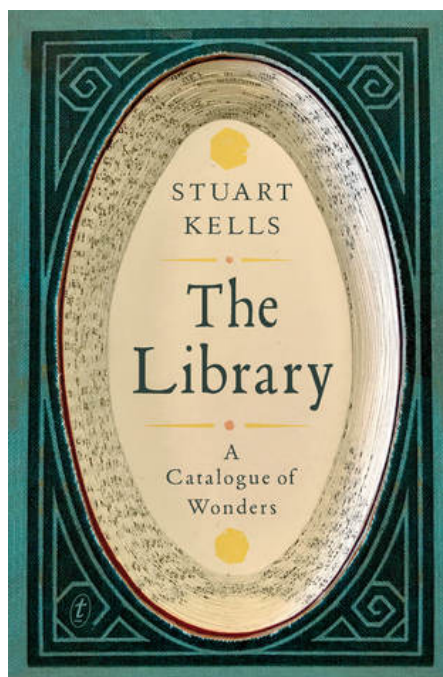




The Library: A Catalogue of Wonders

Stuart Kells

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Libraries are filled with magic. From the Bodleian, the Folger and the Smithsonian to the fabled libraries of middle earth, Umberto Eco's mediaeval library labyrinth and libraries dreamed up by John Donne, Jorge Luis Borges and Carlos Ruiz Zafón, Stuart Kells explores the bookish places, real and fictitious, that continue to capture our imaginations.

The Library: A Catalogue of Wonders is a fascinating and engaging exploration of libraries as places of beauty and wonder. It's a celebration of books as objects and an account of the deeply personal nature of these hallowed spaces by one of Australia's leading bibliophiles.

The Library: A Catalogue of Wonders Details

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From Reader Review The Library: A Catalogue of Wonders for online ebook

Carlos says

Good book and good information here but its mostly anecdotal and about famous people that happened to like libraries through history. Great for a light read and for some historical facts related to libraries , not for a in depth study of the state of libraries as such.

Diana says

I went to a talk by this author at my local library and enjoyed this so bought signed copies of this book for a friend, my boss and myself. For that reason I was hoping this book would be good. I did enjoy most of it but with some reservations. Some of it was a little highbrow for my taste and read like lists of authors, scholars and libraries. When the author introduced anecdotal stories of libraries, authors and book collectors etc.. I liked it a whole lot more. Overall though a subject I am passionate about so glad to have read this Aussie book.

Tundra says

3 1/2 stars. Thanks to Goodreads and Text Publishing for my copy. What I liked best about this book were the quirky anecdotes about libraries and the bibliophiles who created them and what I struggled with was the vast amount of detail and dates and the rapidity in which they were delivered. I understand it's a vast topic but I just can't absorb that amount of detail. Most of all though I wanted pictures (maybe it's just the visual learner in me)! As I was reading I had to Google images of the libraries that were being mentioned in order to comprehend the appearance, vastness and sheer volume of books in them.

For me, this is a book best dipped in and out of. It is well researched and provides a fascinating insight into the reality and fakery of books. Now what I would really like to do is visit some of these libraries, they are truly spectacular.

Text Publishing says

'The Library abounds in fascinating tales of lost codices and found manuscripts, and the sometimes unscrupulous schemes by which people have conspired to obtain or amass valuable volumes.'

New York Times

'I had been half expecting some sort of slide show, featuring gorgeous libraries of the world, but it's not that kind of book. It's more about the human drama of libraries, with gossip alongside anecdotes about the history of libraries.'

ANZ Lit Lovers

'On a vivid tour of the world's great libraries, both real and imagined, Kells is a magnificent guide to the abundant treasures he sets out.'

Mathilda Imlah, Australian Book Review, 2017 Publisher Picks

'If you think you know what a library is, this marvellously idiosyncratic book will make you think again. After visiting hundreds of libraries around the world and in the realm of imagination, bibliophile and rare-book collector Stuart Kells has compiled an enchanting compendium of well-told tales and musings both on the physical and metaphysical dimensions of these multi-storied places.'

Age

'Almost like poetry, a rich ode to all things books and everything we love about them. The enjoyment and engagement is so palpable you can almost taste it and Kells proves to be the perfect guide through the subject matter and history.'

AU Review

'The Library charts the transition between formats such as papyrus scrolls, parchment codices, moveable type and ebooks. There are many whimsical detours along the way, and Kells even devotes a chapter to fantasy libraries...Kells translates his stunning depth of research into breezy digestibility.'

Big Issue

'The Library is a treasure trove and reaching the last page simply prompts an impassioned cry for more of the same.'

Otago Daily Times

'Rich with gossipy tales of the inspired, crazy, brilliant and terrible people who have founded or encountered libraries through history...Kells's reflections are wonderfully romantic, wryly funny...There's no doubt we can all learn a lot from the magnificently obsessive and eloquent Kells.'

Australian

'With The Library, Stuart Kells has written a deft and involving book that manages to balance the erudite with the accessible...There is, in any given chapter, a dozen odd details or compelling stories a reader can only hope to memorise, with an eye towards future use (perfectly timed and skilfully deployed, naturally).'

Monthly

'There is so much to learn and enjoy in this book, with the impressive amount of research never weighing down the accessible writing...Kells makes an elegant plea for the future library—one that will resonate with most book lovers.'

Good Reading

'A sprightly cabinet of bookish curiosities.'

Jane Sullivan, Sydney Morning Herald

'Kells proves a generous guide, taking us on a whirlwind tour through several thousand years of book history.'

Australian Book Review

Todd says

I approached Stuart Kells' "The Library: A Catalogue of Wonders" warily. A book about books and book

collecting? As much as I love books, I had little desire to lose myself in 250-odd pages about ancients, eccentrics and the vagaries of printing if the narrator came off as too pleased with himself, as bibliophiles sometimes do. (Listen, I resemble that remark.) Even the publishing business could be made dull, as I found with Robert Gottlieb's tedious "Avid Reader."

I needn't have worried. Kells' book is generally engaging and breezy, and at its best when the author is digging into his prodigious knowledge of the literary trade – doing so without being too high-flown about it.

"The Library" starts out slowly, as it must – since libraries are a relatively recent invention, dependent as they are on a written language and portability. (It's not like they could house a parade of griots and bards. Who would feed them?) So early libraries – those of the Egyptians and Mesopotamians – contained clay tablets (often kept on trays) and rolls of papyrus. All were handwritten, of course; Gutenberg doesn't enter the picture until the 15th century, which makes the achievements of the scribes and monks of the millennia previous all the more amazing.

Also amazing, in a sad way, is how much literature has been lost. Though there weren't thousands of copies of the same work, copies were made and held in famed libraries such as the one at Alexandria, as well as in private homes. But fires, looting and natural disaster took their tolls. It's astonishing, frankly, we have as much as we do; some books were saved purely by chance, found in garbage pits or smuggled by explorers.

Still, it's in the post-Gutenberg age that Kells, an Australian-born book-trade historian who's written a history of Penguin Books, really comes into his own, because it's here when the "The Library" becomes as much about people as it does about books. And people who are fond of books are certainly an odd lot.

Take diarist Samuel Pepys. He "could not tolerate even the slightest deviation from straightness," Kells writes. "Pepys had even less patience for the ragged line that occurs when books of different heights are shelved together. He commissioned tailor-made blocks – little wooden plinths disguised with leather – and placed them under his books so that the tops would be exactly even."

Related are bibliophiles who purchase books that are precisely the width of the space on their shelves. I can't help but be reminded of the rock star played by Daniel Stern in "Hannah and Her Sisters" who wants to buy a painting from Max von Sydow's artist not because of his talent, but because his giant works will fill Stern's walls and match his décor. "You don't buy paintings to blend in with the sofa!" thunders von Sydow.

Despite – or perhaps because of – these folks, libraries flourish. Thomas Bodley wanted to establish a library at Oxford; thus was born the Bodleian, which tripled its collection just three years after it opened in the early 17th century. The Vatican has a renowned library that's actually not as mysterious as reputation would have it, though its mystery hasn't hurt its collection. There are libraries devoted to Shakespeare (Washington, D.C.'s, Folger, established by a Standard Oil executive) and libraries that disdained Shakespeare (Tolstoy was apparently not a fan).

They're also beautiful buildings in their own right. Kells devotes several pages to J.P. Morgan's marble pile in Manhattan; when Morgan died in 1913, half his fortune was tied up in the library's collection of books and art. (Morgan's library also benefited from a great librarian, Belle da Costa Greene, a colorful character who seems worthy of a book in her own right.)

Still, what is to become of libraries in this digital age? Kells addresses that topic, too, though not as energetically as he does the library overseen by J.R.R. Tolkien's Bilbo Baggins and other characters in Middle-earth. (I'm not a "Lord of the Rings" fan, so the Tolkien excursion went on for a few pages too long.) He makes passing mention of Nicholson Baker's "Double Fold," a book about book and newspaper destruction, and notes that digital conversion of books is no answer to retaining knowledge, since there's no guarantee discs or computer memory will last as long as well-preserved paper – or be as readable, books

such as the Voynich manuscript to the contrary. Still, he leaves the question hanging. Let someone else write a book about new uses for libraries; for Kells, they're places to hold written volumes.

Near the beginning of "The Library," Kells tells the story of Jorge Luis Borges, who turned an unhappy interlude working at a Buenos Aires library into "The Library of Babel," his famed short story about a library that contains an infinite number of books, where the sheer yawning expanse of the collection provokes religious arguments and even suicide. Later, Borges became the head of the city's National Library, where he was much happier. It wasn't the books Borges loathed; it was the people and tedium at his old job. Fortunately, Kells' "Library" offers more of the joy of books than the dreariness. I wonder what he'd think of Robert Gottlieb.

Bethany Kok says

A totally unstructured amble through the history of books and libraries, full of name-dropping and unexplained references. I should have stopped when I realized there were no citations or footnotes. The author barely touches on non-Western libraries but devotes more than a chapter to Tolkien's treatment of books and libraries in Middle Earth. Paragraphs are awkwardly linked and feature segues only a hair less clumsy and lurching than "speaking of ..." There must be a better book about the history of libraries out there.

Sue Gerhardt Griffiths says

I'm sure I have never come across a non-fiction book covering such an extensive amount of research on the history of libraries. Amazing!

Oh, I do love my books but I can't say I'm addicted or obsessed in buying or collecting books as some of these collectors were centuries ago. The mind boggles at the extent some collectors went to to acquire books but they also gave me a good laugh.

This book will appeal to anyone who is an obsessive collector and hoarder of books and anyone wanting knowledge about the incredible history of libraries, of scholars and collectors, dating back to the 1400s and preceding.

Recommended

Many thanks to Text Publishing and Goodreads Giveaways for this review copy.

Kristin says

Imagine going into a library you've never been to before to find something to read.

Some of the books are shelved in order of publication; except when they're not.

Others shelves share a common subject; except when don't.

There's no card catalog or database to help you find what you want in this mess and the librarians won't tell you where the books have come from.

That's what this book is.

It has no index, no cited sources, no narrative focus, and no mention of libraries outside of Europe and America (Although Egypt and Russia rate a few passing comments). Kells writing consists of monotonous lists of names and dates, in language so overwritten that even the most interesting facts become snobby white noise.

The entire thing was a joyless slog and, coming from an actual librarian, that should tell you something.

Jasmine says

I received a copy of this book by way of a Goodreads Giveaway and was initially interested in it due to the Australian link and, also, because I too love libraries. I didn't, however, find it to be the 'catalogue of wonders' it promised to be. The author is clearly a highly educated, scholarly person with a deep understanding of both libraries and books. While I was impressed at his wealth of knowledge on the subject of libraries, I personally found the book to be too highbrow and not as interesting as I had hoped it would be. The chapter headings sound intriguing, but I wasn't willing to wade through all the academic padding in order to enjoy what (might have) lain within. That being said I read mostly for pleasure and relaxation, not so much for education. For those who are the other way inclined, and who would like nothing more than to know virtually everything there is to know about the history of libraries, then I am sure this book would rate most highly.

Angelique Simonsen says

an unexpected delight though dry at times. I learnt the best fact ever though....that the Bodelian library and I were born on the same day 381 years apart! Must be fate that I am a librarian lol

Diane Challenor says

I enjoyed every word in this book. It's a treasure!

Luc Brien says

I first heard of this book while listening to an interview with Stuart Kells on Radio National, and I was so excited to see a copy in my local library. When I got it home and started to read it, however, I soon realised that this book was not for me. It's not so much a "catalogue of wonders" as it is a list of things that happened, some of which took place in libraries.

While there are definitely some interesting library facts in here (the re-evolution of libraries through the ages,

for example), it's primarily a book about bibliophiles (who like libraries), written by a bibliophile (who likes libraries), for other bibliophiles (who like libraries), and I was bored for most of it.

I have three major complaints (right now) about this book:

1. Kells references very few sources for his historical claims, and there is no reference list or bibliography.

Kells seems to assume that we will just take what he's saying about various people and places unquestioningly at face value. Sorry, no.

2. There is an air of smug superiority throughout the text. Kells drops names and places and bits of Latin and French, and assumes (again) that we're all as well-read as he is, that we all get these references and quiet asides. Some people, I have no doubt, will enjoy these immensely, but for the rest of us ignoramuses, the text is elitist and inaccessible.

3. In the opening chapter, Kells marvels at the intangible libraries inherent to the oral histories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditions (sometimes called songlines). Yet in the final chapter, entitled 'A love letter: libraries for the future' he puts his grumpy old man pants on and bemoans the digitisation of the book. Ironically, while this chapter is dedicated to the future of libraries, most of it is spent in the past, pulling out a few examples of where digitisation has failed, or hasn't worked very well. Among his list of 'why computers are bad for books', Kells includes many complaints I've heard before: you can't feel or smell a digital book; you can't appreciate the workmanship in the cover or the fore-edge or the binding; you can't browse in the same way and you lose the thrill of discovery. These are not complaints about digital books; they're complaints about non-physical books, and the same complaints could be levelled at oral traditions from all over the world, from songlines to European folktales to urban legends. Kells' veneration of oral traditions and opposition to digital books looks hypocritical to me.

I wanted to love this book, to be convinced to buy a copy for my reference shelf. Instead, I'll be gratefully placing in the external return chute at Preston Library next week, looking forward to never seeing it again.

Natalie S says

A leading Australian bibliophile goes on a tour of thousands of libraries. The result isn't a punchline but in fact a book called *The Library* by Stuart Kells. This volume is a fascinating text that draws together Kells' scholarly essays on a range of different topics related to the storage of books, reading in general and different methods of communication through history. It's an intriguing trip skipping through the history books and hearing about places that are so much more than a mere storeroom. For many people libraries possess a heart and soul and are a delightful sanctuary, a solace and comfort.

Kells begins by tracing the oral traditions of native tribes and how their members shared their stories and handed these down through the generations. From here, there were original methods to record and write things down. This was done on materials like tablets, the paper-like papyrus and codices made of animal skins. Fast forward through history and we would eventually get books as we know them- printed on a mass scale, made from paper and featuring illustrations. We would also get ones that were ultimately bound with covers to enable the book to be easily located.

This volume is meticulously researched and is full of interesting anecdotes and snapshots from history. Kells is obviously very passionate about books (no one will question his bibliophile status after reading this) and his joy and love is apparent to the reader. Kells' enthusiasm is also something that can be shared by the reader as they come to learn so much and gain a new understanding of the value of books and literature. This is particularly important in this digital age when kindles, e-books and the internet pose a big threat to physical books and libraries.

This volume is also a celebration of different cultures. It cites examples of how libraries have influenced different people and how they have been used as the settings in films and novels. It includes delightful

anecdotes like the story of writer, Jeanette Winterson hiding books under her mattress and on her person in order to read these on the loo because she was forbidden to read non-religious texts by her strict, Pentecostal step-mother. The Library even describes the lengths that some bibliophiles will go to in order to curate and create their own perfect library and to source that elusive or rare book. Heck, Kells even describes some threats to books like fire and water damage and insects like silverfish, bedbugs and book worms. Who would have thought?

The Library is ultimately an engaging and well-written volume by a knowledgeable expert and passionate fan of the subject matter. The result is almost like poetry, a rich ode to all things books and everything we love about them. The enjoyment and engagement is so palpable you can almost taste it and Kells proves to be the perfect guide through the subject matter and history, which ironically could have been lost were it not recorded in this faithful tome. You could consider The Library the good book, except that that one was already taken...

Bonnie says

I really wanted to like this book more than I did. It was a gift from a friend, from halfway around the world. It's signed by the author. It's about libraries! What's not to like? Unfortunately, the book was rather dry and erudite for my tastes. Interesting or amusing anecdotes scattered throughout the book kept me reading, but it felt really disjointed overall, like the author was listing examples without expounding on them. The book would've benefited from either editing down or expanding to a longer book. This endless bouncing from subject to subject then made the 12 straight pages on Tolkien's Middle-Earth libraries and books look really out of place. If nothing else, I will take away the inscription above the bookshelves at the Great Library of Alexandria: "The place for the cure of the souls." I had the pleasure of visiting two amazingly beautiful libraries in 2017 and, along with bookstores and chocolate shops, I will be adding searches for local libraries whenever I travel from here on out.

victor harris says

Not many "Wonders" in this. Some interesting and entertaining anecdotes but reads more like a list of books and how they were destroyed or stolen. No consistent story line, more pieced together segments.
