A Catechism of Books

by *Joseph Bathanti*

I got my first library card in 1958 while I was still five years old. It was orange and, from a writer's point of view, I view it as a union card.

Throughout my life, libraries have remained an evangelizing presence in the same way the Catholic church has, though gentler, and much less judgmental. Technically a lapsed Catholic, I am not a lapsed reader.

Not incidentally, in fact, the first library I ever knew, the East Liberty Branch of the Pittsburgh Carnegie libraries, was next door on Larimer Avenue to Saints Peter and Paul, the Catholic Church in which I grew up. They seemed extensions of each other, giant otherworldly Gothic buildings, hewn of mountain granite, hung with doors a story high. Inside, they both had that marble, vaulted ceiling, chandeliered, on-tiptoe, candle-lit hush that inspired reverence. Instead of a cross lording over its door lintel, like the church, the library's threshold was guarded by two pedestaled lions.

The first rule I had instilled in me about libraries — one that I still observe — was that, as when in church, one observed silence. It was a holy place in which the only allowable sound was a whisper. To carry the analogy further, I viewed librarians, all women then, as having taken a set of vows, like nuns or monks. There was a no-nonsense severity to them. Terrifically busy, they wore spectacles and oxfords, white blouses and dark cardigan sweaters. Their hair had filigrees of grey in it and they were all approximately fifty years old. Reflexively, like the nuns, their index fingers darted vertically to their lips: Shhh.

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But, unlike the nuns who taught me at Saints Peter and Paul School, which was directly behind the church and but a spit or so away from the library, they seemed to like children. Especially reading children, huddled devoutly at little tables and chairs; children with questions about books; children stumbling up to the enormously long checkout desk (like a symbolic prop in a Kafka novel), juggling a chest full of books and their library cards. There a librarian would throttle a stack of books like a short order cook flipping hotcakes. She'd whip open those jacket covers, one after another, and tattoo with her stamp — I was fascinated by this — the gummed-on "date due" slips with the exact day in burgundy ink that those borrowed books must be returned. Or else: a penny per book for each day late. Then they handed over the stack to you, smiled in benediction, and called you "honey." So shimmering in their delight — another soul saved — they could have been stained glass.

I didn't think they got paid; they were reading missionaries. Their purpose on earth was, like a religious zealot's, to bring the word. In this case, the ones enshrined in books. Their sole reward for this witness was the pure epiphany of

beholding a child in the throes of reading, surely a fast track to heaven. Because I ascribed to them a vocation, I figured that come nightfall, they retreated to cloistered cells somewhere on the premises, and remained through the night immured among their beloved books. They obviously didn't need much. They were able to subsist on the penny-per-day fines. Like the conductors at the East Liberty train station that was once, before my birth, just across the avenue, they launched thousand of journeys. Not incidentally, it was from that very station that Gerald Stern, the great poet, and Andy Warhol himself left on the same redeye for New York, prompted, who knows, by the books some intrepid librarian had handed over to them at the East Liberty Branch.

I don't remember many of the books I borrowed at the library. But, there was one I loved particularly, about a Pilgrim boy who becomes best pals with an Indian boy. I checked it out again and again. And there was the Cowboy Sam series. Sam and his pals on a cattle drive, around the campfire, thwarting stampedes, bringing rustlers to justice. There had to have been many others, but like Robert Lowell says in his poem, "Jean Stafford, A Letter," "my mind economizes so prodigally, I think I've suffered theft." What I remember best, what was most astonishing, however, were the sheer numbers of books, their beauty, their fragrance, their looming weighty secret presence, room upon room, rowed and racked to the ceiling, ladders that rolled along the gleaming shelves for the librarians to mount upon a whim. My impulse was to genuflect. I had to keep reminding myself that I wasn't in church. It was next door. Eventually, in a middle-sixties frenzy of contemporizing a classic immigrant neighborhood that had withstood two world wars, the Depression, and Modernism, the city tore the library down for what they called "urban renewal." What happened to the books I couldn't say, nor the librarians. Ignorance descended; people moved away. As in "Sleeping Beauty," a great thorn hedge grew up around the neighborhood, and it was blighted.

But there were other libraries. When Saints Peter and Paul shut down, another casualty of "urban renewal," I transferred to Sacred Heart School which actually had its own library. A huge cart, actually, that once a week parked in the hall. I began obsessively reading baseball biographies: Mickey Mantle, Jackie Jensen, Bob Turley, Mel Ott, Sal Maglie: all white men. I came from a neighborhood and family that were less than tolerant when it came to African Americans, and I can't claim that I myself had a more liberal bent back then. Yet that library cart planted in me the first seeds of tolerance. I became an integrationist by reading about the Jim Crow hardships the first black players endured by crossing the color line into the major leagues: Jackie Robinson, Roy Campanella, Willie Mays, Satchel Paige.

It was from the Sacred Heart library in 1967, when I was in eighth grade, that I borrowed *The Catcher in the Rye*. Having heard the title all my life, it seemed, I checked it out with blithe indifference. I returned it, however, a changed person, and in complete secrecy. I figured no one in that building but I had ever read it, with its molten expletive lifting off the page in three harrowing dimensions. A librarian, I tell you, had placed fire in my hands, a little old lady wearing the black habit and bonnet of the Sisters of Charity.

With the old East Liberty library gone, I migrated to the main library in the university district. *The* Carnegie Library. An enormous Parthenon-like building, of the same architecture as my now vanished childhood library, but exponentially grander and mitered into the Carnegie Museum.

It was like a city. Books spilling from every crevice, every newspaper and periodical known to mankind, an archive that dated back to Genesis. Where aged books transmigrated when they died, and came to matter even more as ghosts, where new books were born. Floor after floor of paper, room after room furnished with Persian carpets, easy chairs, reading lamps. Like being marooned in a Merchant Ivory film, a battalion of librarians at your beck and call, white gleaming tiny-octagonal-white-tile Victorian bathrooms more spacious than most people's homes. Where I would meet my girlfriend and we would hide whispering in the blessed arbors of the open stacks, on the tallest floors against the rafters, the dehumidifiers wheezing their

approval. It had not occurred to me, at that time, that I would not live long enough to read each book that resided in that building.

When I entered the mighty Hillman Library as a student at the University of Pittsburgh, I couldn't believe it. It was as large, larger even than the Carnegie, but without that patrician air of formality that I loved so much. It thrummed with people, students mainly, in their mad seventies costumes, many of them draped asleep over the loveseats and overstuffed chairs sprinkled everywhere, stacks of books on the end tables like a cluttered living room, many of them draped on each other, making out heavy, cigarette smoke twirling up into the lights like intellectual exhaust; and professors and all manner of misfit and archetype haunting the place, talking to themselves. And the architecture: it was open, airy, glass and more glass, art deco married to Frank Lloyd Wright and Bucky Fuller. I loved it. Wow.

I hurried upstairs to the section on the Romantics and hauled off as much Keats as I could carry — I had a paper due—muttering to myself as I hitchhiked home, "Thou still unravished bride of quietness." Whatever that meant, but filling me with its iambic fever, a line I would never forget. It became a part of my psychic library. I particularly love poet Maxine Kumin's account of her students' discomfort at her requiring them to memorize poems: "I tell the students who groan and the ones who do not that I am doing them a favor: I am providing them with an inner library to draw on when they are taken political prisoner."

By the time I left Pittsburgh for North Carolina with a master's degree in English (what else?), I knew I wanted to be a writer. I applied to VISTA, was accepted, and assigned to work with prison inmates in and around Charlotte, an assignment that ended up being quite congenial to writing. But I didn't know anything about writing except that it took a lot of longing — which I've always been good at. Long before I ever had a North Carolina driver's license, I had library card at the Charlotte-Mecklenburg public library on Tryon Street in downtown Charlotte. Not so downtown then, and the library not half so glittering. But it was charming and devout, and it was there that I first became acquainted with, actually saw in the flesh, so to speak, the first little magazines and periodicals I was destined to publish in, though at the time nothing seemed more remote.

I was puttering away on my poems and stories, by then, and I needed somewhere to send them. I'd pull them off the periodical wall: *Southern Humanities Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Carolina Quarterly*, *South Carolina Review*. I'd leaf through and find out the names of the editors and the addresses. To actually see and touch those magazines, to be able to copy those names and addresses into the little pocket notebook that surely all writers carried to accommodate the capricious muse, made me feel like a writer. It wasn't long before those rejection slips started pouring in.

Then there are the little, often tiny, North Carolina libraries that over the past many years have endeared themselves to me. Nothing spectacular about them at all, their architecture is merely functional, frequently stark, sometimes merely a storefront such as the one in Old Fort, in McDowell County, where children can check out not only books, but toys, where I found a cassette tape of French monks singing Gregorian chants, recorded live on Easter morning — in the 14th century for all I knew.

These little libraries stand as outposts in their respective counties, peddling much more than books. The Hampton B. Allen Library, for instance, in downtown Wadesboro in Anson County, stands as the nexus of the county's culture. When we lived in Anson County, it hosted a lecture series, the bloodmobile, a support group on adolescent pregnancy, the community theatre, and was also headquarters to Moonsong Productions when Stephen Spielberg was in town filming *The Color Purple*. It was also the site of a baby shower our friends had for my wife and me a few weeks before our first son was born.

I could bow my head and recite the litany of libraries, a long prose poem, I have traveled to in this fair state, and in each one there was a surprise waiting for me in the persons of North Carolina citizens fiercely devoted to the word.

In Davie County where I have spoken so often, I can now greet people by their

first names; in Harnett County in Lillington; Haywood County in Waynesville, where the President of the Friends of the library is a British man named Robin; in Burke County where I spoke this past February 4th and met an elderly couple who had traveled three hours from Macon County to hear my talk on autobiography because they were writing a family genealogy; the Henderson County library, crawling with poets; the Franklin County Library in Louisburg; the Nantahala Regional Library far out in remote Murphy, where my son Beckett (named after the great Irish writer Samuel Beckett) portentously took his very first steps (an obvious metaphor for reading or vice versa) — in a library, no less; Robeson County Library in Lumberton where, for some reason, I started my talk by saying that I'd bored people before, but never killed anyone, which got a lot of laughs until a man in the back row keeled over with a heart attack; the amazing Elkin Public Library, situated on a creek over which lean on opposite banks what must be the state's largest and most beautiful beech and sycamore trees, to which I traveled on six successive Sunday afternoons in 1997 to talk about poetry to a dozen acolytes of verse (they loved the inscrutable A.R. Ammons), now old friends, where one Sunday the mayor's wife pulled into the parking lot next to me as I was locking my car, and sweetly drawled, "We don't lock doors in Elkin"; the Yadkin County Library in Yadkinville, just a few doors down on Main Street from a fish camp, where a very old woman gave me the recipe for bird pie (any kind of bird); the Stanly County Library in Albemarle to which I miraculously made it on time, nearly 80 miles in 90 minutes, back roads and traffic signals notwithstanding, St. Christopher riding shotgun; the Union County Library in Monroe where I was presented after my talk with what still ranks as my favorite honorarium of all time, apart from money, of course: a small two-bladed, brown-handled penknife that I still use when I fish; the Elbert Ivey Memorial Library in Hickory where the woman who introduced me pronounced my name a different way each time she mouthed it so for a while I forget myself how it is said; the Sandhills Regional Library in Rockingham, where I met a woman who had been a student at Black Mountain College; the Gaston County Library where only five people showed for my reading, three of whom were the librarian who had invited me, my wife, and myself; Mooresville's tiny public library that's impossible to find; Perquimans County Library in historic Hertford where I snapped a picture of my sons flanking the Catfish Hunter monument, the sea air blowing in from the Chowan Sound; the Thomas Hackney Braswell Library in Rocky Mount; Ashe County Public Library on a downtown West Jefferson peak surrounded by the Blue Ridge; the North Regional Library in Raleigh; the opulent Morrison Regional Library in Charlotte; University City Library in Charlotte; the Dallas Library; Watauga County Public Library, where a county commissioner and a city councilwoman were in attendance for my reading, surely a sign of radical local politics; the Davidson County Public Library, where I delivered a talk on Palm Sunday of last year, and was able at its conclusion to trot across Main Street and pick up blessed Easter palm from a Latino Catholic Church; the Davidson Branch Library in Northern Mecklenburg County.

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My visit in September of 1997 to the Mitchell County Library, way up in the mountains, in Bakersville, merits special mention. Accompanied by my wife and two sons, then 10 and 5, we whirled out of Statesville in mid-afternoon and arrived, starving, not long before my talk at The Oaks, a bed and breakfast the library had reserved for us. There are no motels in Bakersville. The Oaks was run by Cindy Sharpe, a wonderfully friendly, accommodating woman, who had taken a writing workshop I had taught years before at Mayland Community College. She and her

husband, who was off on business, had recently bought the Oaks, an enormous old three-storied southern home with a wrap-around porch and balconies fringing each floor. It had been built in the early 1800s, and needed some work, but it was painted white, and loomed quite cheerily against the firmament, Roan Mountain purpling in the dusk. I hurried in, changed into my requisite tie and coat, and, with directions to Helen's, the local cafe, a few doors down from the library, ripped into downtown Bakersville.

Helen's was jammed. The menu featured the usual Southern fare. They had Italian hoagies. I knew I was taking a chance, but I figured a sandwich would be quick. I had to eat. Growing twitchy with hunger, I watched the clock push toward seven o'clock which was when my program was scheduled to start. At five minutes until the hour, I left my family in Helen's to dine without me. My first stop was the car where I drank the kids' little travel juice boxes, gnawed a pear to its nub, then sprinted along Main Street (the street of choice for public libraries in North Carolina) to the library.

The Mitchell County Library, directly across the street from First Baptist Church, a big red brick building with painted white columns and a shiny white cupola, is storefront-like, situated in a tiny intersection that I assume is the town square. Thus, from their panel of windows my audience, exactly thirty men and women, all very, very, very old and extra Caucasian, wondering where in the world I was, had watched me, their esteemed visiting scholar, come flying down the street, tightening his tie and still chewing. Realizing this at the last moment, with some mortification, I barged in on them, was greeted by the relieved librarian, my host, and sat through her introduction, trying to get my breath.

My subject was *A Visitation of Spirits*, by Randall Keenan. It is an a much-praised, finely written, unrelievedly grim and nihilistic tome written in a very impressionistic style about one night in the life of Horace Cross, a brilliant, homosexual, teenaged black boy living in the stultifying small fictional North Carolina town of Tims Creek. Because of his self-loathing, Horace attempts through ceremonial magic to turn himself into a red-tailed hawk and when that does not work he wanders the landscape naked and finally kills himself with his grandfather's shotgun in front of his minister cousin.

No one liked the book. Many of the citizens there hadn't finished it. They found it profane, offensive. Why would anyone write such a book? What was wrong with young people today? What did those people in charge of the program (the "Let's Talk about It Program," administered by the North Carolina Humanities Council) mean sending them a book like this to read? Two old men unapologetically went to sleep. My head swiveled from disgruntled face to disgruntled face. I said things like, "Yes, ma'am" and "Yes, sir." I told them that I hadn't written the book. I tried in my presentation to guide them through its various levels — this is why "those people" had paid me — Horace's conflicts with his family, the church, the racist stranglehold the rural South still had on him, and of course his sexuality. At each rebuff, my blood sugar dropped precipitously. Across the street the Baptist church seemed to sneer, then levitate with disapproval. Becoming nearly catatonic, I found myself agreeing with them. Maybe it was a bad book.

Thank God, time ran out and it was time for cookies, party mix and punch. I ran to the refreshments and starting shoveling it in before I fainted, while the audience crowded around me with some incredulity. Someone asked me where I was from. I hated to tell them, but I had told enough lies for one night.

"Pennsylvania," I nearly whispered.

A few of the folks nodded. That explained it. I hurried to add that my wife was from Georgia and my sons were native Tar Heels. They shook my hand and told me how much they had enjoyed it. That after hearing me talk about the book, they had found a lot to like in it. I was quite a brainy fellow and they were proud to know me. A few said that now maybe they'd go back and finish the book. Some swore they still wouldn't. No offense. They loaded me down with goodies to take back to my family. One lady even gave me some poems of hers to critique. They hoped I'd

come back, and I assured them that that would be my pleasure.

When I arrived back at The Oaks everyone was seated at a table set up in the front yard, studying the harvest moon, pasted up against the Roan. Along with Cindy and my family there were two other women, friends of Cindy: Shannon, who had literally had her baby under water; and Holly, who had worked for a while at the McDowell County Prison. We had lived in Old Fort for two years and I had visited that prison several times.

In the summer of 1976, six weeks or so before I arrived in North Carolina, there had been a horrible and controversial fire there. Once the fire started the officers in charge left the burning cellblock with the keys in fear of a purported escape and ran for help. Nine inmates died. Holly and I chatted about this. She, of course, knew about the fire. She told me that on the cellblock floor at the prison there are imprinted indelible outlines of the nine dead men — like the Hiroshima shadowgraphs of vaporized Japanese.

Cindy told the story of waking once in the middle of the night in The Oaks and witnessing hovering above her a grey-headed, "long-lipped," old woman in a short-sleeved gingham dress. Cindy's small daughter had been sleeping with her, and the hovering woman had said, "I like her. She's sweet."

Cindy replied,"I like her too. But you better go before you scare her." And the woman vanished. Poof. You see things around here, Cindy told us. Plenty of sounds too. We realized we'd be spending the night in a haunted house, which, now as the moon swelled and swelled, detaching itself from the mountain and threatening to roll into the yard, no longer looked so cozy, but somewhat sinister. The kids had been down at the goat pen feeding the goats, so we were sure they hadn't heard any of this.

I eventually got around to eating my sandwich from Helen's which my wife had toted back in styrofoam. Then we went inside and got ready for bed. The boys refused to sleep alone, so the four of us crowded into a big four-poster bed, the kind dead people rise from in Poe stories, in a cavernous room. All night the house chattered, the too bright moon nudged the deliquescent panes of antique glowing window glass, and the children kicked at us. I couldn't stop thinking about *A Visitation of Spirits*.

Mere hours later, at 6:15 a.m., we hit the pitch, fog-shrouded road and wended our way down the mountain to the Piedmont and our home in Statesville. The kids went to school — my wife home-schooled our older son — and I punched in at Mitchell Community College. I met my first class, which was assigned to do research, at 9 o'clock in the College library. On the ground floor are periodicals, long rows of weighty reference texts, various machines and computers, photocopiers, all the freight of technology. My students, intoxicated with twenty-first century artificial intelligence, went to work, staring at screens that stared back at them.

The books live on the next floor up, and I loved to take the white marble steps up to them just to walk the stacks for respite like a beat cop, making sure all is well in his neighborhood. When I came to the College in 1990 to teach English, I began ordering books for the library. Mainly books of contemporary poetry and fiction, areas where the collection was sorely lacking. For the next eleven years I ordered hundreds, especially from Spring Church Books in Pennsylvania, but also from university and small press catalogues. At least once a month I would turn in my frequently voluminous picks to Rex Klett, the head librarian. Each time I fully expected a reprimand. What did I mean spending all this College money on books? Thousands of dollars. Who did I think I was?

But I was never chided. In due time I'd receive a memo that the new books had come in and were awaiting my inspection before being shelved. I'd drop what I was doing and hurry down to the library and there they'd be behind the main reference desk on a three-tiered cart: Adrienne Rich, Richard Hugo, Jean Genet, University of Michigan's Poets on Poetry Series, all of Fielding Dawson's books from Black Sparrow in California, a trove of books on the Beats, new bios of Samuel Beckett, Frank O'Hara, and Robert Lowell, the journals of Thomas Merton, the novels of Paul Auster. And, the

way I did when I was just a little boy, back on Larimer Avenue in the old East Liberty Branch, I'd pretend they were all mine, and theoretically they were.

I memorized where they were shelved and at a moment's notice could lay hands either for a student or myself on Flannery O'Connor's letters *The Habit of Being* or Martin Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd*. I walked among them, pulling out this one, then another, feeling in their spines immortality. Some I'd save for another day, but unable to refrain I grabbed a couple of newly shelved lithe volumes of poems, and headed back down to my charges. One of them met me at the bottom of the stairs with a question about parenthetical documentation. When I finished explaining to his satisfaction, he asked, "What's upstairs?"

On the way home from work, I stopped at the Iredell Public Library where I chatted with the librarians. At least two of them are poets. They informed me that the book my wife had asked them to hold was ready. I checked out a couple of foreign films, the only place in town to do such a thing, and a few "Lone Rangers" for the boys. On the way out, I browsed the discard shelf: paperbacks a dime, hardbacks a quarter. I found eight mint condition Nevil Shute paperbacks. Unable to resist I hustled back to the checkout desk, dug in my pockets and realized I didn't have a cent.

"I can write a check," I'd said to Martha.

"Don't worry about it," she said. "We'll put it on your tab."

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1. Keyes Metcalf, *Planning Academic and Research Library Buildings* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1965), 416.

2. Susan K. Martin, "The Care and Feeding of the MARC Format," *American Libraries* 10 (September 1970): 498.

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