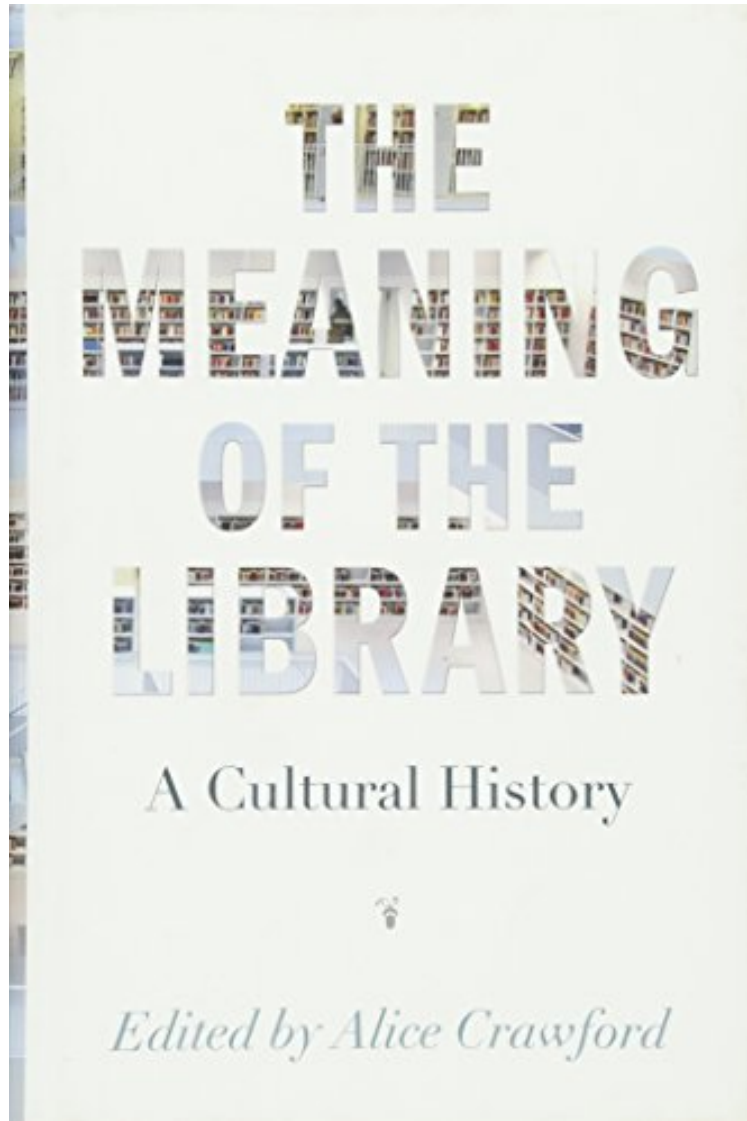


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The Meaning of the Library: A Cultural History

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From imusti : The Meaning of the Library: A Cultural History before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Meaning of the Library: A Cultural History:

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful. THE LIBRARY AS A PLACE OF WONDER AND ENLIGHTENMENT THROUGHOUT HUMAN HISTORYBy L. C. HendersonNo matter whether you are a library user, or a library professional, you are bound to find something that satisfies your curiosity or that tweaks your interest in Alice Crawfords collection of essays entitled The Meaning of the Library: A Cultural History. Spanning a wide

range of topics to do with libraries, the work is separated into three parts: *The Library through Time*; *The Library in Imagination*; and *The Library Now and in the Future*. Being both a librarian by profession and a cultural historian of sorts (by dint of having studied the Cultural History of Western Europe for three years at undergraduate level), I chose to home in on *The Library in Imagination*, and I was definitely not disappointed. The wide grasp of the subject, and the depth of the insights, was astounding. From Marina Warner's acknowledgement of the seminal value of the Epic of Gilgamesh, through Robert Crawford's exploration of the librarian as ennobled and immortalized in poetry (and I can think of a number of librarians who would love to be so remembered), to Laura Marcuss's pursuit of the image of the haunted library and the library as labyrinth (with special focus, much to my delight, being paid to the library as presented in all its convolutions and Mediaeval ramifications in *The Name of the Rose*), the authors never fail to intrigue and enlighten. Not only are the contributors all experts in their field, but they are also such excellent writers that one can truly savor each word and sentence that they write. Their rhapsodical descriptions embody the mystery that lies at the core of the library as phenomenon stretching down the ages. For instance, Warner draws attention to the way of making [which] is important with regard to the library in fiction, viewed not only as a particular place where single titles or book-objects have been collected, but as a metaphor for literature itself, a polyphony of voices, laid down on multiple tracks, looping and converging over time, sometimes over great vistas of time. In short, the richness and wealth of information that is embodied in library collections is brought only honor and memorableness in this text. Whoever thought of a library as being a prosaic and stuffy old place that bears little relevance to the current digital age must definitely think again. Rounding off the work with an acknowledgement of the significance of libraries even in the modern day and age, given by Library of Congress James H. Billington, tribute is paid to the role of the library as a purveyor of knowledge that is geared towards satisfying mankind's ongoing search for the truth. *The Meaning of the Library: A Cultural History* is a riveting and deeply satisfying work that is bound to leave the reader not only far more aware of the sociocultural importance of the institution as a reservoir of heritage and learning, but also inspired to think of issues that lie beyond the earthly and temporal realm.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. A stimulating and fascinating survey. By Wally Wood. The library, like the symphony orchestra, has always seemed to me to be one of the towering accomplishments of civilization. *The Meaning of the Library: A Cultural History*, a collection of essays edited by Alice Crawford, is a marvelous survey of Western libraries and books from Greek and Roman times to today. Crawford is digital humanities research librarian at the King James Library at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, and the essays were commissioned to mark the 400th anniversary of the library. It is a lovely book, handsomely designed with endnotes, author bios, bibliography, index, and an eight-page, four-color insert illustrating ancient and medieval book cabinets. The essays consider the social roles libraries have played across the age, as centers for scholarship, mazes, sanctuaries, archives, and repositories for hidden wisdom. As Crawford writes in her introduction, "Although they are arranged to follow the library's development through history, the essays aim to offer simply glimpses of what libraries were like at these times rather than a comprehensive history. They focus on what libraries were used for, why they were needed, why they were meaningful to the various communities from which they emerged, and provide impressions rather than analyses of their value in the changing chronological contexts." Edith Hall, Professor of Classics at Kings College London, opens the book by noting that our first certain literary response to a library is in a raucous comedy by Aristophanes, first performed in 425 B.C. The book closes with an essay by James Billington, the Librarian of Congress, who argues that "librarians are becoming more rather than less important in this new age of instant electronic communication; and libraries as places have a key role to play in building and sustaining participatory and accountable democratic societies—the kind that have historically not fought one another." In between these two essays, we read about the growth of community libraries in England and Scotland, the library in fiction from Gilgamesh to Borges, the library in film (think "Ghostbusters"), the library in poetry, and more. At least two profound shifts have affected the library in history. The first was the invention of printing and movable type. With the spread of printed books, inexpensive compared to hand-copied codexes, a library was no longer a way for Europe's richest to flaunt their wealth and culture. We're in the middle of the second shift: the rise of the internet and digital copies. This means that something like the HathiTrust, founded only in October 2008 as a consortium of research libraries, now has more than 11 million volumes and is one of the 10 largest research library collections in North America. As a novelist, I was particularly interested in the rise of community libraries in 19th century England. The worthies in charge saw the institution as a tool of edification and moral enlightenment. Novels were a problem. Narrative fiction "seemed to be so constructed by manipulative and morally bankrupt authors as to sensationalize or whitewash bad behavior and encourage emotional incontinence among readers through blatant titillation. The other worry, closely related to the first, was that such literature was also simultaneously much more likely to appeal to and therefore to lead astray those vulnerable readers with the weakest constitutions, specifically women, the young, and a fascinating Georgian perception: servants, as a consequence threatening not just public morality but also the social and political order." *Shades of Seduction of the Innocent*. Clearly *The Meaning of the Library* is not a book for everyone. But for those of us who love books and have long loved libraries it is a stimulating and fascinating survey of "the library" in Western culture.

From Greek and Roman times to the digital era, the library has remained central to knowledge, scholarship, and the imagination. *The Meaning of the Library* is a generously illustrated examination of this key institution of Western culture. Tracing what the library has meant since its beginning, examining how its significance has shifted, and pondering its importance in the twenty-first century, notable contributors including the Librarian of Congress and the former executive director of the HathiTrust present a cultural history of the library. In an informative introduction, Alice Crawford sets out the book's purpose and scope, and an international array of scholars, librarians, writers, and critics offer vivid perspectives about the library through their chosen fields. *The Meaning of the Library* will appeal to all who are interested in this vital institution's heritage and ongoing legacy.

"[F]or both scholar and general reader, comprehensive bibliographic notes constitute a multilingual gold mine of historical resources on libraries."--Booklist
"As a history and an assessment of an inestimable resource and a force for good in the world, *The Meaning of the Library* is a timely and thought-provoking compilation."--Patricia Craig, Independent
"*The Meaning of the Library* is a riveting and deeply satisfying work that is bound to leave the reader not only far more aware of the sociocultural importance of the institution as a reservoir of heritage and learning, but also inspired to think of issues that lie beyond the earthly and temporal realm."--Lois C. Henderson, Bookpleasures.com
"A marvelous survey of Western libraries and books from Greek and Roman times to today. . . . It is a lovely book, handsomely designed with endnotes, author bios, bibliography, index, and an eight-page, four-color insert-illustrations of ancient and medieval book cabinets."--Wally Wood, Bookpleasures.com
"These pleasant peregrinations exploring the role that libraries . . . have played as preservers, proponents, and providers of culture will appeal widely to library scholars and bibliophiles."--Choice
"This excellent volume, well produced and with an extensive bibliography, is not standard library history, but it is delightful reading, whether consumed as a whole or used to browse in. It should provide any library historians with new insights into their discipline and can be highly recommended."--Peter Hoare, Library Information History
"Each essay is excellently written and researched; each new perspective illuminates a different fact in great and mind-expanding detail. . . . Bibliophiles, especially, will love [*The Meaning of the Library*] as it focuses attention on the deeper importance book collections hold."--Gretchen Wagner, San Francisco Book
"A wonderfully informative, erudite and entertaining collection of essays."--Alberto Manguel, Times Literary Supplement
From the Back Cover
"This wide-ranging survey of the long and tumultuous history of libraries contains at least a dozen tantalizing bits of information per page. I was fascinated and enriched. And because these essays began as lectures delivered in a library, they illustrate beautifully one of the library's most important roles--as a stage set for writers to share what they've learned about various subjects, including Roman bathhouses, Victorian fumigators, plunder, lust, and the eighteenth-century librarian upon whose death, it was said, The books are grieving, mang themselves."--Marilyn Johnson, author of *This Book Is Overdue!: How Librarians and Cybrarians Can Save Us All*
"*The Meaning of the Library* covers the history of the library from antiquity to the present day. This is a very good collection of essays."--Colin Burrow, editor of *Metaphysical Poetry*
"The library as a topic is currently of increasing cultural interest. I enjoyed *The Meaning of the Library* and learned a lot from the book's eclectic and interesting mix of essays."--Richard Ovenden, Bodley's Librarian, University of Oxford
About the Author
Alice Crawford is digital humanities research librarian at the University of St Andrews Library in Scotland. Her books include *Paradise Pursued: The Novels of Rose Macaulay*.