

It's National Libraries Week (originally written in 2017)

This week is National Libraries Week, and what better way to show your love of libraries than to write a book about them... So I did.

I've been quite vocal in the past about my love of libraries. In fact, in April of this year I was invited to write a guest blog post for the lovely Anne Williams. I had recently given a talk in my local library to support the launch of my (then) latest book, *Turn Towards The Sun*, and had promised Anne a review of that event. When I sat down to write the post, however, I realised it wasn't the story I wanted to tell and it became something else entirely.

You see, ever since I was a small child libraries have been a huge part of my life. When I was about seven the village I lived in was lucky enough to have its own library. A village mind, not a town or a city, but a smallish rural village. Even then I think I understood how lucky we were to have this on our doorstep, and how idyllic the setting was. Actually, it was only a portacabin, situated at the end of a lane of houses which backed onto open fields, but to me it was the most magical place. I can still vividly recall the smell as you pushed open the door. It was a warm, friendly, bookish smell that became an intrinsic part of my childhood. I visited the library twice a week after school and worked my way steadily through the collection of junior fiction. From the delights of *The House at World's End* by Monica Dickens to the heady discovery of *The Hobbit* and worlds not like our own. As I grew older, the visits continued until I had outgrown and definitely out read the children's section and experienced my first thrilling forays into adult reading and the illicit pleasure of Jilly Cooper's girls: Bella, Imogen, Harriet and Prudence.

My love affair with libraries continued throughout my adulthood and on into parenthood. I first visited my local library in Church Stretton when we (my husband and our three children) moved to Shropshire. Our youngest daughter was only four months old at the time – she's now nearly sixteen. It was a weekly treat to visit this beautiful welcoming space and return home with armfuls of books for each of us. I am immensely proud of the fact that our family has grown up to be avid readers and I know without a shadow of doubt that libraries have played a huge part in this. It meant that we could remain constantly surrounded by books, and I'm sure also inspired me to take up my own writing again.

When I gave up my old career in January 2016 to become a full time writer, I decided almost immediately that, having worked with people for many years, moving to a solitary working life would not necessarily be a good thing. So, I decided to keep my eyes open for a casual post that would allow my writing to continue uninterrupted, but also provide me with opportunities to leave the house and keep me from becoming a reclusive mad woman. To my delight, a post came vacant at the library and I now work there most Saturdays. Our youngest daughter comes with me as a volunteer, something she also does after school, and pretty much whenever she can. It's become like a second home to her. I'm not surprised, she loves it as much as I do. It's a beautiful place, staffed by the most wonderful people who fill the space with everything a library should be, and that includes much laughter. Our customers are welcomed by their first names, offered tea and coffee if we're making one, and go home with so much more than books. As one of our older customers remarked only

last week – I've just told my husband I'm popping out to see my friends and have a giggle. I'll feel so much better when I get home. I might even manage to choose some books too!

Because, of course, our library is so much more than somewhere to borrow books from, or use the computers – for many it is a lifeline to the world outside. People find inspiration there, and knowledge, the comfort and escape provided by a good book, companionship and care, and happiness and laughter fills the air within the building every single day it is open.

I will be heartbroken when it closes, and it will close. Like so many libraries it's under threat, and despite the valiant support of our local community the closure is as much to do with political posturing as it is about saving money. It might limp along in one guise or another for a while yet, but like the books themselves that line the shelves, the writing on the page is clear as day. We can quantify how much it costs to pay the staff, and heat the building but I've never met an accountant yet who can put a price on the important things, the things that are priceless beyond measure. They cannot be quantified, and so they cannot be counted. They are, quite simply, priceless. In my very humble opinion there are things in this world that should exist for no other reason than it is right that they should do so. Libraries are one of them.

Of course, the little village library I loved so much as a child is long gone, replaced by a housing estate, but it saddens me that in the space of my own lifetime we could see the total demise of community libraries. Perhaps one day our government will see fit to support our libraries once again, but until then please make the most of them while you still can. If you have children, make these special places a part of their lives, as they have been for me. As potential future leaders of our country maybe *they* might be the ones to make a difference...