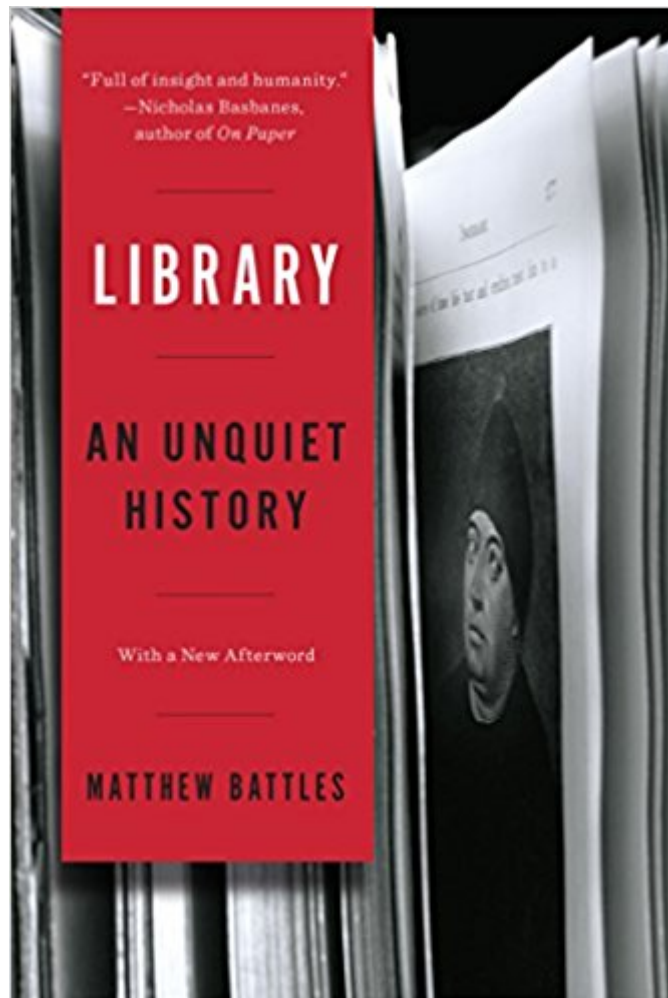


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Library: An Unquiet History



Synopsis

•Engrossingly saturated with fascinating lore, colorful anecdotes and deft portraits. •Hilarie M. Sheets, *New York Times* Through the ages, libraries have not only accumulated and preserved but also shaped, inspired, and obliterated knowledge. Now they are in crisis. Former rare books librarian and Harvard MetaLAB visionary Matthew Battles takes us from Boston to Baghdad, from classical scriptoria to medieval monasteries and on to the Information Age, to explore how libraries are built and how they are destroyed: from the scroll burnings in ancient China to the burning of libraries in Europe and Bosnia to the latest revolutionary upheavals of the digital age. A new epilogue elucidates the preservation of knowledge amid the creative destruction of twenty-first century technology. 10 illustrations

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Customer Reviews

Last April during the war raging in Baghdad, a mob set fire to the "House of Wisdom," the national library of Iraq. Almost all of its books and ephemera were burned. Burning a library seems a particularly vicious and sad thing to do, but it would not have surprised Matthew Battles. He works at the rare books section at Harvard's library, and he has written *Library: An Unquiet History* (W. W. Norton), a tour of libraries through history, and what becomes of them. Those of us who frequently use our local libraries and even take them for granted may reflect with pleasure on the anomalous (and deceptive) permanence of our particular library. Battles writes, "There is no library that does not ultimately disappear." Some of them are done in by natural causes, and plenty more are deliberately destroyed to make a social or revisionary point. There is more to libraries than their

destructions, of course, and more to Battles's book. It is full of well-written and surprising paragraphs, brimming with erudition, and part of its attractiveness is that he has not stuck to any structural plan. This is not an attempt at a comprehensive history of libraries, but it does take into account a lot of history. "By bringing books together in one place, cultures and kings inevitably make of them a sacrifice to time." Though the destructions of libraries by Shi Huangdi (who started the Great Wall of China), through the Nazis and into Sarajevo are necessary subjects here, the grimness is lightened by portraits of eminent librarians. For instance, cataloging by means of the famous Dewey Decimal System was invented by Melville Dewey, born in 1851; he was a spelling reformer and changed his name to Melvil.

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