

Libraries will not die, they are here to stay

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 A library

A student in a library. FILE PHOTO | NATION MEDIA GROUP

In Summary

- But in the college brochure, the course wasn't explicitly packaged as librarianship, rather Information Sciences.
- I was a semester in before I figured things out, and I couldn't just up and leave.

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The library was supposed to be dead by now, at best belly-up and writhing like an upturned beetle, or teetering on the edge of a fast cliff.

In the tech-boom that has characterised the past decade and a half, a brave world full of gadgets and apps of all persuasions, tools that allow one to read

multiple books or store a shelf-worthy collection of books and other reading materials, the physical library was among the institutions whose shelf-life, experts argued, would soon become obsolete.



Yet not only has the physical library shrugged of the prognosis, it has seen remarkable growth in the past ten years, even in the most tech-savvy nations of the world.

The Kenya National Library Services (KNLS) has, according to statistics on its website opened four new branches in various parts of the country in the past one year, with the number of public libraries currently standing at 62.

SIGNED UP FOR COURSE

Librarianship is the course I signed for; that and a sprinkling of archival studies.

But in the college brochure, the course wasn't explicitly packaged as librarianship, rather Information Sciences. I was a semester in before I figured things out, and I couldn't just up and leave.

But in that 'accident', I would come to appreciate the house of knowledge, the order and the work that goes on behind every book that has earned its place on the shelf. And it is in the library that I discovered a new world, and new names, in particular, a writer named Anne Rule, arguably the most prolific and beloved of the true-crime genre. I had never read better- beaded prose. From that juncture, it was a just a matter of time before I signed the divorce papers cleaving librarianship for the choppy waters of typed copy.

Backpacks and pages

In my mind there are three unforgettable scents: the achingly sweet smell of dust fleeing at the drum roll of raindrops; the smell of wooden pews inside the empty hall of my childhood church out in the countryside; and the smell of books in a library: old flaky pages, or the wet freshness of a newly arrived book.

I can't say I experience the same nasal thrill whenever raindrops touch the face of parched earth-at least I do not run outside, and I haven't been to my old church in quite some time.

But the smell inside a library-any library, the smell of old flaky pages, or the sawdust-fresh of newly unpacked books has remained unchanged.

SHARDS FROM LONG AGO



We carry shards from long ago; our experiences, our interactions and later some of these chapters, pages, form part of who or what we become.

If I close my eyes I can telegraph the first book I ever borrowed from the public library in my hometown of Nyeri after I enrolled my membership.

The book was a hard-bound biography of Mahatma Gandhi, the Indian freedom hero and martyr of peace (his legacy has been revised of late, revealing a smudged portrait, but that's a whole different chapter).

What I remember is the cover jacket, the pince-nez glasses hanging down Gandhi's nose, and the smell of the pages—a rich, time-worn smell not completely of human making, rather a confluence of time and timelessness. The hall was full but tomb-quiet, and as I walked among the rows in the history and biography sections I felt lost, and completely found. It felt like home.

Among the spines were names from the past, names of consequence; names and events I had skimmed in history class, or picked from conversations at home: Churchill, Nkrumah, Hitler. I had just turned 18, and the visit to the library would mark the end of my rendezvous with fiction, yanking me into a chapter of near-obsession with works of nonfiction, and an enduring love for libraries.

The library is dead, long live the library

Experts suggest that the resilience of the traditional library in the digital age hinges on the human need for community.

“There is a sense of networking and even ownership,” says Anne Wangui, a librarian with the Rural Reading Centre, a private-owned community library network that offers free library services in non-traditional settings—villages and other places where reading centres are unlikely to be found. “The community becomes part of the learning process. Children who come here to read are unlikely to engage in truancy and delinquency.”



Moreover, not everyone can afford a computer and other tech-heavy gadgets, or access to Internet. And even where these resources are readily available, there appears to be an almost filial connection between readers and the physical book-which is the centrepiece of the old-school library.

“Modern screens and e-readers fail to adequately recreate certain tactile experiences of reading on paper that many people miss and, more importantly, prevent people from navigating long texts in an intuitive and satisfying way,” writes author Ferris Jabr in a feature article titled, *The Reading Brain in the Digital Age* in the *Scientific American* magazine.

“Compared with paper, screens may also drain more of our mental resources while we are reading and make it a little harder to remember what we read when we are done.”

There is a reason librarians sternly, and adamantly advise readers not to return books to the shelves. Here is why: each book in the library bears a number code that denotes the subject content or field; it is what keeps the library in coherence. I never practised my course, but when I look back at the theory work, and a short internship at the Kenya National Archives, I am naturally inclined to a certain clingingly stubborn adherence to this order; a book should be in its rightful place. It takes loads of work hours to put books in their rightful slots.

There is a brittle section of the society, people who bite into a certain way of life to the point of being considered purists, or even cultish. In the decades since that visit to the public library in Nyeri town, ever since I got lost among the rows and rows of paper and caught the whiff of old, crumbly pages, I have not been able to sign over to the digital side of the page. I am keeping the physical book.

Eventually, time will most likely twist my arm into acceptance, and I will be dragged across the ditch into the strange world of Kindle and whatever else is out there. But for now, I can't wait to walk into a library hall and look up the rows and smell the pages. It's home, in the company of friends-books.





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Wamae Wanjohi · 5 months ago

KNLS has a most diverse and rich book collections , can they digitize it?

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