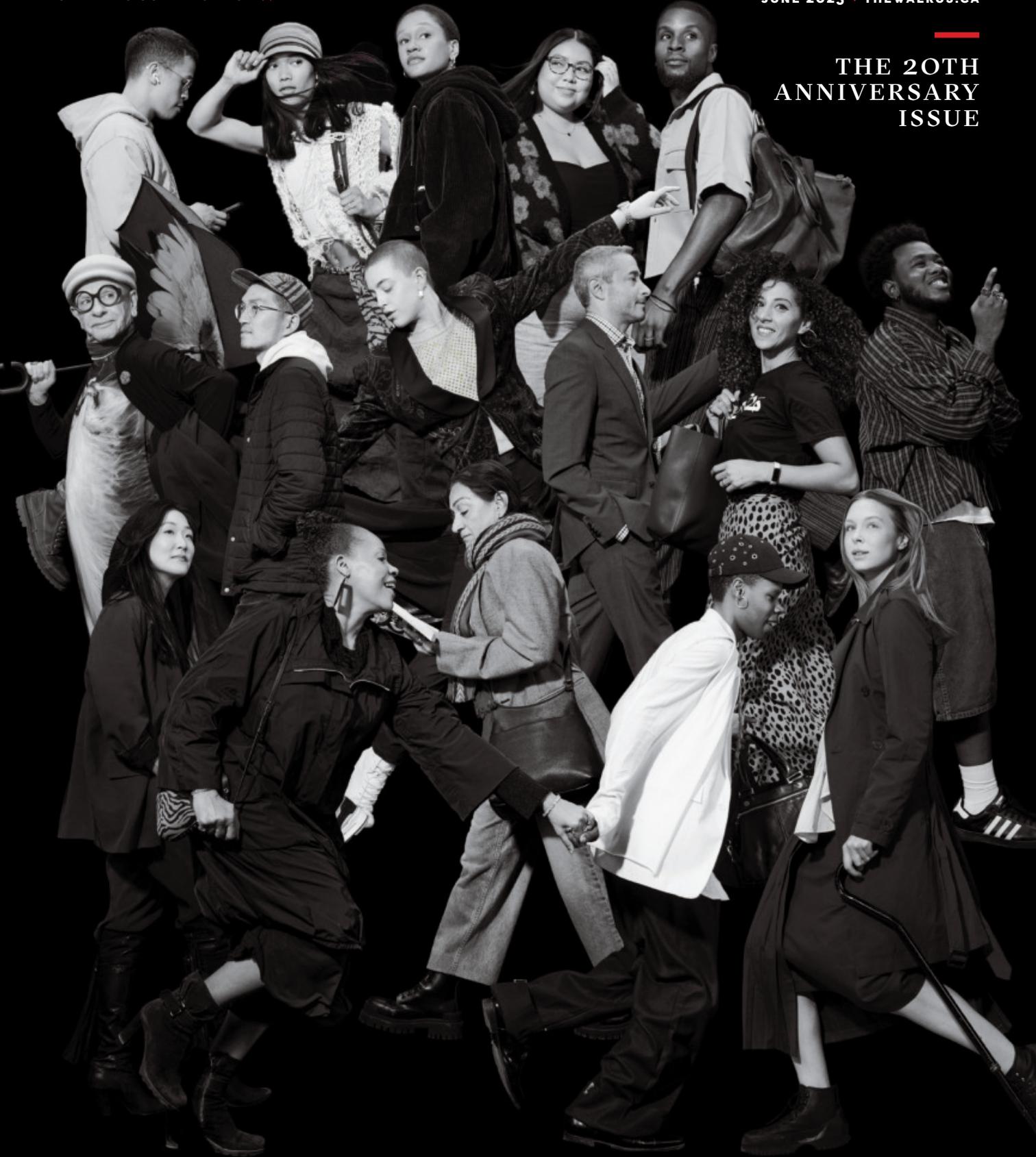


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THE 20TH
ANNIVERSARY
ISSUE



SOCIETY

Have You Been to the Library Lately?

*Librarians once worried about shushing patrons.
Now they deal with mental health episodes,
the homelessness crisis, and random violence*

BY NICHOLAS HUNE-BROWN
ILLUSTRATIONS BY DOROTHY LEUNG

THE ONTARIO Library Association Super Conference is the largest annual gathering of bookish public servants in the country. The days-long event at the sprawling Metro Toronto Convention Centre is both an industry trade show and the de facto meeting spot for all of Canada's librarians—a place to catch up on the latest in cataloguing, hobnob with distant colleagues, and take stock of the state of the library.

On a bitterly cold Friday this February, the final day of the 2023 event, vendors in the exposition hall upstairs were busy hawking everything from book-moving services to exotic animal visits. Former Toronto mayor David Miller sat alone at the University of Toronto Press booth, surrounded by copies of his latest hardcover, while a buzzy line formed down the aisle for signed copies of a picture book about a giant beet. Downstairs, in the corporately neutral confines of meeting

room 202D, a full house had gathered to talk about one of the burning issues at the heart of the modern public library.

Rahma Hashi, a social worker with a bright smile and a beige head scarf, began the session. Over the past decade or so, in response to the waves of vulnerable people arriving at their doors, many North American libraries have begun hiring in-house social workers. Hashi was one of Toronto Public Library's first. Part of her role, she explained, was to make partnerships with shelters, with the idea that the library should always be a welcoming place for everyone but the real work of providing service to people who are homeless should be handled by the professionals.

The reality is somewhat different. In Toronto, over the past few months, Hashi explained, there were about 11,000 people experiencing homelessness, according to the city's count. That's around 11,000 people who may be coming in to a library space to warm up

during the day, she said. Some branches are open later than other social services, and most shelters in Toronto had been full anyway, so library workers were often asked to do the impossible—find shelter for someone in a system that often had no room. “When people come to us at the eleventh hour, when we're closing, and they say, ‘Can you help me find a bed for tonight?’ we call Central Intake, and they're at 100 percent capacity.”

Vicky Varga, a twenty-four-year veteran of Edmonton Public Library, described how the city had moved toward fully integrating social work into the activities of its main library branch. “People really do seek this out, because it's the last truly public space, as I'm sure everybody in this room knows,” she said.

It's an evocative phrase—“the last public space.” It's one I heard over and over while reporting this story, often invoked as a kind of badge of honour. For the library CEOs who need to justify their budgets to unsympathetic city



councils, the phrase emphasizes the importance of their institutions: like the “last old-growth rainforests” or “the last Galápagos tortoises,” “the last public space” sounds like something we should probably spend some money to preserve.

As a description of the role of the library, the phrase is also a remarkable illustration of how far the institution has come. Libraries were once places to access books. They are now places to access everything? The last place to access anything? As the social safety net has frayed, libraries have found themselves filling in the gaps. The conversation in room 202D that afternoon was the sound of library workers struggling with the reality that, despite their best efforts, an institution organized around lending out hardcovers might not be up for the job.

Every library branch in every city has its own specific issues, but in conversations with workers across the country, the broad strokes of the crisis are the same. Librarians say they’re seeing more people with more complex needs than ever before. In Toronto, the number of recorded “incidents,” a term which includes violent, disruptive, or threatening events, spiked from 7.16 per 100,000 visits in 2012 to 35.74 in 2021. In Edmonton, where librarians are offered training to administer naloxone, 2022 saw ninety-nine opioid poisonings across the system. On Vancouver Island, some workers went on strike for nearly two months over workplace concerns and a lack of wage growth. In a letter to library trustees, they argued that “management has refused to agree to many important proposals—including solutions to workplace violence and mental health impacts.” Library workers across the country report being attacked, spat on, threatened, sexually assaulted. They describe the emotional toll that results from not having the necessary resources to help the people who come to them, day after day. They talk about picking up the phone to call for help and realizing that nobody’s coming.

When the floor opened for questions that afternoon in Toronto, hands shot up. A grey-haired man wanted to know how many social workers Edmonton had

hired. “Winnipeg just added its third, and there just aren’t enough hours in the day for the demand,” he said quietly. “How are you going to increase support for staff?” asked a woman near the front. A man mentioned that, because some of Toronto’s branches that have more difficult patrons are unpopular among staff, the least experienced, least senior employees often end up working there.

“What is the next step?” asked a woman from Vancouver Public Library. It was the question that seemed to be on everyone’s mind. People, she said bluntly, were dying. “At what point do library workers, managers, directors speak directly to governments?”

The speakers murmured vague answers about each person doing their best to make change within their own realm, but the truth was there were no good answers. The session ended, and the attendees shuffled out into the vast carpeted expanse of the convention centre. But in the months since, that conversation has continued—in discussions between library CEOs, in meetings between union leaders, and in chats between harried workers on their breaks: What is the next step? Where does the library go from here? Because it’s clear that being “the last public space” isn’t a privilege. It’s a sign that something has gone terribly wrong.

LIBRARIANS ARE a remarkably collegial group, quick to praise one another. Ask them which libraries are doing interesting things, and they’ll talk about Halifax’s gorgeous Central Library and Edmonton’s innovative social programs, Vancouver’s community work on the Downtown Eastside and the herculean feat of running Toronto’s 100 branches, one of the biggest library systems in North America, with nearly 1.2 million cardholders and about 10.6 million items in its collection. “One that we all admire incredibly, not only for the building but for their innovation, is Calgary Public,” said Mary Chevreau, CEO of Kitchener Public Library.

Calgary is a surprising mecca on the Prairies. It’s one of the largest systems in North America, with 57 percent of Calgaryans carrying a library card. The

new Central Library, which opened in 2018, is an architectural wonder: a six-level ark rising up over a light rail line. A curling tunnel of cedar at the entrance leads patrons into a lofty, pleasingly off-kilter atrium that does the thing that parliaments, cathedrals, and other great buildings are supposed to do: create awe and uplift—the feeling that you are in a place where something of significance is happening. The building was responsible for putting Calgary on the *New York Times* list of “52 Places to Go” in 2019 and was included in *Time* magazine’s 100 “World’s Greatest Places” that same year.

I visited early one morning in February, a mild chinook wind blowing in over the mountains and the building’s trapezoidal windows glowing warmly against the electric-blue dawn. At 8 a.m., an hour before opening, a small crowd had already gathered outside the doors. The branch is located in Calgary’s East Village and was intended to revitalize a corner of the city that had long been neglected. The Salvation Army is next door, with other drop-ins and social services clustered in the area. Most of the people outside were single men—smoking cigarettes, carrying duffle bags, whiling away the time.

There is a sense of theatre in the moments before the opening of a big public building, a hushed current of anticipation before the action. Inside, workers trickled in, shedding their heavy winter coats and putting on the library’s bright-blue vests. In the quiet atrium, you could hear the gentle whirr of the “Bookscalator,” a long conveyor belt that shuttles tomes from the return slot downstairs up to the second floor to be sorted. At 8:50, three security guards came down the elevators to their stations by the entrance. And then it was showtime, the doors swinging open and a stream of patrons wandering in—college students clutching iced coffees even in February, thickly bearded middle-aged men who looked like they’d been sleeping rough, a kid in a Spider-Man costume who entered excitedly and then immediately demanded his mother carry him because his “body is tired.”

Sarah Meilleur, the forty-three-year-old CEO, took in the scene. Meilleur is a

small and sprightly die-hard library nerd who has the Dewey Decimal number for books about librarians tattooed on her ankle. She is a lifer, beginning her time at Calgary Public Library shelving books after university and then slowly working her way to the top job in 2021. “I didn’t necessarily think I would be a leader or a CEO,” said Meilleur brightly. “I just loved the work. I think, in libraries, you feel like you make a difference every day.”

As a bookish only child, Meilleur remembers going down to Memorial Park

vaulted ceilings and ornate architecture, Carnegie libraries were designed to inspire the masses. They were places to access books, that great democratizing force. “There was no use to which money could be applied so productive of good to boys and girls who have good within them and ability and ambition to develop it, as the founding of a public library,” Carnegie wrote in his autobiography.

In the decades that followed, the core purpose of the library remained the same. People deserved access to books, books

functions could now be done with the click of a mouse. RFID tags and other forms of automation meant that those armies of workers were no longer needed behind their desks, sorting books, and would need to find new roles.

At the time, countless articles asked if new technology meant “the death of the public library.” Instead, the institution completely transformed itself. Libraries carved out a new role providing online access to those who needed it. They abandoned the big central desk, stopped shushing patrons, and pushed employees out onto the floor to do programming. Today, you’ll find a semester’s load of classes, events, and seminars at your local library: on digital photography, estate planning, quilting, audio recording, taxes for seniors, gaming for teens, and countless “circle times” in which introverts who probably chose the profession because of their passion for Victorian literature are forced to perform “The Bear Went over the Mountain” to rooms full of rioting toddlers.

In the midst of this transformation, new demands began to emerge. Libraries have always been a welcoming space for the entire community. Alexander Calhoun, Calgary’s first librarian, used the space for adult education programs and welcomed “transients” and the unemployed into the building during the Depression. But the past forty years of urban life have seen those demands grow exponentially.

In the late 1970s, “homelessness” as we know it today didn’t really exist; the issue only emerged as a serious social problem in the 1980s. Since then, as governments have abandoned building social housing and rents have skyrocketed, homelessness in Canada has transformed into a snowballing human rights issue. Meanwhile, the opioid crisis has devastated communities, killing more than 34,000 Canadians between 2016 and 2022, according to the Public Health Agency of Canada. And the country’s mental health care system, always an underfunded patchwork of services, is today completely unequipped to deal with demand. According to the Canadian Institute for Health Information, from



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Library with her parents to get her first library card. That location, a stately building on a landscaped park, was Calgary’s first. It was opened in 1912 and funded by Andrew Carnegie, the steel industrialist and philanthropist who used more than \$55 million (US) of his fortune, an astronomical number at the time, to build 2,509 public libraries around the world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including 125 in Canada. Carnegie, who only donated to municipalities committed to funding the maintenance and operation of the library, catalyzed this country’s public system. Often with

were expensive and best shared, and so an entire infrastructure and profession sprung up around that fact. Soon, armies of workers were needed to shelve books and process magazines and journals. Librarianship became a vocation, with attendant degrees and graduate programs and associations.

That version of the library is now gone. “Libraries have seen more change in the past twenty years than at any time in the past hundred,” architecture professor Brian Edwards wrote in 2002. The years since have only solidified that transformation. The rise of the internet meant that one of the reference librarian’s main

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2020 to 2021, Canadians waited a median of twenty-two days for their first counseling session. As other communal support networks have suffered cutbacks and disintegrated, the library has found itself as one of the only places left with an open door.

Today, when Meilleur describes the role of the library, it's as "a place for community connections and a place for people to come together to dream big." It's where people go to fill in online applications for government assistance and print out immigration forms in duplicate. It's a shared office for students and workers stuck in overcrowded apartments. It's one of the last places you can go to warm up or use the washroom, where you won't be hustled along by security or forced to buy something.

If books remain the library's brand, they are no longer its primary focus. In 2015, Calgary trimmed its collection by about 13 percent and relocated tens of thousands of texts from its shelves, according to the *Calgary Herald*, following a trend of libraries "managing down" their print collections. Many of those books are still available for order, stored off site in a warehouse somewhere, but Calgary's branches themselves are noticeably light on printed material, leaving more space to do the programming, meeting, and hanging out that are now at the core of their mandate.

When people tell the story of this transformation, from book repository to social services hub, it's usually as an uncomplicated triumph. A recent "love letter" to libraries in the *New York Times* has a typical capsule history: "As local safety nets shriveled, the library roof magically expanded from umbrella to tarp to circus tent to airplane hangar. The modern library keeps its citizens warm, safe, healthy, entertained, educated, hydrated and, above all, connected."

That story, while heartwarming, obscures the reality of what has happened. No institution "magically" takes on the role of the entire welfare state, especially none as underfunded as the public library. If the library has managed to expand its protective umbrella, it has done so after

a series of difficult decisions. And that expansion has come with costs.

FROM LATE 2020 to early 2021, University of Toronto information science professor Siobhan Stevenson conducted a survey of front-line library workers in four public systems in Canada, asking them about their experiences of violence and incivility.

The results painted a picture of a predominantly female profession that could be difficult, traumatic, and sometimes dangerous. About two-thirds of respondents reported feeling unsafe, from a few times a month to a few times a week. As many as 84 percent had been victims of verbal intimidation, while 75 percent had experienced an unwelcome invasion of personal space or physical intimidation. Four percent said they had been the subject of an attempted rape.

"I have been threatened with violence on a number of occasions, knifed and punched in the face," one respondent reported. "Verbal threats of rape, at least once a month," said another. "As time passes, I have felt more unsafe in my workplace—which surprises me," said a third. "I love my job but it has changed dramatically over the last few years for the worse."

One Toronto library worker I spoke with, who asked not to be named for fear of professional reprisal, described conditions many library workers were completely unprepared for and a management slow to admit there was a problem. "So many people go into library school because they have an image that they will be cataloguing or selecting books or dealing with people's reading interests," he said. "No, you're not." The reality, he said, was closer to working in a neighbourhood bar. "Some bars have a quiet clientele. And some are nasty and violent."

These problems aren't unique to libraries. In every public place, the evidence of a social welfare system that has been chipped away at for decades is on display. In early 2023, a series of violent incidents erupted on Toronto transit. The city's response was simple: they threw police at the problem. If you barred a certain category of person from the bus,

perhaps the larger systemic issues would take care of themselves.

For both ideological and practical reasons, libraries do not have that option. "We can't lock the door, we're for everyone. So that is the starting point," says Åsa Kachan, CEO of Halifax Public Libraries (and chair of The Walrus's Educational Review Committee). The library's openness is the best thing about it, but it also creates inherent challenges. "The tension is between genuinely wanting to be a welcoming, open space for everyone. And then, at the same time, keeping staff safe," says Stevenson.

According to some workers, management is not doing enough to uphold the second half of that equation. "We have found that there has been an uptick in terms of violent incidents in the libraries, and the library as an employer has been very slow to respond to that," says Brandon Haynes, president of the Toronto Public Library Workers Union. Part of the reason for the slow response, Haynes believes, is management's desire to protect the library's image. "There's a real concern, and I think it's a valid concern, with portraying the library as a safe and welcoming space that's open and accessible to everyone," says Haynes. There are worries that if a beloved institution becomes known as a dangerous, unpleasant place, both visits and funding could suffer. "But I think we can't just hide the voices of the library workers," says Haynes. "I think that in order to address the problem, you need to actually put a spotlight on it and not sweep it under the rug."

The desire to put a good face on things can extend to front-line staff themselves. "This idea that the library is all important and can do no wrong kind of pushes library staff to do more and more and use more and more of their time and energy to the point where folks are burning out," says Heather Hill, chair of the master of library and information science program at Western University.

Talk to library workers and you'll find people eagerly going beyond any reasonable description of their duties. The average library page—the precarious workers, often students, who shelve,

tidy, and organize books—makes \$16.50 an hour at Toronto Public Library. Librarians—all of whom have master’s degrees—earn between \$72,054 and \$81,372 a year. Both are on the front lines, and both have seen their responsibilities expand, doing work today that might otherwise be done by a social worker, an early childhood educator, a harm-reduction expert, a therapist, or a settlement worker.

In Calgary’s Saddletowne branch, Kelly Stinn, a soft-spoken library veteran in a cardigan, told me she was concerned about what she has been seeing since the start of the pandemic. “We’re seeing a lot more people that are leaning on the library more heavily, just because the service that might have been there previously is either overextended, changed their mandate, or no longer exists,” she says. One patron walked in recently and just burst into tears. She didn’t know anyone in Canada, had never had mental health counselling before, and didn’t know where to turn. Stinn calmed her down. She set her up with an appointment and asked if she needed a bus ticket

or taxi chit to get downtown. “At one point, she just said to me, ‘Can I have a hug?’” Stinn remembers. So she gave her a hug.

Stinn was noticing something else as well—an increase of kids in serious mental distress. They were emerging from years of lockdowns and illness with debilitating anxiety. Parents were noticing their children struggling in school. According to the Canadian Mental Health Association, children are experiencing extreme stress due to the pandemic. And three out of four can’t get the care they need, either because it’s unavailable or not covered by health insurance. Many of them were ending up at the library, and Stinn felt utterly unequipped to help them. So last summer, she started a graduate certificate in children’s mental health at the University of Calgary. “At least if I have a better understanding, I can share that with the staff here,” she says.

The work of people like Stinn is inspiring. But a country’s immigration settlement programs or children’s mental health care can’t be dependent on

underpaid librarians getting extra graduate degrees. Heather Hill points to a 2018 journal article by Fobazi Ettarh, “Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves,” that set off conversations among her colleagues. Casting the work of libraries as holy and beyond reproach, Ettarh argues, puts unreasonable, unsustainable expectations on workers to act as saints, as pillars of democracy. “Adding duties like life-or-death medical interventions to already overstrained job requirements is an extreme but very real example of job creep,” Ettarh writes. “The library’s purpose may be to serve, but is that purpose so holy when it fails to serve those who work within its walls every day?”

The changing atmosphere in libraries can be difficult to talk about. “I think sometimes even library workers and librarians, who are usually left of centre on some level, find their own ideological commitments challenged,” says Stevenson. “Nobody wants to say, ‘I actually don’t want to deal with that overdose in the washroom. I’m not comfortable dealing with someone who is experiencing a

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serious mental health crisis. I didn't take this job for that.”

One worker from Winnipeg became emotional when talking to me about her job. (Staff aren't allowed to speak to the press, and the city denied an interview request.) She explained that threats and verbal abuse were common, and dealing with erratic behaviour was par for the course. As a veteran of more than ten years, she wasn't particularly sensitive. But it was clear to her that, in recent years, the library was being asked to do far more than it could sustain. “It just becomes this really small space where all the issues that are in society are just magnified,” she said. Staff, she told me, were regularly being retrained in de-escalation techniques, seemingly with the idea that perhaps new training or a new attitude could mitigate the need for more funding or more employees or a functioning supportive housing system. “I spend a lot of time thinking, ‘Is this really what my job is now?’ And what is the library? I don't even think I know anymore,” she said. “I don't remember the last time I actually did my real job.”

One of the issues that made her most upset, however, was how her experiences and those of her co-workers were dismissed by advocates who valued the work that libraries were doing with the vulnerable without seeming to value the workers themselves. “I think what makes it worse is to be minimized and treated like I don't have the right to safety,” she said through tears. “I find that extremely hurtful.” She'd noticed a lot of early retirements among colleagues. A lot of sick days. A lot of leaves of absence. “People have just gone.”

There are no easy solutions to any of this. In early 2019, after staff reported a rise in violent incidents, Winnipeg's Millennium Library took the unprecedented step of introducing airport-style security at its entrance. Patrons were searched with metal-detecting wands. They had their bags checked, with anything deemed dangerous confiscated.

The move led to protests. A community group called Millennium for All produced a report arguing that the presence of heavy security deterred marginalized people from using the library. Would a

homeless person, carrying all their possessions, submit to having their bags searched? Would a Black or Indigenous visitor who had bad experiences with the police simply avoid the building? “This barrier leads some of the people who benefit most from library services to avoid the library, effectively limiting their access,” the report read.

The number of violent incidents did fall. But so, too, did the number of people using the library. Instead of serving the community, the library was pushing people out into the cold. About a year after they were implemented, the extra security measures were scrapped.

Then, on December 11, 2022, twenty-eight-year-old Tyree Cayer was fatally stabbed after an altercation at Millennium Library. Four teenagers between the ages of fourteen and sixteen were charged with his death. The library closed for about two weeks as administrators tried to figure out how to respond. When it fully reopened, a walk-through metal detector had been installed, and police officers were stationed at the door.



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Hello wizenface, hello apple,
 understudy in the fridge
 since March (it's September).
 Hello wrinkly red cheeks,
 I'll bet you're almost a year old,
 born last autumn,
 kept in the fruit storage built
 half-underground on the farm,
 then, in the snow, sold to me.
 Hello my honey crisp (well,
 my honey, no longer crisp...)
 are you asking why you
 haven't been eaten by now?

Because that man hewed to his routines:
 an apple for lunch every day,
 the same red punctuation.
 You were earmarked for the date
 he slipped from my arms & we both
 slid to the floor, red angel, are you
 listening? 911, hospital, hospice,
 and ten days later (you were
 about six months old then),
 he died and was carried
 to a cold shelf.

Hello smiley stem, hello days
 moving you from spot to spot.
 Hello week where I forgot
 and left you at the back and
 went about my new life.
 Greetings new groceries!
 Their jumble causes a re-
 arrangement of your bin,
 so I have to pick you up
 —would you rather
 have been eaten and
 lived on as energy?
Not yet, not yet, my pomme.
 Hello soft wrinkled
 face in my palms.

OVER THE months I spent writing this story, I drifted from library to library. I set up my laptop in Saddletowne in Calgary as groups of gangly teenagers crunched themselves into tiny nooks in the kids' area because, as the librarian told me, "teens like to be tucked away." I went to my local Toronto branch and let my six-year-old forage for as many books about cheetahs as he could find. I used the free Libby app to borrow a digital copy of *The Library Book* by Susan Orlean and the free Hoopla app to stream the first thirty minutes of *The Public*, a well-intentioned but very boring Emilio Estevez movie about a group of homeless people taking over a Cincinnati library. I walked into the soaring atrium of the Toronto Reference Library, probably my favourite building in the city, and was hit with the feeling, so rare in modern life, of being in a beautiful, thoughtful place created and maintained for my benefit—a place that wanted nothing from me other than to make my life marginally better. A public place.

Today, library leaders are recognizing that these public places may have reached the limits of their capacity. According to Pilar Martinez, the CEO of Edmonton Public Library and the chair of the safety and security working group that the Canadian Urban Libraries Council assembled this January, it was time to put some "guardrails" on what libraries ought to be doing with their resources.

There had been talk about a library branch providing clothing to patrons, for example. It was a serious community need, after all, and a place where the library could conceivably step in. But was that their role? And while the three social workers they'd hired in Edmonton had made a huge impact, Martinez said, "that's just not an area that we're going to grow and provide library resources and funding to add additional social workers." Librarians like Martinez were drawing a line. There was the sense, she said, that the Band-Aid solutions they had been trying to provide may even have been obscuring the severity of the problems from governments. It was time to demand help from people outside the building.

“I think what happened is, for a long time, libraries swung in one direction, which is ‘We don’t do anything but books,’” says Amanda French, the manager of social development at Toronto Public Library. “And then they swung wildly in another direction, which is ‘We do everything. We do *everything*.’” Now she sees libraries swinging back to a more sustainable equilibrium.

That approach, however, requires governments to ease that burden. As libraries have taken on more responsibility, they haven’t seen a simultaneous increase in funding. If a public library wants to hire another social worker, does that mean they need to wait for a librarian to leave? Putting cops at the door in Winnipeg rather than hiring more support staff may make sense considering the police’s budget is about \$327 million, ten times higher than the library system’s allocated funds, and this year’s police budget increase was about ten times higher too.

Fixing libraries means more funding to bring up staffing levels to give workers the support they need. But it also means doing things that are much more difficult: building more social housing, hiring more social workers, investing in mental health workers, schools, community centres, and everything else needed to address problems before they reach the library’s doors. Libraries have proven themselves to be incredibly adaptive, contorting themselves

into various shapes to serve the needs of their communities. That’s another favourite librarian saying: “A good library reflects its community.” But that goes both ways. A troubled community is reflected in its libraries. And if the social problems of twenty-first-century life continue to grow with little restraint, they will inevitably find their way into the city’s last public places.

In *Palaces for the People*, Eric Klinenberg’s insightful 2018 book about the importance of “social infrastructure,” he writes: “Everyday life in libraries is a democratic experiment.” There are few other institutions that take as their constituency *everyone*. Democracy, of course, is messy. None of that work is magical. It’s grinding, difficult, always compromised. But watching a library function—doing the mundane, day-to-day work of accommodating an entire city within its walls—is also remarkable.

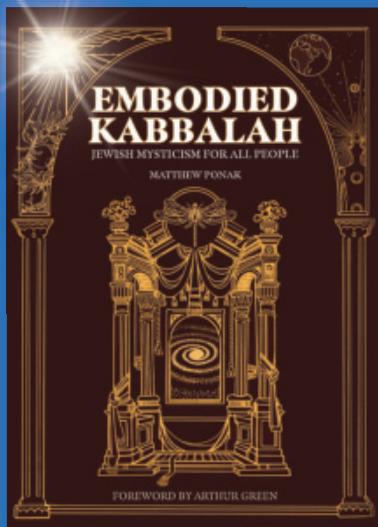
That February morning in Calgary, when the doors opened, visitors scattered to every corner of the building. Prince, a twenty-five-year-old international student from Ghana, set up his laptop on the third floor to study, as he does most days. A sixty-seven-year-old retired carpenter browsed the shelves, finally selecting a copy of Anne Applebaum’s *Twilight of Democracy*, before heading downstairs to the cafe to meet a friend. Jeff, a fifty-five-year-old in a big black hoodie, who was staying at the drop-in centre nearby,

went straight to the laptop collection on the fourth floor and checked out a Chromebook to look for a landscaping job in the spring.

Sneha, meanwhile, sat at a little wooden table in the children’s area with her four-year-old son, Joshya, who was contentedly filling a large sheet of butcher paper with intricate crayon drawings. That morning, they’d come down from their home in the northeast with her husband, who was working at the Salvation Army next door, and now they were spending the day here—reading picture books, choosing DVDs and CDs to take home, using the climbing structure built in the kids’ area.

Sneha said that this was Joshya’s first time at Central Library, but they were regulars at their home branch. It was the perfect place to bring a kid too young for school, a spot to find playmates. Sneha had been a dentist in India but was still finding her footing here, and through the library, she was taking a free online course in medical office administration that, she hoped, would help lead to work. They’d arrived only a few months before. Everything was still new, and life in a big foreign city could be difficult. But Sneha and her family were doing okay. They had found their way to the library. □

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NICHOLAS HUNE-BROWN is a frequent contributor to *The Walrus* and the senior editor at *The Local*.



Embodied Kabbalah

by Matthew Ponak

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