Jennie M. Flexner

A Reflection of my life and
librarianship so far
It is cold today in New York City but my heart is warm. I have just left the office of my editor at Simon and Schuster located in Rockefeller Plaza and I've stopped to watch the ice skaters for a moment. My head is spinning, as if I were on skates, with the anticipation of my latest book, *Making Books Work*, being published. I sat at my typewriter last night in my apartment and pondered for several hours about the dedication page. I knew who I wanted to thank but the words had to be just right. As I thought about those many years in Louisville, I knew they were the reason I was here; the first inspirations that lead me to my latest book. I thought of the dedicated staff of the library and the many patrons who had turned to me for advice on their reading selections. All my wonderful memories of Louisville came rushing back; growing up there and where my life’s purpose of librarianship began.

My name is Jennie Flexner and I was born on November 6, 1882. The oldest of five children, four girls and a boy, I was raised in a lively and often noisy household. One of us, it seemed, was always practicing the piano while Mother ran the home and Father, a physician, tended patients from his office located on the east side of the house. Our house was filled with music, spirited political debates and of course much discussion of books.
I suppose home is where I learned to love books. But when Mr. Andrew Carnegie offered the town of Louisville a sum of money to establishing a stable and well-funded library I was able to be employed in a place where I could influence others with my affection for books. The new library was in need of several assistants and because I could type well and was considered a great reader, I was hired. At the same time, the library was becoming a place for everyone, not merely scholars, as the shelves were opened up and I could feel great enthusiasm from the common reader. This was also made evident when under the same donation from Mr. Carnegie, a branch dedicated for use by Negroes was opened in 1908. It was the first of its kind in the South and it was wonderful to witness the activity at this branch. I am particularly proud of my city and library for this great accomplishment so that books shall truly be for all!
Back at my own branch during that same time, I wasn’t tied down to the typewriter as I had feared but found opportunities for myself in the order department, in circulation and as a classifier. My contributions throughout the library were finding favor with those in charge and it was suggested I attend library school. I was thrilled! By 1909, I was packing my bags and heading to Cleveland to attend Western Reserve University. There, I was under the tutelage and mentorship of two of the finest librarians this country has seen, William Howard Brett and Linda Eastman. William has since passed but left a great legacy of librarianship at the Cleveland Public Library in children’s services; there Linda also contributed greatly in pioneering services to the blind. Linda has been retired for several years but remains a mentor and friend to me to this day as we communicate often via letter.

I enjoyed my studies at Western Reserve greatly and took every opportunity to promote the school. In the 1911 edition of Western Reserve’s annual, The Rubaiyat, I was proud to be recognized as the second vice-president of the Library School’s Alumni Association as I took that role quite seriously.
From my studies I brought much new knowledge and ever more enthusiasm to my purpose of librarianship at the Louisville Free Public Library. Just as I had grown up in a lively home, I too wanted the library to be a vibrant place. While the open shelves had been a good start, I knew there needed to be more. I created inviting displays showcasing new publications along side older books. But I also talked books to anyone who would listen. And listen they did. I made suggestions to cranky lawyers, earnest teachers and all those wonderful suffragettes fighting for our right, as women, to vote. I was already engaged in readers’ advisory work whether I called it that or not.

So be it history, politics or a new work of fiction a reader was looking for, the patrons of the library had formed the habit of stopping by my desk for a chat, knowing I was willing to help them find just the right book. In 1927, with 16 years of circulation work, I was greatly honored when a member committee of The American Library Association asked me to pen a textbook detailing those services. I visited libraries of various sizes and accomplishments during a leave of absence from my own library. The result was *Circulation Work in Public Libraries* and while it covered the technical aspects of the work, it has helped the librarians-in-training to have a greater understanding of meeting the needs of readers. I then returned to the Louisville library for only a short while, as my great adventure in librarianship was only beginning.
I'll never forget that hot summer day in 1928. The telegram came from the New York Public Library, offering me, Jennie Flexner of Louisville, Kentucky the opportunity to start my own reader’s advisor office in those grand surroundings. While I hated to leave Mother and Father, we all knew that I could serve a greater and more diverse population that is New York. So I traded bluegrass and mint juleps for concrete and skyscrapers and traveled 738 miles to my new home. I wasn’t frightened, but rather filled with great anticipation of the number of patrons I would be able to help with their book selections. I arrived in Manhattan in the fall of ’28 with the expectation that I would learn all I could about the NYPL and its processes, its holdings as well as the staff and most importantly its patrons. The Readers’ Adviser’s Office was officially opened on March 4, 1929 without fanfare nor publicity. The very same day, President Hoover was inaugurated and the country was as usual anticipating a new presidency. Little did anyone know what state our country would be in eight short months down the road.
The New York Public Library was the grandest library I had ever laid my eyes upon and as I set to work I had to remind myself that the patrons and the books, not the building, was the most important part of my job. However, I did want to inform myself of its history and learned that the cornerstone was laid in May of 1902 and the grand Beaux-Arts structure was officially dedicated on May 23, 1911. At times I wondered if all the gleaming marble might somehow discourage reluctant patrons to enter and find a welcoming atmosphere. ‘Not as long as I am here’ I declared to no one in particular!

My office is located at the southeast corner of the main floor which is convenient to both the main entrance and the union catalog but given the vast size of the building, the office is quite far from both the reference department and the books in central circulation. Over the years, I made it my mission to walk with those who made use of my services to the far off places of the library and made sure they found what they needed and that they achieved some level of comfort in order to proceed on their own. The NYPL is a daunting place but with the help of my assistants, we have all attempted to make it less so.
The Great Depression

After a year in New York City, I had found myself adjusting and making friends. But work has always been my top priority. Things had been progressing in the Readers' Adviser's Office and I was busy compiling my lists of books to meet the needs of various readers. My belief is that every reader's problem is one that should be solved separately. Therefore the staff of the office spend a great amount of time with each person that seeks our help. That was until...it happened...the Stock Market crashed and there was a run on the banks. It seemed as though our economic structure in the country had all but collapsed. Companies went bankrupt and many, many people lost their jobs. My focus at work had shifted greatly. While I had always been an advocate for people enriching their lives through more education, either formally or simply by doing their own reading and learning, now it was imperative that people be able to find different means of employment by learning new skills and gaining more knowledge. I found myself compiling lists not only for individual needs but for different groups as well such as the Adjustment Service for the Unemployed. I take these lists quite seriously and review each title. Sometimes these reviews are written and published and I am not shy in giving my opinion. I believe it is my job to place the most effective titles in the hands of the readers. These times of hardship allowed me also to step outside my own branch and help with establishing the readers service to over 30 New York branches so that every reader in each borough may benefit from individualized assistance.


Twenty-three eminent Americans have contributed personal ideas on their vocations, influenced by their success in their chosen callings, to this volume dedicated to youth. These essays fluctuate from the sentimental advice of the agriculturist who quotes a florist as saying, “To grow beautiful roses in your garden, you must have beautiful roses in your heart,” to the brief, hearty, pungent letter on the newspaper business, written by William Allen White.

Youth today is not greatly helped by the generalizations on successful careers written by people who because of superior endowment and opportunity have, through whatever struggle, achieved great success. There is a certain encouragement in the “success” biography, but these sketches are too brief and give too little space to the struggle, too much to the joy of achievement in an age when youth has too little opportunity. The reader who thinks this book will give something of practical advice for vocational guidance will be disappointed. It tells no one how to become a librarian, a teacher, a doctor, or how to test the vague inclinations toward such callings, or what are the opportunities for employment in the field for the beginner. The oversimplification of this complex subject impairs the constructive role that such a book should play in the lives of young people concerned with this problem.

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The war has certainly eased some of the economic circumstances from the past decade. As men have left us to fight overseas, it has opened up many work opportunities for women. We have seen an influx of new émigrés fleeing from Nazi and Fascist regimes. As so many things are already in short supply and being rationed, books are no different. I have been working with the National Refugee Service to provide books for immigrants. We are in need of many foreign language books that simply aren’t available. However, many immigrants are already educated and could fill roles here in the U.S. I am, of course, drawn to the plight of the refugee librarian and serve on the ALA committee to find placement for them. I continue to make my lists such as Interpreting America for all the foreigners that now call this place home hoping to ease their transition if only slightly at first. It has found its way to libraries all across America and is used on radio programs such as “Town Meeting of the Air”. I am well pleased that so many have the opportunity to use these thoughtfully prepared lists as I diligently prepare others in anticipation that different lists may aid soldiers when they return home.
I turned 60 one month ago today, and this is my life so far. But my life’s work is really captured in the manuscript I dropped off with my editor earlier today. In the forward of the book I wrote that the intention of the book is ‘to put the reader, the user of books and libraries, in the way of finding what he wants.’ That has always been my mission whether spoken or not. I do hope that the book will help to carry out that mission and that it will find its way into the hands of those who will benefit from my years of experience and knowledge of books and libraries. My editor has warned me that there may be a delay in the timely publishing due to the war. I must be patient and remember that. But tomorrow we will remember Pearl Harbor, as we really have this entire past year. I can only hope that the war will end soon and all our men and women serving our country will return safely. Until then I have much work to accomplish; books to review, lists to compile and readers to advise!