

Royal Fellowship of Readers at Omaha Public Library



Waiting for Books

Where Stories are Read and Told



In the Bindery



Patrons of the Children's Department



In Deep Meditation

TO MAKE this library answer the call of all classes; to make it democratic and yet not offensive to the most delicate temperament; to establish goodfellowship—this has been my aim," said Miss Edith Tobitt, librarian of Omaha's public library. And experts high in authority on such things have testified to the success of the undertaking and declare that never have they seen such an "atmosphere" as that at Omaha's public library.

This atmosphere is a source of special pride to the librarian. She considers it her greatest asset and points to it gleefully. More than anyone else she has created it and worked to preserve it. A corps of able assistants in the reference, cataloging, children's and bindery departments have co-operated with her. The realization of their dream is a cosmopolitan crowd bound together by one common tie—the love of books—worshipping at one shrine and paying tribute to the same power, bashing their heads against the intricate mysteries of very learned books, rambling together through reams of printed pages.

Numerous societies embracing widely diverging fields of study have met and are still meeting at the library. Among these are the Fine Arts society, the Story Tellers' league, the Art guild, the Esperanto society, the French and Persian History associations and the Daughters of the American Revolution.

Caste Once Prevalled.

In the beginning these societies found few traits to commend them to each other. They at once assumed a clannishness that boded ill for the librarian's democratic designs. Daughters of the American Revolution didn't fall for the study of Esperanto, believing plain American, shorn even of its English frills, was good enough for any descendant of the Pilgrim fathers.

Readers of Kant, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer and Spencer could find no joy in the lichened rocks and rills of the young readers of novels and poetry. Neither did the disciples of the fine arts hanker after the little ragged regiments of embryonic patriotism who gathered at the Story Tellers' league.

Divers and sundry strange creeds and nifty notions obtained among the patrons. These readers of the innumerable books displayed no intention of traveling toward a common goal. There was no sudden and passionate desire for intellectual democracy. Mechanics, art students, dressmakers, lawyers, restaurateurs, musicians and medical men, the idle and the busy, the tensely earnest and the indifferent, green old age and gray-haired, careworn youth, pride and prejudice, the low and the high, the poor and the rich, the learned and the unlettered, the enthusiastic and the blasé, each sought shelter with his own kind and gave no sign of trespassing nor was any encroachment welcomed.

Democracy Now the Order

This has been changed. The rich rub elbows with the poor, the learned seek to convince their

unenlightened brethren, philosophers join in joyous combat with their finicky, more foolishly inclined brethren. Youth converses with age, tolerance hears the bland platitudes of intolerance; timidity and boldness, love and hate, progressivism and standpatism, all find a common ground, if nothing but the reason for disagreement.

Disciples of the deeper skepticism war earnestly with the apostles of the lighter philosophy and consider it undemocratic to hold themselves aloof. Little tots who have forgotten to wash their faces worry through Mother Goose rhymes or laugh over the adventures of Jack and Jill and feel that there is nothing unkind in the glance the bespectacled gentlemen of the bulging brow deign to bestow upon them.

When literature of any section or sect of the great complex public is received the librarian makes immediate announcement of the fact and is pleased to see her patrons come flocking to the feast. A treatise on languages obsolete or sciences long forgotten, stories of the dreary, wild stretches of the Arctic, or of the land where "lanes are bordered with wan palms," or of some slumbering islands of the lazy seas, have a horde of ready readers, eager for the newest effusion. Tales of the city, with its "somber walls of steel and stone," blackened with the smoke of factory fires, inhabited by the sleep-hungry, red-eyed men and women who love the thunder of its commerce, its dull white lights, have a hungry following, no more than do the tales of tragedy, echoing with the mournful cadences of specters of the tombs. For all of them, for somebody, are shot through with the light of high purpose or some gratifying miselion of enlightenment or entertainment, often clumsily constructed and confused, but always more or less appealing to at least a few of the many.

Papers from All the World

There is another attraction that is drawing a constantly growing company to the library. It is the newspapers from far quarters of the earth, printed in strange tongues, but familiar to the newly arrived, who are still battling with the perverities of English. It is in these papers they find tidings of loved ones left behind, while the more ambitious, seeking solace for shattered hopes in a new country, have broken the old ties for the possi-

bilities of the new. These visitors at the library still hold the irreverent youth of their adopted land in a little awe, but this attitude they are fast sloughing, for the library has become a place where neither caste nor any kind of exclusiveness can thrive.

So many books are written that many must grow musty on the shelves, while others are thumb-worn and frayed, but the majority of all the volumes gathered at the library subserve their own faithful coterie. Bindings may be flamboyant and substantial, or inconspicuous and unstable, and this will influence a casual inspection of the contents, but the meat and the style of the writings indicate how frequently and carefully the book itself will be read. Without regard to the manner of their makeup a number of volumes are often read several times while the ink is still moist. They are either devoured rapidly or leisurely, depending on whether the reader takes his food hastily at the literary lunch counter or masticates it slowly at a table nearby. However, everything on the menu, from Socrates and Plutarch to Robert Chambers and Mary Roberts Rinehart, is ordered before the day is over.

Types of Reader

Readers of books represent as many types as the books that are written. Women smothered in furbelows and feathers, maidens walking in the shadow of sorrow, children in ragged clothes, men and women who pull and fret at life's restrictions, the money-grubbers—all of them find some solace in the books.

"This book," said a gray-haired man who thought his neighbor was wasting time with the magazines, "is a wonderful thing. None of your sentimental slopsop. No, siree. It has pulse and will. It is a gleam through mist and rain, a monitory flame. Nothing sluggish. Syllabled fire, all of it. It is the child of a rampant soul and you ought to get acquainted with it. 'Child of the rampant soul' is what he calls the purpose-books, those that yank you out of the rut, and the brawl and brew of life and set you in some sunny crypt of song. No monkeying with metaphysical dingbats, but heat of blood like that which stirred the ancient scopos to songs of the sea-mew, and the wild and bloody battle and rang with the ardor—"

His neighbor groaned under the deluge of verbiage, kicked a chair viciously and turned another page of the autobiography of the man who laid claim to the greatest expose of corruption ever perpetrated. And his neighbor smiled at the enthusiasm and the memory of the old man and made mental note of the stuff that could work such a wonder with him. He was not as old as the man across the table, but he might need such a book some time. For youth flits fast and the blood cools and the fret and fume is lost as the years slip away. A recluse frowned, for he had come here for quiet, thinking he could find it among the books and the people who peruse them. A garrulous young person began to chatter to her neighbor in a low but unmodified whisper. A newspaper man saw a "feature" and proceeded forthwith to cultivate the acquaintance of the old enthusiast.

What the Sailor Man Wants

Even the sailor is of the assemblage that gathers daily at the library. Tired business men, weary with the work of the day, enjoy him as they would a whiff of salt-sea spray. But unconscious that of all the numbers who come to Omaha's reading room his kind are fewest in numbers he rolls across the floor, bracing himself as if to the heave and lunge of the sea, and often asks for some book that will aid him in his correspondence school work—applied mechanics, law, medicine or marine lore, but never the books that point the way to the ministry.

In this patronage there is an answer to the argument of our forebears who deemed it nothing but the height of folly to delve into the mysteries of the papyrus, unless perchance one were ambitious to become an efficient court fool. These ancestors have been a long time dead and the age in which they lived has grown dim through the years, but their time was comparatively modern, unless they lived in the first nest of civilization on Egypt's dusky plains. There they could have entered into the cells of the astronomers and if they

had pledged their manhood and their lives to the glory of hoodwinking the numberless slaves and common people they might have prospered. There was even a chance for them to win a mummyship with a Rameses or a Pharaoh in the colossal tombs built up through decade after decade until the people were paupered and the purple of royalty became flimsy tinsel.

All the Hosts of Great Ones

Following these ancestors came the shadowy host of mighty writers, living and dead, who drove ignorance before them with the chisel, the quill, the blunt-nosed pen and the belligerent typewriter. And the writers, great and small, medieval and modern, each commanding a battalion of the great, groping army, still direct, still lead, sometimes disastrously, more often with success, in spite of the too intimate knowledge of them sometimes possessed by the rank and file. They are not phantom leaders, but real men and women, who have won, after endless toil and endeavor, immortality, everlasting existence among men. From Boewulf to Chaucer and from Chaucer to Shakespeare and from Shakespeare to Swinburne, including the fawning Boswell, each writer has wrought something of worth to somebody and to all they speak from the covers of the books.

There is a shadowy fellowship between the writers of books and those who read what has been written. In the mind of the imaginative student vague figures of strong men of the pen hover over the shelves and flit before the eye as it follows the trail of titles. From the first man who had ideas, invented a new language, and chipped his thoughts in crude outlines on stones, scrawled them on papyrus or pictured them on the bark of some assiduous tree, after the fashion and facilities of the time, down to the prolific scribler with the modern "mill," the army has never been without its scribe-leader.