

A week in the Library of Babel

By Nathan Hobby

On Mondays, if their football team had won, many of the clerks and some of the librarians would come to work dressed in scarves and beanies in team colours. Or, if they were individuals who wanted to ignite controversy and comment, if they *wanted* to suffer derision, they would wear their colours even when they lost. For many, this was their version of authenticity and it bothered me deeply. I never knew what to do on Mondays. Sometimes I wanted them to ask me about the football so I could launch into a diatribe. Other times I feared them asking me because I was both sick of being different to them and yet also unable to betray myself by feigning interest.

On Tuesdays, I bought my lunch. Sometimes I bought the daily special from the pokey staff canteen on the eighteenth floor. A woman ran it by herself. She opened at six o'clock – it was apparently busy even then, with teams like the Stock and Stack buying breakfast and the nightshift librarians buying coffee or cigarettes – and closed at one o'clock when lunch, to my mind, was just starting. So I had to be early to get lunch there. A librarian named Gerry who had worked at the library forty-eight years showed me it and I ate with him several times on the eighteenth floor balcony, one frequented by unionists and those old-timers who prided themselves on being the recalcitrants, overlooked for promotions, out of favour with management.

Other times I needed more than anything to get out of the Library of Babel and I walked through the city to buy a steak and mushroom pie from a small bakery on William Street. By the time I got there, my lunchbreak was half over and I had to eat as I walked back through the lunchtime crowd. Even without time to sit down to eat, it felt good to join the world beyond the library for half an hour.

(What bothered me more than anything was how long it took to get out of the library. It was often ten or fifteen minutes until I got through the labyrinth of corridors and lifts to the entrance of the library. A couple of times I aborted my mission to get to the bakery in my lunch break. I could have got away with it; but my overactive conscience never left me alone long enough. Another time the unpredictable lift dropped me off on basement level eight, and I was wandering through strange storerooms for close to an hour before I returned to my workroom, late and still without lunch.)

On Wednesdays, a blind saxophonist would play wistful jazz outside the library from lunch to dusk. Sometimes the sound would carry through to the lower balconies where I would – in my placements with the backroom teams who never saw customers – be having afternoon tea. Once I dropped a coin from a balcony four storeys up, thinking I could make it land in the black velvet box he had open by him. It landed just near it and bounced violently, hitting a passer-by, who cried out in pain. I ducked back from the edge of the balcony and for days later I expected to be summoned to a manager's office or called upon by police.

On Thursdays, once a fortnight, we were paid. At lunch-time on paydays the pubs to the west of the library in Northbridge were full to the brim. Lunches stretched out to two hours for some on flexi-time, and they returned with yeasty breath from the beer and little energy for work. I never joined them; I couldn't afford the money or the time.

On these days, the queues at reference desks grew long and frustrated. Once a fight broke out between two customers, one tall and the other short, after the short one accused the tall one of pushing in. They punched each other viciously, landing blows on each other's bodies and faces. I didn't know what to do; I was a librarian, not a security guard. I called reception and the receptionist, an unreliable man, said he would send a security guard to my desk.

The other clients stepped back from the fight, but not enough to lose their place in the queue. 'Stop it!' I implored the fighters, feeling pathetic. Then, suddenly, the tall man - who had been winning - said, in a stunning admission, 'I'm sorry – you were right, I did push in.' He let the shorter man in front of him and they recommenced their orderly queuing. I wondered if the tall man had, like me, a sensitive conscience. They commenced a casual conversation about the worst queues they had seen around the world, and I was amazed by their powers of forgiveness.

Twenty minutes later a security guard arrived. 'Your floor doesn't exist in my manual,' he said. 'It's only through sheer luck I found you so quickly.'

'It's over now,' I said. 'You can go.' And he went.

On Fridays, charity collectors waited for me every fifty metres between the train station and the library. Through some gentleman's agreement, there was only *one* every Friday; but there was *always* one. The Fire Brigade, the Surf Life Savers, the Volunteer Sea Rescue, the Cancer Council, the Heart Foundation, the Kidney Foundation, the Eye Council, the Nose Awareness Group, or the Gut Injuries Local Trust. I hardened my

heart toward these presumptions on my conscience. *I would like to pay more taxes*, I wanted to declare to them, *so that you do not have to compete for my attention like salesmen!* I resolved to never give any of them anything, but sometimes my resolve wavered, having to say ‘no’ not once but five or six times before I got in the door of the library without the sticker of protection given to the givers. The stickers which mark the Charitable from the Uncharitable. When I gave I felt guilty because I knew I had given to escape the moral disapproval of the collectors and the other workers. Every Friday my dilemma was repeated, and I never resolved it satisfactorily. Some of these causes I believed in; all of them were worthy in some way. But in my twisted mind, giving to them increasingly became an admission of defeat, the triumph of salesmanship in every corner of the world.

On Saturdays, stalls sprang up outside the library selling antiquarian books; organic bananas with their ends dipped in red wax; food from steaming bamboo pots, sometimes with tentacles dangling from the side; Bali style trinkets – beaded necklaces, bracelets of fake gold, anklets made from shells on black leather cord, faux leather purses.

The stalls were setting up as I went in to work and closing as I came out. I never bought anything from any of them. I felt shut out of the world of leisure that these markets presumed. Markets were for those with time to idly browse and money to carelessly buy. For years I had sought out secondhand books everywhere I went, but now, working in the library that had, some wrongly claimed, every book ever published, it seemed a futile pursuit. The Library of Babel made my efforts puny and I gave up. I no longer had the time to spend months looking for a particular title. If I needed it, I would borrow it.

On Sundays, apparently, the building was abuzz with workers – even more, some claimed, than during the week. All part time and casual staff did their best to get some precious Sunday hours, paid as they were at triple time. I was never offered any, which suited me as I wanted to be free to go to church. (I was practically a Pharisee, so resistant was I to working on a Sunday. I don’t claim it as a virtue; it’s just the scar of a boy brought up Baptist who never got to decide for himself what he was able to let go of and what he clutched onto.)

So I never got to see the library on a Sunday. I presume it went on existing, that in many important ways it was the same institution as the other six days.