

The Library Book, by Susan Orleans: A Review

This book is a delicious and beautifully written love letter to all libraries while being at the same time a fascinating story about the horrendous fire at the Los Angeles Central Public Library on April 29, 1986 and the its preceding and subsequent history. That fire burned for seven hours, destroyed 400,00 books, and severely damaged seven hundred thousand more. There were no human fatalities.

Those numbers do not capture the awful realities of the loss. According to Orleans, they include all theater history; all books about the Bible, Christianity, and church history; ninety thousand books about computers, astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology, medicine; all Shakespeare. Etc., etc., etc. The cost to replace those that could be replaced was \$14 million.

Susan Orleans ranges far and wide. She tells us about her love affair with libraries, about the history of the Los Angeles Public Library, about its directors. We are reminded at some length of our horrific heritage of intentional book burning. Racially and politically motivated book burning (think Nazi Germany) and religiously motivated book burning (think Islamic and Reformation Christian book burning). She tells about her own burning of a book in order to feel the experience directly. She chose is Ray Bradbury's dystopian novel about book burning *Fahrenheit 451*.

Orleans also follows the possible arson story. The cause of the fire remains a mystery, though some investigators suspect a sad character named Harry Peak, an aspiring actor, an attorney's gofer, and a charming handsome compulsive liar. Not a regular library patron, he visited the Los Angeles Public on the morning it burned. He was arrested but not charged.

Orleans treats us to several marvelous characters other than Peak. You will particularly enjoy learning about the outrageous Charles Lummis.

Orleans love of books and of libraries is manifest throughout the fine book.

Bob McDonnell

