

A Choose to Read Ohio Toolkit

Use this toolkit to plan book discussion groups or library programs.

Meet award-winning *New Yorker* reporter and *New York Times* bestselling author Susan Orlean, who grew up in the Cleveland area.

Select from a range of discussion questions to deepen the experience of reading *The Library Book*.

Discover books, websites and primary sources to explore topics and themes in depth.

The Library Book

By Susan Orlean

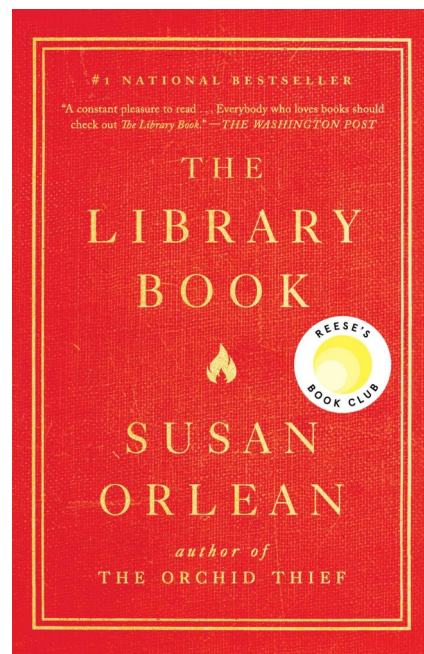


About the Book

On the morning of April 28, 1986, a fire alarm sounded in the Los Angeles Public Library. The fire was disastrous: it reached two thousand degrees and burned for more than seven hours. By the time it was extinguished, it had consumed four hundred thousand books and damaged seven hundred thousand more. Investigators descended on the scene, but more than thirty years later, the mystery remains: Did someone purposefully set fire to the library—and if so, who?

Weaving her lifelong love of books and reading into an investigation of the fire, author Susan Orlean delivers a reflection that tells the broader story of libraries and librarians in a way that has never been done before.

Orlean chronicles the LAPL fire and its aftermath to showcase the larger, crucial role that libraries play in our lives; delves into the evolution of libraries; brings each department of the library to vivid life; studies arson and attempts to burn a copy of a book herself; and reexamines the case of Harry Peak, the blond-haired actor long suspected of setting fire to the LAPL more than thirty years ago. Orlean's journey through the stacks reveals how these beloved institutions provide much more than just books—and why they remain an essential part of the heart, mind, and soul of our country.



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Book Details

The Library Book by Susan Orlean. Simon & Schuster, 2018. ISBN 9781476740195. 336 pages.

www.simonandschuster.net/books/The-Library-Book/Susan-Orlean/9781476740195

Available as an ebook and digital audiobook through the Ohio Digital Library:
ohiodigitallibrary.com

Available as a downloadable talking book from the Ohio Library for the Blind and Print Disabled: olbpd.klas.com



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**"All the things
that are wrong
in the world
seem conquered
by a library's
simple unspoken
promise:
Here I am,
please tell me
your story;
here is my story,
please listen."**

About the Author

Susan Orlean has been a staff writer at *The New Yorker* since 1992. She is the *New York Times* bestselling author of eleven books, including ***The Library Book***, ***Rin Tin Tin: The Life and the Legend*** (a 2015 & 2016 Choose to Read Ohio selection), ***Saturday Night***, and ***The Orchid Thief***, which was made into the Academy Award-winning film *Adaptation*.

Susan Orlean was raised in Shaker Heights, a suburb of Cleveland, and visited the Bertram Woods branch of the Shaker Heights Public Library several times a week as a child. She has also lived in Ann Arbor; Portland, Oregon; Boston; and New York, and now lives with her family and her animals in Los Angeles.

Learn more about Susan in her own words:
www.susanorlean.com/author/about/

Author Resources

Susan Orlean's official website

www.susanorlean.com

Author page on Simon & Schuster website

www.simonandschuster.net/authors/Susan-Orlean

Susan Orlean's *New Yorker* profile and latest articles

www.newyorker.com/contributors/susan-orlean

The Library Fire: An Interview with Susan Orlean

www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/10/25/the-library-fire-an-interview-with-susan-orlean

Brent Katz interviews Susan Orlean for *The Paris Review*.

Author Susan Orlean Explains What Inspired Her to Write *The Library Book*

www.oprahdaily.com/entertainment/books/a25380704/susan-orlean-library-book-interview

Hamilton Cain interviews Susan Orlean for Oprah Daily.

Susan Orlean on *The Library Book* and Finding the Red-Hot Center of the Story

www.writersdigest.com/by-writing-genre/the-wd-interview-susan-orlean-on-the-library-book-and-finding-the-red-hot-center-of-the-story

Don Vaughn interviews Susan Orlean for *Writer's Digest*.

Susan Orlean, author of *The Library Book* (audio, 26 minutes)

www.npr.org/2020/01/23/798989811/susan-orlean-author-of-the-library-book

An episode of the NPR podcast *Bullseye* with Jesse Thorn.

Susan Orlean discusses *The Library Book* at Politics and Prose Bookstore (video, 26 minutes)

youtu.be/CY3Wxafosbw

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Talk About It

Topics to share when discussing **The Library Book**.

- Rather than a linear, chronological narrative, **The Library Book** jumps back and forth in time between the present, the time of the fire, and the hundred-year history of the Los Angeles Public Library (LAPL), weaving in dozens of topics and stories. What do you think of the way the book is structured? Do the catalog records that serve as chapter headings add to the experience of reading **The Library Book**?
- The author describes numerous innovations by LAPL over the years, some of which are now long-gone and seem quaint and obsolete, like the "photo-lending" checkout system (p. 203), and some of which are lasting, like the teen department. What are some recent changes and innovations at your local library or in your own workplace? In your opinion, which of these changes are likely to endure, and which will be superseded?
- Share your earliest or most noteworthy memory of your childhood (or current) library. Do the various memories shared have anything in common besides the library setting?
- Among the many memorable anecdotes is Susan Orlean's recounting of her own attempt to burn a book. Can you think of a time you poked at a taboo or behaved in a transgressive way out of curiosity? If you find it appropriate and feel comfortable doing so, share your story with the group.
- What was your initial impression of Harry Peak? Did it change throughout the investigation? How did you feel about the outcome of the investigation?
- Each of the head librarians profiled in **The Library Book** brought certain qualities to the position. Which of their ideas and initiatives did you like? Did you disagree with any?
- Chapter 30 discusses a range of initiatives undertaken by international libraries and librarians. Do you have a favorite example that you would like to see replicated at your local library?

Some discussion questions courtesy of Simon & Schuster, from **The Library Book** Reading Group Guide. Used with permission. Find more discussion questions in this guide for book club leaders: www.simonandschuster.net/books/The-Library-Book (click on Reading Group Guide).

Go Further

Ideas for extending the experience of reading **The Library Book**.

In 1940, LAPL director Althea Warren wrote a letter to a future library director—the person who would be in the role on the library's hundredth anniversary (p. 200). Think about a role you hold that someone else will hold in the future, such as your job or a family or community responsibility, and write a letter to the person who will hold that role in 25 or 50 years or at an important anniversary. Share your successes, challenges, and some of the high and low points of your experience. You may choose to seal the letter and arrange for it to be read by the future addressee—or just share it with your book club, or keep it to yourself.

Each chapter of **The Library Book** begins with a list of library materials with titles that hint at the chapter's content. For a creative activity that will also acquaint you with your local library's collection, choose a favorite family story or anecdote, then use the library catalog to identify four book titles that describe or summarize the story.

As an alternate activity, try your hand at book spine poetry by arranging several books in a stack to create a poem out of their titles. For inspiration, see bookriot.com/the-best-of-book-spine-poetry or do a web search for "book spine poetry."

Explore More

Additional ideas and resources to use with **The Library Book**.

The Library of *The Library Book*

lapl.org/collections-resources/blogs/lapl/library-library-book

This resource-packed post on the LAPL blog collects stories, photos, architectural drawings, blogs, and more, inviting readers to explore the history and architecture of the L.A. Central Library from anywhere.

A History of U.S. Public Libraries

dp.la/exhibitions/history-us-public-libraries

The Digital Public Library of America (DPLA) makes available millions of items from libraries, archives, museums, and other cultural institutions. This DPLA exhibition tells the story of American public libraries and librarians and their community impact.

Ohio Digital Network

ohiodigitalnetwork.org

Ohio's hub of the DPLA coordinates digitized collections from Ohio's libraries and cultural institutions. Look up your hometown or an Ohio landmark or historical event on DPLA (just navigate to dp.la) to see some of the contributed items.

Find an Ohio Library

library.ohio.gov/using-the-library/find-an-ohio-library

Did you know there are 251 public library systems in Ohio, with more than 730 library buildings? You are welcome in every one of them. Use this directory and map to find a public library anywhere in Ohio. Additional resources include directories of Ohio academic and special libraries.

Check It Out

Recommended for readers of **The Library Book**.

Nonfiction:

The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu: and Their Race to Save the World's Most Precious Manuscripts by Joshua Hammer

The Library: A Fragile History by Andrew Pettegree and Arthur der Weduwen

Library: An Unquiet History by Matthew Battles

Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality,

Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life by Eric Klinenberg

Rin Tin Tin: The Life and the Legend by Susan Orlean (a Choose to Read Ohio selection)

Dear Fahrenheit 451: A Librarian's Love Letters and Breakup Notes to the Books in Her Life by Annie Spence

A Universal History of the Destruction of Books: From Ancient Sumer to Modern-day Iraq by Fernando Báez

Fiction:

The Goldfinch by Donna Tartt

The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek by Kim Michele Richardson

The Time Traveler's Wife by Audrey Niffenegger

The Librarian of Auschwitz by Antonio Iturbe

Cloud Cuckoo Land by Anthony Doerr

Fahrenheit 451 by Ray Bradbury

Choose to Read Ohio, a project of the State Library of Ohio, the Ohioana Library Association, and the Ohio Center for the Book, encourages public libraries, schools, families, and others to build a community of readers and an appreciation of Ohio authors, illustrators, and literature. CTRO is adaptable for use in classrooms, libraries, bookstores, by book discussion groups, families, and other community groups.

Explore Choose to Read Ohio resources & toolkits:
library.ohio.gov/ctro.

Toolkit created by Janet Ingraham Dwyer, State Library of Ohio, November 2022. Links and other information are accurate at the time of publication.