In *Library: An Unquiet History* (2015), Matthew Battles argues that libraries are as much about losing the truth as they are about discovering it. Libraries in Alexandria were burned when Caesar supported Cleopatra’s war against Ptolemy XIII in 48 B.C. (304). An estimated 700,000 materials were burned in the library of the Mouseion alone – the remaining libraries were destroyed in the 3rd century A.D. when the Library of Brucheton was razed during the Emperor Aurelian’s war against Zenobia, queen of Palmyra (304).

In ancient China, Emperor Shi Huangdi undertook the greatest book burning that the world has ever known during the *Fenshu Kengru*, or “ Burning of books and burial of scholars,” at the end of 3rd century B.C. (417). The emperor’s aim was to destroy all Chinese literature prior to the beginning of his dynasty. Battles considers the needs and tastes of private readers and collectors among the best explanations for why records survive. His survey of historical biblioclasm challenged my conception of a library and the ways in which a culture and the actors within it ultimately determine which sources are disposable.

Have you ever been to the La Sierra Library?
You have not been to the La Sierra Library as many times as I have been to the La Sierra library. In Riverside, California where books are cleaned like children and the homeless men sell drugs.
Where there is no peace and volunteers push metallic carts along the thin carpet. Pacing back and forth all day every day except Christmas day

And a white woman named Evie asks to be addressed as Miss Evie walking past the scant row of computers that is the computer station, and walking past the straggling 900’s to him or her in the Juvenile EZ Readers, still walking, to the end of the alphabet, about to slide a finger between the margin of space visible in the shelf of books.

“That book has an orange stripe, Quentin. It doesn’t belong there, Quentin. It’s not a prejudice; it’s just better this way.”
The library’s sort of a tyrannical orphanage, too. The volunteers know.
You don’t know. The volunteers give the pep-talks and baths to the thousand and twenty-three children crammed into their dormitories side by side. Silent. The volunteers tell them to buck up! It’s not that bad! Do your best to look your best, and maybe you’ll find a nice family to take you home 731.67! We have no teeth at the La Sierra Library. They are obsolete.
And we at the La Sierra Library, damned few volunteers, our chosen vocation is to deal in the homeless. Those poor few, who congregate outside on the green lawn, and talk amongst themselves. We are sent out in waves like reconnaissance, like blood-hounds whose sole purpose is to report on shopping carts. See when there are shopping carts out, it means the men are attempting to establish a tent-city around the La Sierra Library. That’s a no, no.

When that happens, I lie about it, personally. Because I’m good buddies with those guys outside! Joe and… Moe? We talk! I’ll say something like, “How’s it going…man?” and Joe’ll respond “Chyet,” and spit out on the asphalt and we’ll go on about our business. That’s mutual respect.

But in fairness, it never really matters when I lie. The head-mistress, Mary-Anne never trusts the nay-sayers, you see. She’s going to send out three more in my place, the weak ones, who will indeed confirm the Tent-City’s struggle for unity.

And then they must be diasporised.

Mary-Anne’s going to go ahead and call the sheriff. She will ask personally, to speak with the sheriff. I will listen to the entire conversation and report it here, because this has become a cry for help.

“Yes, Sheriff Jones, this is Mary-Anne at the La Sierra Library. Hiiiii.

Yes, I’m alright but I’d like to bug you—

There’s a matter down here at the library. No, I’m afraid it’s rather urgent, there are shopping carts in the storage dock.”

I confess that though he spoke with diction, through the phone’s speaker I could not make out verbatim the responses of the sheriff. I will do my best to paraphrase with accuracy:

“Oh no! The shopping carts are back? Are you in a secure location?”

“Yes, yes sheriff. My volunteers are rounding the perimeter as we speak, we’ve got young eyes on them.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Yes, sheriff. Oh, and sheriff—the men are selling drugs! Be sure to bring with you one of those mongrels with the noses.”

“Mary-Anne, are you sure about that? It’d be just awful to make an assumption like that—without evidence, or justification of belief, or good cause, in fact Mary-Anne, that’d be bigotry and we’re adults Mary-Anne. Let’s be reasonable. Now how is it that you know the men are selling drugs?”

“One of the men. He’s always walking back and forth up the sidewalk and he’s always spitting and crowding the phone booth. And so many of them are—I’d just appreciate it if you came down again.”

“But of course, ma’am. Right away.”

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Some of the dirtiest work I’ve ever carried out has been for the La Sierra Library and I’m ashamed to say it was for minimum wage.

I throw the older ones and the twins away.
We don’t like the twins here at the library, we follow an ancient law. I’m given a stack of children and a black Sharpie. These are my sins. I attack the books with my Sharpie, mark them good so that they can never return and the entire world will know of their rejection. I take away citizenships next; they are dead to the La Sierra Library and all others. I listen to them cry when the acid burns away the adhesive of their bar codes; they will never reproduce. Then I lock them away in the big grey sweat box with the plastics and papers and other waste items to contemplate it. I suspect they’ve all but died when Leo collects them every Tuesday, but I dream sometimes, I dream that they haven’t. They really don’t pay me enough. I don’t see letters anymore, everywhere are little hearts and innocent smiles.

I didn’t get his name, but he came up to me as I sat down at the bus stop in front of the green lawn, where some books were talking amongst themselves. I was sobbing because it was Tuesday. He’d lived a long life and we had a conversation. Towards the end he asked me why I’d called the cops on his buddies. I just sobbed, and sobbed. So you see? You have been to the warmth and smell of Lemon Pledge. I have been to the La Sierra Library, where some books go to die and the homeless men sell drugs and the shelves are sprayed down with Lemon Pledge.

References: