked books about travel, science and animals. Benny liked to read too, but not many of their friends read very much. TV and computer games were more popular than books with most of the kids in their school. Kenny thought about all the people he knew who liked to read. His mom was always reading, and his dad even complained that he didn't have enough time to read what he liked. Benny's mom read a lot and was in a book club with Kenny's mom and some other women. Once a month, they'd discuss a book that all the women had read. It was

like a class, but with no teacher or grades. Benny's dad read mostly when he traveled on business. He had lots of time to read in airports, on planes, and in hotel rooms at night after work. Kenny's Aunt Jill read a lot, too. In fact, Grandma Sue told him that when Aunt Jill was a little girl, she was always reading—when she wasn't riding horses. Kenny's Aunt Kim loved to write and had written for magazines about food and restaurants. Lots of people read what Aunt Kim wrote. Kenny's dad had written poetry in college, and people enjoyed reading that, too. Poppa Howie had read all the books in his neighborhood library when he was a kid, or so he said. And Poppa Howie was now writing books for his grandchildren (this book is one of them, as if you didn't know).

Why don't more kids read? Kenny thought. He decided to take a survey in his class to find out, and Benny agreed to help. Miss Ross, their teacher, approved the plan as an after-school project. She liked the idea because she was always trying to get the students in her class to read more.

Kenny wrote out some questions to ask, and Benny added a few more of his own. Here are the questions they thought up:

- Who in your family reads and how often?
- Did your parents read to you when you were little?
- Do you have books in your house?
- Do you go to the library, and if you do, how often do you go?
- Do you get books as presents?
- Do you talk about books at home?
- Did your parents ever tell you about a great book they read when they were little? One they thought you might like to read too.

The results of Kenny and Benny's survey showed that kids who read had families who read, which wasn't surprising. What was surprising was that a lot of the kids in Kenny and Benny's class were annoyed at being asked about reading and they told their parents how they felt. Some parents complained to Miss Ross that the survey should not have been

done. The parents also complained to the principal. Kenny and Benny left that to the grownups to sort out; and in the end Kenny and Benny were glad they asked the questions about reading. They thought that maybe the survey might interest their classmates who didn't read much to think about how important and great it was to read. Miss Ross and their principal felt that both Kenny and Benny had done something valuable and told them so.

As Kenny rode his bike to the library with his backpack full of the books he had read and was now ready to return, he hummed a little song he seemed always to have known: " Ho, ho, ho, hee, hee, hee- we are going to the library.

Howard L. Schwartz, M.D.

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