



NON-FICTION BOOK CLUB

December 2019 Selection

***The Library Book* by Susan Orlean**

On the morning of April 28, 1986, a fire alarm sounded in the Los Angeles Public Library. The fire was disastrous: it reached two thousand degrees and burned for more than seven hours. By the time it was extinguished, it had consumed four hundred thousand books and damaged seven hundred thousand more. Investigators descended on the scene, but more than thirty years later, the mystery remains: Did someone purposefully set fire to the library--and if so, who?

Weaving her lifelong love of books and reading into an investigation of the fire, award-winning New Yorker reporter and New York Times bestselling author Susan Orlean delivers a "delightful...reflection on the past, present, and future of libraries in America" (New York magazine) that manages to tell the broader story of libraries and librarians in a way that has never been done before.

In the "exquisitely written, consistently entertaining" (The New York Times) *The Library Book*, Orlean chronicles the LAPL fire and its aftermath to showcase the larger, crucial role that libraries play in our lives; delves into the evolution of libraries; brings each department of the library to vivid life; studies arson and attempts to burn a copy of a book herself; and reexamines the case of Harry Peak, the blond-haired actor long suspected of setting fire to the LAPL more than thirty years ago.

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Discussion Questions:

1. What has your relationship with libraries been throughout your life? Can you share some library memories from childhood to adulthood?
2. How would you describe the fire's impact on the community? How about the community's rebuilding efforts?



3. In chapter 5, Orlean writes that books “take on a kind of human vitality.” What role do books play in your life and home, and do you anthropomorphize them? Have you ever wrestled with the idea of giving books away or otherwise disowning them?
4. Libraries today are more than just a building filled with books. How has your local branch evolved? Are you able to chart these changes and gauge their success within the community?
5. The Library Book confronts the issue of street people patronizing the library. Is this an issue in your hometown? How do you feel about the L.A. library’s involvement, handling of the issue, and the notion of inclusion?
6. Andrew Carnegie is perhaps the most famous supporter and benefactor of libraries. Can you name a modern equivalent who is using his or her largesse to underwrite public works? Is it more important for the public sector to have big benefactors or overall community support?
7. What was your initial impression of Harry Peak? Did it change throughout the investigation?
8. Each of the head librarians discussed in The Library Book brought certain qualities to the position. What ideas and initiatives did you like? Did you disagree with any?
9. The Library Book chronicles the history of the Los Angeles Public Library from its origins to the present day. How were the library’s ups and downs reflective of the city’s ups and down? Are libraries a fair barometer to judge the mood of a city or town?
10. Chapter 30 discusses a range of initiatives undertaken by international libraries and librarians. Do you have a favorite example that you would like to see replicated at your local library?

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Recommendations:

- If you liked *The Library Book*, you might like [*Furious Hours*](#)
- You might also enjoy [*The Ghosts of Eden Park*](#)