

## Episode 1.17 Los Angeles Central Library

### Angourie (host)

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation as the traditional custodians of the land on which this work was developed and is presented. I pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

[theme music]

### Angourie (host)

Hello there, and welcome back to The Community Library: a podcast, book club and discussion space. I'm your host, Angourie Rice. Welcome, everyone, to this week's minisode. Today I'm going to be talking about my trip to the Los Angeles Central Public Library. But, before I do, I want to tell you about what I'm currently reading.

So at the moment, I am reading three books. I'm not quite happy with the selection of books I'm reading now; usually I like to read a variety of books at the same time, maybe one non-fiction, one adult fiction and one YA. Right now I'm enjoying everything I'm reading, for sure, but they're all in a similar-ish vein, and none of them are strictly fiction. You'll see what I mean when I talk about them.

First off, I'm reading *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* by Audre Lorde. This is my first Audre Lorde, so I'm very excited. I'm not very far into this one, I've just read the first essay which was about 35 pages, and it was documenting a trip to Moscow. It was really interesting, and I like her style of writing, and I'm definitely intrigued to read further. I think the first one was more of a diary entry, so I'm excited to read more pieces that are more argument-based. It's not a very long book, but I have a feeling it will quite dense, so hopefully I can finish it by the end of this week, but we'll see.

Next, I'm re-reading *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf. So, next week's podcast episode will be about this book, so I'm preparing for that. This is an extended essay on women and fiction. It's a reasonably quick read, but it's taking me a little longer this time because I'm taking notes and planning the episode as I go, obviously. I've also started doing this thing where I listen to the audiobook and read my physical book at the same time, and I've found that this actually helps a lot with my concentration. I find I can get quite easily distracted reading Woolf's work because it's very stream-of-consciousness and can be quite dense, so listening to the audiobook at the same time is really helping me focus on the text, and making me notice sentences, and phrases, and little details that I may have missed the first time round.

Finally, I'm reading *Mythos* by Stephen Fry. This book retells the stories of the Greek myths, starting with Kronos and the Titans, and then moving in to Zeus, and his siblings, and his children. I guess it's kind of non-fiction? Because the voice of Stephen Fry comes through a lot – it's like, he's the one telling you the stories over a campfire at night. But at the same time, the stories are technically fiction, I guess. But it's also different, because they're myths – they're – they're kind of the foundation for the fiction that we have now, the foundation for words, phrases, and literary tropes in English that we have today. So, I don't really know what it is, or how to classify it, but I'm really enjoying it so far. I've always been very interested in Greek mythology, but my knowledge of the myths is very disjointed. I've kind of collected stories here and there, and latched on to ones

that I found particularly interesting, but there are some that I remember incorrectly, and some I know absolutely nothing about. So, I'm hoping that this is kind of the definitive guide to Greek myths, or, like, Greek myths 101. I'm about 60 pages in, and, so far, Zeus has defeated Kronos and is having babies with basically everyone. We've met the muses, which was very exciting because my sister, Kalliope, is named after the muse of epic poetry, and her name means "beautiful voice." The book says, quote: "Somehow she became a steam-powered organ commonly played in fairgrounds, which are just about the only places where you will hear her name spoken today." End quote.

### **Kalliope (unwanted guest)**

Ha. Sike.

### **Angourie (host)**

Well, when I read this, I found this pretty funny, considering that I hear Kalliope's name literally every single day of my life. But anyway, so far, the book is fascinating, and, yeah, I'm intrigued to read on. But, let's get on with the episode.

So, as you may know, I was in LA last week. I've been to LA a few times now, and I feel like I've done most of the classic tourist things that you do when you go to LA. So I've done the theme parks, I've seen the Hollywood sign, I've put my hands in Marilyn Monroe's handprints. So this time, I thought about what I might want to do or see in LA than I hadn't done or seen before. So few weeks prior to me leaving for LA, I had borrowed *The Library Book* by Susan Orlean from my local library. It's a non-fiction book about the Los Angeles Central Public Library and the big fire that happened there in April of 1986. I had never heard about the LA library before, let alone the enormous fire that happened there, so I was very intrigued by the book.

Last night, I actually finished the book, and I'd say it's a five-star-read. I really loved it. In the book, Orlean follows multiple threads; she follows the history of the library, the day of the fire and the aftermath, and how the library operates today. So the chapters jump between these three strands, while exploring the cultural significance of books and libraries. It's kind of part true crime, part history, part love letter to libraries, and I really loved it.

So, because of this book, I decided that I wanted to visit the LA public library. So, one warm and sunny day in LA, my mum, my sister and I all drove to downtown LA to visit the library. And my first thought was how different downtown LA is to the rest of LA. It's all grey concrete and glass high-rises, and there are hardly any billboards, and lots of people in suits. It just felt worlds away from, like, the sunny Venice Beach, or the glittery Beverly Hills, and the crowded Hollywood Boulevard. It felt kind of like Melbourne, actually. We parked in a deserted carpark and made our way to the entrance of the library, which, I realised later, was actually the side entrance, so my special moment of entering the library was actually kind of ruined, 'cause it – it wasn't the main entrance. But as we walked up the steps to the side door, I remarked that it was so strange to be finally visiting a place I had read so much about, but I hadn't actually seen. It was like – like meeting a celebrity, or walking on to the set of a TV show you watch every night; you feel like you know it, but at the same time everything is just, like, slightly different than what you expected. So when we walked into the main entrance, it was just that, 'cause it looked ... normal. Like, just a normal entrance hall to a normal library, which seemed very strange to me. I don't know what I expected. There were librarians helping patrons at an information desk, there was a column in the middle with maps of the library tacked to it, and signs pointing towards various hallways leading off the room. Very normal, I guess. So originally, the first thing I wanted to visit in the library was the

rotunda, but, um, because my grand entrance had been somewhat underwhelming because we had come through the side entrance, I decided to turn left and exit the building so that I could enter it properly through the main entrance.

So the building was designed and built in the 1920s by Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue. His main inspiration for the building was ancient Egyptian architecture. So the central tower is topped with a pyramid, and on top of that, is a golden sculpture of a hand holding a torch, and this represents the "Light of Learning". It's a magnificent building, and you feel it, for sure, when you're walking up the big steps to the entrance. The steps are long and wide and there are lots of them leading up, so you feel like you have to make this journey to get to the temple at the centre, basically. It feels like you're about to enter, like a magical palace, or something. As soon as I got to the main door, I saw a plaque on my left that I hadn't noticed before, and it was a plaque that acknowledged and listed all of the firefighters that were involved in fighting the 1986 fire. And, some of the names I recognised as people Orlean had mentioned, or even interviewed, in her book. It was strange seeing evidence of something I had only ever read about before, and it suddenly made it all very real; the fact that this fire had actually happened, and had actually destroyed four hundred thousand books. And before it had just felt like a story in a book that wasn't actually real, but now, seeing the library, seeing the plaque, seeing evidence of it all, it really hit me how real and devastating it had been, and how much was lost.

So, moving on from the entrance hall, we visited the rotunda, and it's honestly one of the most beautiful rooms I've ever been in. It has a high, domed ceiling with a beautiful chandelier in the centre, and just an exquisite four part mural painted on the walls. And it's bright and echo-y and the perfect place to take pictures, which several people were doing. Off the rotunda are the two sections for young people; Teen'Scape, and the Children's library. So I visited Teen'Scape first, which was like a mini library within a library, and I realised later in my discovery of the library that this is the way that everything is organised; kind of little libraries inside a bigger library. I was amazed at the Teen'Scape space, which holds books for young adults. Not only did they have books and computers, but also board games, beanbags, study desks, signs offering free online tutoring, and posters featuring superheroes that said: "reading is cool". It just amazed me that so many efforts had been made to make this a really comfortable space for teenagers to do their homework, or meet with friends, or just get some peace and quiet. Oh, and there was a lovely librarian who I witnessed helping someone in Spanish, and then someone else in English just a minute later. So after Teen'Scape, I went into the children's library, which was similarly laid out but, obviously, with books for younger children and a lot more parents milling about. Again, in this room, the walls and ceiling were painted with beautiful murals. It made me so happy and excited for all the kids who are coming here with their parents, who will also grow to love reading and libraries and telling stories. Every time I go into a library, I get so excited by the fact that this is all here for free, and for anyone. And not only is it a building for everyone, but it also offers learning to everyone, and I think that's an incredibly special thing.

So I continued exploring the library with the help of a map I had picked up along the way. On level two I looked through art and music. On the third floor I walked past shelves and shelves of classic fiction, and strangely, all copies of the books were the same edition. Now, I don't know if this is just an LA Central Library thing, I don't know if this is an American Library thing, I don't know if I just haven't noticed this before, but at my library, they might have three copies of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, and they will all be different editions. But at the LA Central Public Library, all nine copies of Jane Austen's *Emma* were the same Signet Classics edition, and all fourteen copies of

Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* were the same 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary edition. I don't know, I just found this strange for some reason.

On level one, I poked my head into the International Languages section. I understood some of the German titles, a few of the French, and absolutely none of the Spanish.

Level negative one held books on Business and Economics – something I wasn't particularly interested in looking at, and so I kept going down to level negative two. Now, this is where I was interested, because level two held books on Science and Technology, but also a comprehensive collection of American patent listings. So I looked through a volume of book patents from 1925, a volume of design patents from 1966, and design patents from January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2001, which was the closest one I could find to my birthday. The thing that I loved about the patent listings was that – the design ones, at least – all had little diagrams of how these mechanisms worked.

I then moved down yet another level to negative three, and found the social science, philosophy and religion section.

Down on level negative four was the history and genealogy section. So I've always been interested in genealogy and family trees, and my family history, as well, but I knew that this particular library probably couldn't help me find my long lost ancestors. I have American family in my close immediate family by marriage, but my blood ancestors are all British colonists who came to Australia. But, you know, I was still interested to find out about Americans who shared my last name, so I looked through the genealogy local history index. This is a physical library catalogue with index cards organised by last name. So, each one has a name printed at the top, and then lists citations to family histories in which that name is mentioned. So this includes local and county histories and cemetery records. I looked at the card that said Edward Rice at the top. I'm pretty sure there's no relation. The name Rice first appeared in my family when Thomas Rice came on a boat to Australia from England, and he had bad handwriting so it's unclear whether the document said Price, Rice, or Ross. But, it was cool to see it anyway, and I really enjoyed flicking through the little index cards.

After this, I went all the way back up again to the ground floor to find my sister, who was reading *Animal Farm* by George Orwell in Teen'Scape.

We exited through the giftshop, where I bought three postcards. I also saw that *The Library Book*, by Susan Orlean was for sale, which I thought was quite ironic.

I really loved my trip to the library. I think in my mind, Los Angeles is associated with work and the film business, which can be quite exhausting and stressful for me, and it was nice to go somewhere in LA that felt very separate from that. I think that books have an incredible power to make someone feel at home and comfortable, and that's exactly what the library did for me. I think libraries are very similar to the movies – they're places that bring people together through storytelling. My love for libraries and what they mean to me is something I can't articulate as well as Susan Orlean can, so I'm going to leave you with a quote from her book, *The Library Book*.

Quote: "The library is a whispering post. You don't need to take a book off a shelf to know there is a voice inside that is waiting to speak to you, and behind that was someone who truly believed that if he or she spoke, someone would listen. It was that affirmation that always amazed me. Even the oddest, most particular book was written with that kind of crazy courage – the writer's belief that someone would find his or her book important to read. I was struck by how precious and foolish and brave that belief is, and how necessary, and how full of hope it is to collect these books and manuscripts and preserve them. It declares that all these stories matter, and so does every effort to create something that connects us to one another, and to our past and to what is still to come."

End quote.

Before I do the outro, I wanna let you know that next week, I will be discussing *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf, with my good friend Maija. She was featured on the podcast before, we discussed *Pulp* by Robin Talley together, and we had a great time. So, you still have a week to read *A Room of One's Own* if you so desire. It is a very short book, and I think it's an incredibly piece of literature, and I would love for you to read along so you can join in on the discussion. If you don't have a physical copy, or don't have access to a library, then there is also a free audiobook available on both YouTube and Spotify, so I will link them both in the show notes. I hope you read along with us, and I can't wait for you to listen to next week's episode.

[theme music]

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