

Book Club Discussion Guide

The Library Book

By Susan Orlean

Author:

Susan Orlean has been a staff writer at *The New Yorker* since 1992. She is the author of seven books, including *Rin Tin Tin*, *Saturday Night*, and *The Orchid Thief*, which was made into the Academy Award-winning film *Adaptation*. She lives with her family and her animals in upstate New York and may be reached at SusanOrlean.com and [Twitter.com/SusanOrlean](https://twitter.com/SusanOrlean).

Summary:

On the morning of April 29, 1986, a fire alarm sounded in the Los Angeles Public Library. As the moments passed, the patrons and staff who had been cleared out of the building realized this was not the usual fire alarm. As one fireman recounted, "Once that first stack got going, it was 'Goodbye, Charlie.'" The fire was disastrous: it reached 2000 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, award-winning *New Yorker* reporter and *New York Times* bestselling author Susan Orlean delivers a mesmerizing and uniquely compelling book that manages to tell the broader story of libraries and librarians in a way that has never been done before.

(From Simon and Schuster website)

Discussion Questions:

1. What has your relationship with libraries been throughout your life? Can you share some library memories from childhood to adulthood?
2. Were you at all familiar with the Los Angeles library fire? Or any library fire?
3. How would you describe the fire's impact on the community? How about the community's rebuilding efforts?
4. In chapter 5, Orlean writes that books "take on a kind of human vitality." What role do books play in your life and home, and do you anthropomorphize them? Have you ever wrestled with the idea of giving books away or otherwise disowning them?
5. What is your impression of John Szabo? How does his career inform and shape your understanding of what librarians do?
6. Libraries today are more than just a building filled with books. How has your local branch evolved? Are you able to chart these changes and gauge their success within the community?
7. *The Library Book* confronts the issue of street people patronizing the library. Is this an issue in your hometown? How do you feel about the L.A. library's involvement, handling of the issue, and the notion of inclusion?
8. Andrew Carnegie is perhaps the most famous supporter and benefactor of libraries. Can you name a modern equivalent who is using his or her largesse to underwrite public works? Is it more important for the public sector to have big benefactors or overall community support?
9. What was your initial impression of Harry Peak? Did it change throughout the investigation?
10. What was your reaction to the Mary Jones and Charles Lummis saga? Can you cite any similar examples from history or the present?
11. Each of the head librarians discussed in *The Library Book* brought certain qualities to the position. What ideas and initiatives did you like? Did you disagree with any?
12. *The Library Book* chronicles the history of the Los Angeles Public Library from its origins to the present day. How were the library's ups and downs reflective of the city's ups and down? Are libraries a fair barometer to judge the mood of a city or town?
13. 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?

(Questions issued by the publishers.)