Topic Selection:

Library history is much more than a collection of facts. Anyone who has taken this course should be familiar, by the end, with major library history trends, important names in the field and significant dates for milestone events. However, not everyone will have a solid image in his or her mind of what it was like to be participate in library history. It is important, when learning from the past, to place facts within their contexts. Thus, when extracting important lessons and trends from library history, it is helpful to be able to put yourself in the situation. As someone who enjoys writing, I find myself creating stories in my mind using the details of the readings. What did the library look like? Who might have visited? What was their purpose for visiting? Who said what? Or did what? And when? These mini, mental stories became the basis for the very short stories in this project.

Problem Statement:

Students of library history would benefit from stories that place library history facts into fictionalized plots, which are also based in factual evidence, so that they can extract lessons and trends within context.

Need for Study:

Library history is already studied academically in quality, peer-reviewed journals, such as *Library Trends* and *Libraries & the Cultural Record*. However, people learn in a variety of ways. Creating stories with fictionalized plots adds another dimension to the scholarly endeavor of learning about library history.

Strengths and Limitations of Approach:

The imagination in a powerful tool, capable of opening intellectual doors that our factual nature might have otherwise left closed. Through weaving facts with fictionalized plots, we are better able to place ourselves in a time period and in a particular library. However, my imagination can be limited, too. Thus, my stories are only as rich as and educational as my imagination allows them to be at the time. Furthermore, stories are placed in one setting, with one group of characters, so they are not comprehensive teaching tools for an entire time period.

Process:

I first read essays, articles and book selections in order to understand better the library, the time period and the characters. After getting a feel for the setting and the location, I began to create a situation in which my characters might have interacted with their particular library. I fact-checked and proofread them as I went along and at the end.
Secrets

When: 1350 BCE
Where: The Hattusas Palace Archives, Hattusa, Turkey

I knew I shouldn’t still be here. Oh my dad would kill me! If the king didn’t kill me first, that is. But what else is an eight-year-old boy to do when he finds himself unexpectedly waiting in the palace archives for his dad to return? Of course he reads if he can.

The day had started like any other day. The sun rose slowly as I milked my goat, taking sips of the tangy milk before passing it into my mother. I had walked as far as the palace gates with my father before joining the other boys to help in the fields outside the city walls. This is my job – to work in the fields – until I am old enough to learn from my father how to clean and care for the palace archives. Two more years, I reminded myself as I worked alongside the men and boys of our city. In the afternoon, we broke for a quick meal beneath the large Cyprus tree, gnawing our bread and chewing on the sweetened dates.

But then, after our break, the shouts started at one end of the field and traveled throughout like ping pong balls. I listened carefully for the message, and realized that they were calling my name. Someone was looking for me. My mother, who had been expecting my fourth sibling, had had the baby. Another boy! My father would be happy… My father! That’s what I was needed for. Before I heard another word of the message being passed along to me, I sprinted back through the fields and toward the town. Back through the outer walls of the city and upwards towards the palace. I would need to get my father and bring him home to my mother.

I kept running up the rocky incline and took a leftward path, towards the palace. Breathless, I related my errand to the guards at the stone walls. They knew me as the kid who said goodbye to his father at these very gates every single morning. They knew, too, that I would one day pass through these gates by invitation. Either they trusted me, or I looked urgent, because they let me pass.

My father had talked about the archives frequently and fondly. From his stories, I knew to travel right inside the palace compound, past formidable royal buildings, to a large, long building filled with tablets. Once inside, though, rather than feeling my father’s awe
and respect for the materials within, I felt nothing but small. This building was surely ten times the size our tiny home – a hundred times the size of me! I could see into a series of rooms, each one stocked with clay tablets.

I spotted a man hunched over by a shelf in the corner of this first room. His hair was lighter than my father’s and his tunic cleaner than the one my father wore, but perhaps he could tell me where I could find my father.

“Hello. I am Yakob, son of Labarmas,” I spoke softly to the gentleman. “I am looking for my father.”

The man slowly raised his head and looked at me curiously. As he did so, I saw his hand pause and realized the reason for his hunching. He had been scratching into a still-damp clay tablet with a long, thin stick, of sorts. Perhaps a piece of sturdy straw. His concentration had been directed towards writing. He was a scribe.

“Your father was sent to the temple to bring back writings from the priests. I alone am here right now. I can go and ask for him to come back.” As he spoke, he set his utensil and a tablet onto a table and rose, fully stretching his legs. “I am done for now and I need a break.”

I had barely said “thank you,” and he was out the door, leaving me to stare at the shelves of tablets around me. And then, there I was, with the palace stories and secrets at my fingertips.

I could read – and this was my secret. My father had picked up pieces of reading and writing from the hours he spent surrounded by clay tablets and scribes. He cared for the tablets, repaired them when necessary, cleaned them, stored them and protected them. After handling them and watching the scribes often enough over the years, the tiny star-shaped lines, scratched into the dirt, had begun to slowly make some meaning to him. With each little piece of knowledge he obtained, he came home and taught me. Scratching the dirt with sticks, I learned that this symbol, shaped like the sun, means something quite different from this one, which looks almost like a fish. Some were series of circles, others long, horizontal lines.

Now, as I wandered the rooms of the archives and peered at the tablets, I began to study the symbols with a new sense of energy. Some of the tablets bore titles on them, indicating their content, even the writer. Many of them had small numbers and were lined up in order. There appeared to be transcripts of religious rites on one particularly large tablet, and notes about treaties with small, neighboring towns on shelves across the room. Back into the first room, I found a series of tablets with lists of names on them, ordered in a fashion unknown to me. Name after name after name... a couple of the phrases were familiar, as I had just scanned them on a shelf. It was almost as if all of the tablets in the archives were listed in this set of tablets, in some order. I suppose it would help find what you needed if you were in a hurry.
But, I was not in a hurry. I wanted to wander and read and find out what I could about the king and his land and his people. Only the priests and the scribes – and my father the repairman – ever read these secrets. The king's notes to the leaders of his soldiers were in here. With every victory, new tablets entered the archives, and new letters were saved, as well. I could learn about warfare and farming and religion and money and....

And, there was my father, rushing into the door, looking for me with worry on his face. I had no time to search for secrets today. I should've waited outside the archives, anyway. Secrets would have to wait for two more years, most likely.

“Mother had the baby,” I told him without delay. “My first brother.” Immediately his face turned from worry to delight. I hoped that we would both someday, my father and I, pass on our secrets of reading to my new brother. Teach him to look for stories, to tend to the records of our king and our people. Perhaps he would, too, long to know all he could about our world, just like me.

Quickly, we set out from the archives, through the palace walls and back to our home where our family awaited us.
Jonah and John and Word of Mouth

When: 600s BCE
Where: The Library of Ashurbanipal, Nineveh, Assyria, Mesopotamia

I kick up dust with each step I take. The skin of my feet and the leather of my sandal straps are coated in the same, tawny shade of dirt. It’s been a long, tiring morning, but I keep walking. I’m almost there... to the place my long-deceased relative, Jonah, almost died trying to avoid. Nineveh.

I am looking for more than Nineveh, though. I need more than a simple view of this city where he spoke. More than the satisfaction of knowing I retraced his steps – minus the whale, of course. I need to visit the library and see what they’ve written about him. The Library of Ashurbanipal, where it is rumored that the royals and the rich have begun to store their knowledge and the important records of their people for others to read. If this is true, then just maybe they’ve recorded some small story about him, too.

As I near the city, I stop in a small market just inside the city’s main gates. Stalls line the walkways, showcasing their fares. Dates and breads tempt me, so I purchase a quick meal and find a seat on a large stone beneath a tree. As I eat, there is nothing to do but contemplate the task before me...and hope for the best.

I hear the voice of the priest in my head as I recall our conversation at the temple a few weeks ago.

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“Tell me, John. How is your memory?”

I looked up at him in confusion, breaking my rhythm in transcribing the priest’s words.

“It is fine,” I reply, unsure if this is a right or a wrong answer.

“Fine? Then tell me about your relative Jonah.”

I frown. Of course, I cannot tell him about Jonah. He knows this. The memory has begun to fade from my family’s minds. My own mother, too distressed when she heard a version of the story as a child, swears she’ll never tell my brother and I. Guess she doesn’t want us to run away from orders, either. The stories I have heard about Jonah come from my great uncle, but he is often so drunk after supper that his stories are never to be entirely trusted.
In reply, I defend myself to the priest, arguing, "You know how little I know about Jonah. You know I wish to know more. But it is not my memory that is failing, it is the memories of my family members."

The priest nods his head slowly, "Of course. Memories have a way of failing us over time. "This," he points at the scroll in front of me, "is why you write for me. So that important things will not be forgotten. So that there will always be a record for a priest to read in the future, if he is in doubt."

Of course, we both already know this, too. But what's his point? "John, I need you to go somewhere for me. I need you to go to Nineveh."

Now, I’ve stopped writing entirely and set my scroll aside. Go to Nineveh? If I were to go to Nineveh, perhaps I could ask the people in the town what stories they tell about a man named Jonah, who prophesied death and destruction. Maybe their stories would be more real than ones my brother and I have been told. But, why does the priest want me to go? Surely, not just because of Jonah.

Seeing the suspense building on my face, the priest explains, "Ashurbanipal, so I heard, has begun to build a collection – a library – where he stores his tablets and scrolls and knowledge so that nothing will be lost from memory. And so that everything can be shared with the wealthy and the learned. I need to know if this is true. If it is, then he may have information we can use."

I stare at him, not believing at first. Ashurbanipal has a personal, royal library? And I could visit it?

The priest continues, his voice picking up excitement, "A traveler came to the temple yesterday, and he gave me fantastic images of this library... 30,000 tablets! Scrolls and papyri enough to fill two rooms! The Enuma Elish, the Enuma Anu Enlil...and more. The knowledge is so vast, he said, that the god Dagon guards rooms from theft at all times.

The traveler also said that there are so many items in the rooms that they have lists of what's inside so that you can find what you need in the collections. Ashurbanipal has been building up his library from his victories in war, and now he shares it with others. Medicine. Law. Mathematics. History. Stories. Stories, John..."

His voice drops back down as he paces back and forth in front of me. Finally, his lips break into a laughing smile. Stories. Will they tell the tale? Will I finally know what really happened to Jonah when he traveled, reluctantly, to Nineveh?

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I watch the sun bake the earth and the homes below it as I finish the last of my bread and take sips of my water. My dusty hand casually strokes the drawstring bag that I’ve carried with me from the beginning of my journey and from inn to inn along the way.

Rolled up tightly in my bag is a scroll from the High Priest, requesting permission that I, the scribe and messenger for our temple, be granted access to this royal library. If, indeed, Ashurbanipal’s great library is real, then I am to seek information on medicine and law and history that might be of help to our people. Our leaders seek cures: cures for new ailments that have taken down the young and the old in our city, and cures for misdeeds that haunt the crime-ridden areas. They hope that the fabulous collection in Nineveh might hold answers that we have lost over the years in our oral traditions.
For my own sake, I long to find out the truth about Jonah. If this library exists, then maybe I can discover a record of his voyage and take home a true tale to share with our family.

After I finish my meal, I stand and brush the crumbs from my tunic, looking ahead in my mind with hope and anticipation. My feet are finally ready to follow again the dry, desert earth that spills out before me. Market paths will lead to winding roads, which will lead eventually to the Library of Ashurbanipal, where more than oral traditions await. More than government numbers and figures tucked away for an exclusive audience. Stories await me, and I am ready to read.
A Perfect Shot

When: 1870s
Where: A small, colonial library in Southern Africa

“I hate killing lions,” Allan Quartermain, my wizened, graying friend laments to me as he joins me in the stacks.

I know this already, we've been friends for so long. It's because of Africa. He loves Africa too much to happily kill any living thing within her. But, still, we all have to eat somehow. He may be a British hero both here in South Africa and in his home country, but he must eat, too. Allan, for his own sake, earns the money that he lives off of by hunting. So he hunts with his impressive collection of rifles and brings back his spoils to share amongst the Africans, like me, and the British alike.

I know Allan’s distaste for killing all things African, so we don’t really discuss the details. I merely inquire, “Lions today, eh, Allan?” as I run my hands along the spines of the British titles.

He wrinkles his nose up in distaste, nods in acquiescence, and slowly replies, “Yes. Lions.”

Moving on, I think.

“Well, what will it be today, then, Allan?” The row I have chosen is the biology section. On the top shelf sits a brief collection of donated books on botany, below that is medical science and then, at waist level, are the zoology books. Some of them are pointless to us. Like this book on dogs as pets, for example. It was probably a remnant of some colonist’s wife who left it behind for other women to read when they come to this desolate, hot country that is devoid of the lush, green gardens that they're accustomed to roaming in Britain. There are still some useful titles for Allan and I, though. Donations from military leaders serving their time here, from scientists who have come to study the flora and fauna, or from missionaries, some of them more enlightened then others by our African standards.

“Not lions,” Allan says.

I select a book that covers gazelles and wildebeests. It’s one we’ve discussed before, but I am still learning to read the hard words, and Allan will never stop learning about the animals.

Together we make our way to the front of the library, past rough, wooden shelves that are stuffed mostly with colonial hand-me-downs. However, we have just been sent, straight from Britain, a library director who is charged with stocking our small, colonial library with anything needed or desired by the British ex-patriots. By rule, we Africans are
allowed to come inside and find books, too. This, though, is known to be the technical rule, not the practical application.

When we hand our selection over to the librarian, the sole employee in this small getup, I stay a step behind Allan. This is our protocol within the library. Outside these walls, he treats me as his friend – his equal, even. I am Nasta, his African hunting guide and companion. When we come to the colonists’ library, though, I pretend to be his servant. We both feel confident that the librarian understands our playacting. He, though, will not give us away to the other colonials who would be less generous with their collection towards an unattended native.

Little do the British know that they are fed in part because Allan chooses to teach me to read. Each week, I select a book, together we read, and he leaves with the knowledge he needs to track animals even in the dead of night and to shoot them with more accuracy than any other Brit or African in our area of the continent. We’ve read physics, zoology, and sometimes even philosophy. Almost all of the books are in English, though, so I never really had an option. I could learn to read English, or I could not read at all.

“And, fine choices, Mr. Quartermain.” The librarian smiles and speaks to Allan, making annotations on a small card. Towards me, he gives a gentle nod of the head.

In his low, methodical voice, Allen replies, simply, “Thank you, Henry, as always.”

We gather up our books from the smooth wooden tabletop and head back outside into the heat and the grasses. We will find a table and drinks, probably in Quartermain’s home, where we will sit, read, think and talk – and for a while grow in knowledge rather than hunt.
The Last Book Club

When: 3000 CE
Where: A secret, illicit library housed in a janitor’s closet in a NARA warehouse

The smell of smoke is all I sense, all I can register, as I dump my cartload of books onto the conveyor belt leading into the orange, gaping mouth of the industrial incinerator. I watch tensely as an attractive blonde, pictured on the cover of an ancient romance novel, slowly inches along the belt to her fiery death. I may be a retired librarian, a purveyor of intellectual freedom and reading rights, but even I’ll admit that our society won’t miss that particular book.

Nonetheless, burning books should be a crime.

As a book creeps past me on the belt, I stop unloading and glance hastily around the incinerator room. My eyes flit over both my shoulders and behind me. The heavy, grey metal door is still closed, and the cement room is empty but for me, the fire and the piles and boxes of books waiting to be destroyed.

Quickly and quietly, I reach out and grab the book closest to me without reading the title or looking to see who or what graces its cover. Perhaps it’s another trashy romance novel, but I don’t care. Just as swiftly, I slide it up under my shirt and into a canvas pocket strapped smoothly to my stomach. My loose shirt drapes elegantly back over the bulge, concealing it from all but the most observant of eyes. No one would notice anything different, unless they were looking for the book corners that pinch every-so-slightly at my thick, cotton t-shirt.

After relieving my cart of its entire burden of books, I wheel it back to the door and into the large, central room of the warehouse I call my office.

Lisa, my co-worker, glances at my empty cart and me. I see her search my middle for the slight, telltale signs of book theft. With a brief nod, she glances away from me and turns back to her own pile of paper books.

Along the far back wall of the large room, I park my cart in a long lineup of empty carts that are all waiting to be refilled with more books that my team and I will decide to destroy.

When I took the job at the Paper Books Division of the National Archives and Records Administration, I had been chosen for my preservation expertise. I was selected to work on a team that, together, would help choose the books that would be preserved by the American government as proof that paper books once existed. Like the clay tablets and papyrus scrolls once housed in museums over a thousand years ago, paper books are now what we are choosing to remember.

At first, my team and I had together selected the most rare, the most important, the newest, and the oldest of all the paper books to come through our doors. We chose the big ones, whichever standouts still existed. Sadly, the preservation techniques of our ancestors hadn’t been sophisticated enough to maintain the paper-based constitution or the first printed Bibles or several other important artifacts. Nevertheless, my team and I chose the next most important documents: important scholarly books, books that had once been tremendously popular and were marked with the phrase, “New York Times Bestseller,”
religious documents of all shapes and sizes as proof that religions, too, had once been important to our ancestors.

Two copies of each book was the maximum NARA would allow us to keep. Like the once-fabled Noah and his animals on the ark, two by two, saving genomes from destruction. Now, there would be only two paper Bibles in existence in our country, dating back to the 1800s. Soon, there would probably only be a handful of paper Bibles in existence around the world.

As I shuffle back to my desk, my eyes sadly scan the stacks of multi-colored books towering all over the warehouse, and the air-controlled cases that hold the more costly books on our current docket. Our division is now the dumping ground for any paper books still in existence in archives, museums or antique stores that sell oddities and rarities. Personal collectors could probably get a pretty penny out of their paper books if they could sell them legally, but that is the truly sad punch line to this tragic story: Not only has our government decided to decommission paper books nationwide, like most countries have already done around the globe, but the government has also decided to use the leftover books for other, more economically convenient, purposes.

Books, journals, magazines...everything is electronic and has been for so long that paper-based anything is no longer financially viable. Paper kills our already endangered trees and costs exorbitant amounts of money to produce and print for an extraordinarily small audience. And with our current energy crisis, burning books simply makes sense. At least to our government.

Not to the government of our past, I think, as I grit my teeth in anger. A poster of a long-ago president hangs in my apartment, emblazoned with the quote, “Books cannot be killed by fire. People die, but books never die.” Of course, Franklin Delanor Roosevelt was discussing book burning of a different kind, at a different time. When only paper books existed and they were being destroyed. Well, people had nothing left to turn to. At least now, we have our e-books.

But it's not the same, my mind argues. Of course it’s not the same. No longer do we hear the crinkle of the spine when a new book is opened or the crinkle of pages turning in a rush from a gust of wind. We can annotate our e-books, but our handwriting is not the same on our electronic pads as it was for our ancestors who wrote with ink and paper. We’ve nearly eliminated writing flaws with our electronic systems – and thus the need to erase. In doing so, though, we’ve eliminated interesting mistakes and curious notes that were never meant to last, but which we’re glad did. No, it's definitely not the same.

Hence, this extra trip that I make as I take a break for the restroom. I nod casually, with a smile, to Lisa as I slip out of the warehouse, down a hall and towards the restrooms. But, instead of heading to the ladies’ room, I take a quick detour down a smaller, whitewashed hallway to a janitors’ closet that is no longer used and is locked all day, every day. Except I have a key, which I insert into the lock and turn until it clicks.

Inside the door, I survey our collection. Three small, makeshift bookcases, one against each wall of the closet, hold a blossoming collection of random, salvaged, paper books. Rarely have we chosen deliberately. Mostly, we have simply grabbed what we can when no one is looking. We can only take out a book – or two at the most – at a time, so it has taken weeks to build the collection up to its current size. And, it will take months to reach saturation. Hopefully by then, we'll find a way to smuggle them out of NARA and into one of our homes.
Until then, we collect. And we defy our society’s expectations and our government’s standards in hopes of preserving and enjoying this small piece of our past: the paper book.
Bibliography


