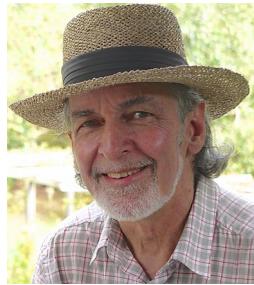


Libraries and books are good for your soul

We should treat our libraries and our librarians better. After all, now that religion has virtually gone, and the universities have become information sausage machines, the Library is really the only place to house and disseminate our cultural and moral heritages. Much of the media is so bound up with appearances (Herald excepted of-course), rather than underlying messages, that food for the mind is as rare as real food in fast food outlets. The sainted John Campbell still relentlessly points out the good and evil of our society, and Bob Jones slips the occasional classical and moral reference into his otherwise testosterone laden articles, but where else can Joe Blow find the depth and splendour that is *real* knowledge of the *real* world.

I confess to not being impartial about libraries or librarians. My solo working mother, who left school at twelve, walked me and my sister, come rain or shine, to the library every Thursday evening from before I even started school, and I repeated this process with my children and grandchildren. My librarian girlfriend of my early twenties, was no stereotype, and as a Territorial Army sergeant, taught me as much about the intricacies of the Sterling sub-machine carbine (and a few other '60's' things) as how to navigate the Dewey Decimal system.



“But we don't need libraries, when we have electronic devices”, I hear you say. But grazing on electronic media doesn't give a whole picture of a subject or its depth. True we can pay for and download books, but human nature being what it is, we will often look at the summary or someone else's idea of what a book says (who may only be quoting somebody else). According to librarian and author (The World's Strongest Librarian), Josh Hanagarne, Film reviewer Roger Ebert said:- “doing research on the web is like using a library assembled piecemeal by pack rats and vandalised nightly”. Sorting the gold from the chaff on the web, in an area you know little about is almost impossible, as rubbish written by authoritative ignoramuses can look as good as the real stuff.

Libraries have already done the hard work of separating some of the rubbish from genuine gold. The books they contain have been deemed worthy of being published, are in demand and are clearly divided into sections where you know what you are going to get. If you really want to get your health advice from the 'New Age and Fairy Companion' shelves then that's fine – as long as you know that's where it's coming from. What's even better is that there are a core of dedicated but ill-paid and under-appreciated experts at the library, who

will point you to the areas you want to know about and save you hours of wasted time.

Going to the library is an active process and we all know that doing something physical in association with mental activity, not only makes you feel better, but the stories and information you obtain will tend to be more three dimensional and 'stick' in your mind, compared with passive screen absorption.

Most importantly, reading whole books or magazines and encouraging deep and sustained reading will prevent the decline in true literacy, which is taking place. According to reports, up to a quarter of graduating University of London history students had never read a complete book! The average American teenager spends four minutes a day reading, other than social media. This plunge into 'ill-literacy' is a disaster when we want our young people to be able to actually *understand* the increasingly complex world, rather than *categorise* it into two minute sound bites or textspak.

Get along to your local library. It is really the only true community resource left, despite Councils' attempts to marginalise them. Kick the device covered tables and their occupants who now prevent you getting to the shelves,

out of the way, and pick up a book – any book. Never mind the thickness, feel the quality and appreciate the way the words lead you into thinking different thoughts. Brush off the occasional deranged librarian that bleats that libraries are just for devices and no longer need books, and go to a section that you have never even heard of. Immerse yourself in something you never knew existed – 'the unknown unknowns' of the wrongly derided Donald Rumsfeld. Have the courage to see unknown knowledges and viewpoints you won't get from Facebook. When the written wonders and complexities of the world are a bit too much, pick up a Mills and Boon (Chicklit) piece of escapism and escape. But do it with a book, not the poor imitation that even the best of devices provide. They are OK for doing your banking and ordering pizza, but not for feeding your soul.

Stephen Wealthall was trained as an academic paediatrician at the Universities of Sheffield, Oxford and Case Western Reserve-Ohio and has designed computer assisted learning systems, but was, and is, educated by the Public Library system of three continents.