

What goes on between the stacks at the Toronto Public Library

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By Mary Fairhurst Breen, Contributor

Mary Fairhurst Breen is a Toronto writer, film maker and library worker.

I'm never without a book. I'm also a writer, and a cardigan carrying member of Toronto Public Library Workers Local 4948. I earn my bread-and-butter at the Toronto Reference Library – an architectural wonder I visited frequently as a high school student. After a long and circuitous career in the not-for-profit sector, I was hired as a page at the age of 58, when most employers considered me past due for renewal. Now I serve patrons at the desk and on the phone.

My earliest memory of the library involves getting ejected from one. I was a preschooler and had apparently been chatting through Storytime, so the librarian asked my mother to take me home. Expectations of small children were different in the 1960s. Today, libraries go out of their way not to eject anyone.

Libraries are often pictured as kids' circles, cosy cardigans and cat's eyeglasses, but there is much more going on. At the library, you can't look away from the human cost of economic inequality. Yes, visits to the Toronto Public Library are up. Circulation and reference inquiries are on the rise, but so are poverty, homelessness and food insecurity. And while the city doesn't track despair, I encounter enough of it to add it to that list.

Libraries have always been about knowledge. They are the place where in Grade 10, I listened to LPs of Shakespeare's plays trying to grasp the language. Most of the turntables have been replaced by 3D printers and a treasure trove of other digital resources, but this fundamental role is unchanged.

Toronto's public libraries remain one of the last places where everyone is welcome to hang out undisturbed all day without spending a nickel. That openness makes them cultural spaces – and social ones. As gaps widen elsewhere in the public safety net, the Toronto Public Library is constantly evolving to fill them. It now employs Library Safety Specialists to lend an ear and help de-escalate situations. Staff routinely save lives with naloxone. Reading rooms offer refuge.

It's interesting to note that Andrew Carnegie, the "granddaddy of libraries," was fine with economic disparity. He famously believed in an unfettered free market and argued that the rich should bear responsibility for uplifting their fellow citizens. He was disinclined to pay fair wages, preferring to use the vast profits he made as an employer to fund his vast philanthropic vision. He built thousands of libraries in Canada and the U.S., and he felt everyone should foster their own opportunities, just as he believed he had. His legacy is complicated.

According to a [2023 report by the Centre for Policy Alternatives](#), more than 80 per cent of Torontonians in both the lowest and the highest income brackets visit the library. In an increasingly polarized and antagonistic world, this statistic helps get me out of bed and onto the subway in the morning.

Libraries are sanctuaries for all kinds of people – those cramming for exams, those browsing the internet for big-bosomed ladies, those who object to the gender-neutral washrooms and those who depend on them.

Libraries also serve as sanctuaries for all kinds of ideas, including those that may offend some users.

My children's book "Pride and Persistence: Stories of Queer Activism" is not only on library shelves, but the Canada Council sends me a welcome bit of money every

February as part of its public lending rights program. It makes me prouder than any other fees I receive for my work. By contrast, this book has been boxed up and sent back to my Canadian publisher from libraries across the United States, thanks to a new wave of book bans and censorship.

We can't know what Carnegie would have thought of all this, but libraries that still bear his name are actively involved in the freedom to read movement.

Libraries are also on the front lines of the fight against loneliness. People come to read the paper or use the computer even if they could do those things at home. Sometimes it's obvious that the few words they speak to the staff at the desk might be the only ones they utter all day.

That need for connection extends beyond the buildings. Those who can't easily get to a branch rely on the Toronto Public Library's phone service. Some callers need a human search engine to look up free movie screenings — and summarize the plot of whatever is showing. Some want to argue or complain about something unrelated to whatever is causing them distress. And some just want to talk about that time they saw Santana before two members of the band split to form Journey.

With or without cardigans on, we listen.