



THE BIG POND

A US-GERMAN
LISTENING SERIES

The Library and the Book

by Alex van Oss

Alex van Oss: Shhhhhhh ... it's a library!

[SOUNDS OF CHILDREN IN THE LIBRARY, CRYING, GENERAL HUBBUB]

Alex van Oss: In school ... in first grade, second grade, third grade ... my class went to the public library, and there were so many books! And sometimes, at night, when I was five, six, seven, eight, my father would take out a book and read me to sleep ...

[EDGY FLUTE, ECHOING 'WATERFALL' OF OVERLAPPING DISTANT VOICES]

Alex van Oss: And ever after, my life has been one book after another – and one library after another. Old buildings usually, with trees outside, and real quiet inside. I became a real bookworm. And one day, at my old high school, I went into the school library with its iron stacks, and floor after floor of books ... old books ... really old books! And instead of doing my homework I took out old books. William Morris's 1800's hand-designed *Canterbury Tales*, by Chaucer. And, what else? Oh, anatomical drawings from the 1500s, by someone named Vesalius. They were fascinating. I was a bookworm – but not a good student.

[A PERCUSSIVE SOUND]

John Palfrey: So just seeing the smile on your face as you recall that – that's probably more memorable than most of the classes you had, or most of the other experiences you had in learning. It was something that attracted you, and then you learned something that was unexpected.

Alex van Oss: John Palfrey is the principal of my old high school – Phillips Academy Andover, in Massachusetts. And he's written a challenging book titled *BiblioTECH: Why Libraries Matter More Than Ever in the Age of Google*. Library stacks are great, says Palfrey, and so is what he calls 'serendipity' – the random encounter with books.

John Palfrey: We need to keep that in libraries so I'm a big believer of books in stacks and having that as part of the experience – I also think we can do that in the digital environment, too.

Alex van Oss: Palfrey walks to his stand-up desk and computer.

Alex van Oss: What are we doing here?

John Palfrey: I'm going to just show you an image of something called 'StackView,' which is a technological tool which will allow you to see a stack, in a virtual form, which would be much like the experience of walking into the stacks, only this time has been created with a whole lot of virtual libraries.

Alex van Oss: Be my eyes, what do you see – you've looked up Gravity's Rainbow – what do you now see?

John Palfrey: Well, I see a big version of Gravity's Rainbow right in the middle of the screen, but then I also see other Thomas Pynchon books to the right and left, as well as criticism of his work. And you can imagine other authors who write things related to him in other ways, and you see a sort of endless way to scroll against the spines of these books, and if you click on them you would actually pull up that digital version of the book.

Alex van Oss: Touch the right hand arrow and see what happens.

John Palfrey: It would allow you to scroll endlessly through the holdings of this library, but you can imagine having it be connected to many different libraries.

Alex van Oss: So it could be an endless wander.

John Palfrey: It could be an endless wander through the world of books and knowledge – and one that could not be created in physical space.

Alex van Oss: I check out the old Andover library, where I wandered the stacks half a century ago. But it's closed now, with tubes coming out the window. On life support? No, it's undergoing a radical redesign, says Paige Roberts, the library's Director of Archives and Special Collections.

Paige Roberts: The primary book storage area will be in the basement, which I believe will be focused mostly on history and social science works because those are the most heavily used collection. And then there'll be some books in the library attic, as well.

Alex van Oss: Available? Accessible?

Paige Roberts: Those will be accessible, but a librarian will have to go and physically pull them. This project does not include an elevator going to the attic. So the collection, in terms of books, has obviously expanded significantly in terms of the number of ebooks, and the number of paper books has shrunk a bit in the past few years.

John Palfrey: So the stacks will be a little different, but they'll be much more efficient uses of space ...

Alex van Oss: Again, John Palfrey.

John Palfrey: So you'll still have the serendipity but you may have to do a bit of cranking instead of walking through some metal pathways.

Alex van Oss: 'Stacks' – I like to hear that. When I read the promotional material, though, it talked about 'legacy spaces,' which sounds like something you pay extra for on an aircraft!

John Palfrey: [LAUGHING] There will be some legacy spaces, which is to say that are most memorable. So, two rooms in particular: there's one called the *Garver Room* which is the old silent study room – that will remain as it is, a sort of classic library room. There's also the *Freeman Room*, which had a mural on it, you may recall. Kids now call it the comfy-chairs room. That's a room we've used to bring the most important debates of our day, so to bring political issues and so forth for kids to talk about – that will remain our 'Lyceum' kind of space. But also we will take some spaces that were stacks, and we will turn some of those into things that kids need, such as study rooms, and the shelving will become compact shelving.

[SOUNDS IN THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS – HUBBUB, DOORS, CARTS ...]

Alex van Oss: So much for an old New England school library, but what about the great Mother Ship of libraries: the Library of Congress, in Washington, D.C.? Space is always a problem there, and behind the scenes there are stacks and stacks, and millions of books upstairs, downstairs ...

David Morris: We are on Deck 13; when we came in we passed through Deck 30, which are interconnected. Above and below are another half-dozen other sets of stacks just like these. This building was built in 1897, and it was thought at that time that it would last until the '70s, as far as capacity is concerned. But already, I think, in the 1930s they realized that was way over-optimistic.

Alex van Oss: David Morris winds his way to the European Division of the Library of Congress, where he's German Area Specialist. Libraries in America, he says, owe a tip of the hat to one of the giants of 1800s Germany: the founder of the University of Berlin, Wilhelm von Humboldt.

David Morris: Traditionally the 'Humboldtian' approach to education was of course a real marriage between teaching and research – and also the status of the natural sciences in a university education, which were almost kind of the redheaded stepchild of the academic world until Humboldt really with his vision, and especially the vision of his brother, Alexander von Humboldt, thought of science and art and literature as a very unified whole, and that has since informed what we think of as a well-educated person.

Anna Maria Boss: The idea was that the student should not just be taught a skill, to apply to a profession, become a lawyer or something, but that they should be able to think for themselves, become citizens, in a sense, that would allow them to make informed decisions and also to do research that is not just going for a specific monetary goal, but that they should be able to freely research whatever they were interested in.

Alex van Oss: At the German Historical Institute, in Washington, D.C., the head librarian is Anna Maria Boss.

Anna Maria Boss: That required a different type of university. It required less lectures by the professor, more seminars where students would read material, would discuss material, would think for themselves, and put their thoughts into words – and that in turn had an influence on libraries, because it meant that it wasn't enough to have one book for the professor. You had to have large libraries that were accessible for the students and where you potentially had multiple copies of a single book so that students could have access to books, read the books,

discuss the books, and that created a different type of university library, both in Germany and then in the United States, when this concept came over the big pond.

[PUBLIC LIBRARY AMBIENCE SOUND: KIDS, ROOM NOISE ...]

Alex van Oss: From the quiet hush of a research library, to the hubbub and energy of public libraries. There are thousands across the country, in all kinds of communities, and they're all facing rapid change – demographic and digital.

Maria Harris: I think in a nutshell the internet was a groundbreaking change in the way library services were, and are, delivered. A lot of people said that that was going to be the doomsday of the library, and despite the root of the word 'library' being books, really the purpose is an 'evening' ground to provide books and other services to the general public: to even the playing ground.

Alex van Oss: Maria Harris is a retired librarian who's spent 30 years serving in, or managing, public libraries in Washington, D.C.

Maria Harris: So even if you never had a computer or you had the most expensive computer in the world, everybody wanted to come to the library to use it. The other thing was that I think that libraries provide a lot more services now because there were always storytimes and book groups and things like that, but when computers really kind of exploded, there was hardly any place you could go to learn how to use a computer. How do you get an email address? The public library fit that bill. I'm not sure where you'd go even to pay to go get that sort of training. Public libraries stepped in and provided that service.

Alex van Oss: Another crucial function of the public library, says Harris, is supremely low-tech. And that is: to be a quiet space, and a safe one.

Maria Harris: Working in a public library I would always say it's, you're literally only one step away from the street. And that's the beautiful thing about public libraries but also I think it's the challenge, because the general public come in with a variety of needs and a variety of different states of mind, and we have some customers that would stay with us all day, for whatever reasons – and sometimes when they came, they came to the library they were in a bad mood, and sometimes that bad mood followed them, and so I tried to set the tone so that we could all have a good day. And the other thing, too, is that I find working with the public, sometimes people want a sounding board, and that can be a very good thing, and sometimes it can be a not so good thing – at least sometimes it would create conflict. So I tried to set the tone so that everybody would be nice and calm.

Alex van Oss: Tell me about a surprise that happened sometime to you in all these years.

Maria Harris: The first thing that occurs to me, it actually didn't involve any humans. We had closed down one of the libraries for renovation, and I came upstairs to the second floor to find a pigeon up on the windowsill, looking a little perplexed. And I just started to talk to it, and it started to fly towards me – right to my face – and, as if it thought better of it, it landed at my feet. And I realized the poor pigeon had been in there all weekend. And I thought: can I shoo him down the steps? Do they do that? And then I said: OK. I decided we would ride the elevator. I don't know why I called him 'Big Boy.' 'Come on, Big Boy! Come on, Big Boy!' And he followed me like a dog. I got on and turned around and faced the door. And the pigeon walked on and turned around and faced the doors as well. The doors closed, we rode downstairs, and, just nicely, I walked the pigeon right out of the library.

[SOUND OF MUSIC INSTRUMENTS TUNING UP]

Alex van Oss: Pigeons, the internet, virtual books – time out! Time to pause – at the public library in Rockville, Maryland, where, on a recent weekend, there was packed room ... and a concert.

[MUSIC OF MOZART BEING PLAYED]

Alex van Oss: There's a film by German director Wim Wenders called *Wings of Desire*. In that film two angels, in trench coats, descend to earth and ... simply listen. They're invisible and silent, but they can hear our thoughts. The two angels visit the main public library in Berlin – a vast space – and just listen to people thinking. Libraries are a good place for thinking, says Hugh Kelleher, who went to Harvard and then worked on Capitol Hill, in Washington, as a speechwriter. But then he switched gears and became a plumber ... and a writer. Libraries are important to him, as are books.

Hugh Kelleher: There was an English critic, whose name of course I can't remember, but the basic idea was that 'reading should expand the sympathies.' And that's what I look for in a good book. Does it help me understand people? I remember my Dad, who was not a reader, he sometimes said, 'Why do you want to read that kind of stuff – it's not even true.' This was fiction we were talking about. And about all I could say at the time was, 'Well, it's really interesting.' And he wasn't really buying it, but I've decided that he didn't have the right idea, and I did.

Alex van Oss: There's a book by Susan Orlean and in the book there's some discussion about whether books have a soul. I wonder what thoughts come to you.

Hugh Kelleher: Every book certainly does have a spirit. I mean when you're with it you're in the company of something that you recognize isn't you, but is speaking to you, is engaging you. Was it Proust who said: 'We read books to read ourselves?' It gives us an opportunity often to improve and expand our awareness of what the world is. And libraries are just ... they're magical places and there is that other saying: 'Where is the will so weak as in a bookstore?' The bookstore is another version of the library.

Alex van Oss: Hugh Kelleher. Another serious reader is Tom Veblen, the former Vice President of the Cargill Corporation. In fact, Veblen is so serious about books and libraries that some years ago he traveled all the way to Egypt to see the pyramids and also what's been called one of the foundations of Western Civilization: The Great Library of Alexandria. Of course, the original library disappeared a thousand years ago or so, but there's a modern version now, designed by a Norwegian. So Tom Veblen – who's of proud Minnesota Norwegian stock – decided to travel 5,000 miles to Alexandria and pay a visit. But when he got to the library, it was closed. What to do?

Tom Veblen: As you know, in most of the Mediterranean countries money talks [LAUGHING], and so finally I figured out that our guide was waiting for me to ask what the cost would be – probably like \$50. And that was the magic key to opening up the library.

Alex van Oss: What does it look like?

Tom Veblen: As you go in the entrance of the library, it slopes down for about seven or eight stories, open, toward the Mediterranean. So as you stand in the entrance of the library, you look into the library, you look through a glass ceiling, in effect, out to the Mediterranean, and then down to the, story after story ... they're really sort of balconies that run down, and there are desks and tables and chairs – but no books.

Alex van Oss: No books?

Tom Veblen: Obviously this is a moment of reflection. So what's the purpose of a library if it isn't to collect books? And that was my question to the assistant librarian who was showing us through: 'How can you run a library without books?' And he said, of course: 'This is the electronic age and, digitally, we can produce everything that's of any significance in literature in the world – and that's exactly what we're going to do.'

[FLUTE SOUND]

Alex van Oss: No books in the library – this weighed on me! In fact, when I went back to my old high school and met the head of school, John Palfrey, I had a dream. And in that dream was Karl Marx – of all people – who wrote most of *The Communist Manifesto* and *Das Kapital* while sitting in the main library in London. But now Karl Marx was in my ear, and he was saying ...

Alex van Oss: [IN A WEIRD ECHO SOUND VOICE] Zer ist a specter haunting libraries, und ze specter ist – ze book! John Palfrey, what do you make of that dream?

John Palfrey: Hmm! Well, that's interesting. I thought the specter haunting libraries was going to be Google, or some other technological service that people have been thinking might replace libraries. I think the book is such an integral part of our conception of libraries. I also think it can potentially be a limiting factor when we think about libraries as only being about bound books. They're so much more than that. So, to the extent that a book is a specter towards library: potentially that might be one way that might be true – which is to say, if we only think of libraries as being about bound books, that might be problematic.

Alex van Oss: All over America ... the world ... libraries are racing to digitize. They've got to, says John Palfrey, to stay relevant.

John Palfrey: Because of Google and Smart Phones. In other words, you carry around with you a library at all times – why would I need an actual library? Why should we spend money on this instead of fire, and police, and education, and other good things in our town? And the answer is: we should do all of those things; they're crucial public services. I think libraries are more important than ever, and more important than we think they are, and I think they're pretty cheap dates in most instances! I don't think they're especially expensive as public services go. So my fear is only that we underrate the value of libraries and that we don't actually believe in them and we don't actually invest in them as much as we need to right now.

Alex van Oss: You, in your book talk a lot about how libraries should become 'nodes' and 'platforms' – and I suddenly had this vision of libraries becoming – airports! Nodes? Platforms? What is all this?

John Palfrey: I want to be sure that libraries don't end up as silos or islands, in other words, on their own. I think that it's really important for libraries to be interconnected. So if, in this digital era, if libraries missed the fact that there is power in networks, there is power in platforms, they would be missing something really important. So why is Google so powerful, why is Facebook so powerful? Why is Netflix and Amazon, why are they so powerful? It's because they've figured out these secrets of the digital age. I just think that libraries need to do some of that as well.

Alan Inouey: Libraries tend to follow the trends in technology, just as in society ...

Alex van Oss: At the Washington office of the American Library Association, Alan Inouey directs their office of public policy and government relations.

Alan Inouey: So back in the day big technology in libraries included things like photocopier machines, typewriters, microfiche readers, and of course many print magazines and newspapers and books. And of course that's changed a lot, or at least I should say it's expanded a lot. A lot of those old technologies, although maybe not so many typewriters anymore, but print books and magazines and newspapers are certainly still very popular, but there's a lot of newer technologies. And so looking in the years ahead, we expect artificial intelligence to become major, even a much more significant technology in society: whether it's automated cars with automated driving, or what have you, and so we expect that to end up in the libraries as well.

Alex van Oss: Whoa! You mean driverless cars are going to come into the library?

Alan Inouey: Well, I hope not! We don't want them, these cars running into the walls or anything – but I think that bringing in more the artificial technology into the library. So right now you may well find labs for 3D printers and obviously labs for lots of computers and internet access, and so that might be one, the new dimension, will be artificial intelligence laboratories, for example.

Alex van Oss: A final story: Years ago, in a public library, I came across an 1877 book by a famous British aristocrat – James, First Viscount, Bryce. He was quite a fellow: an academic, jurist, politician, historian, diplomat ... and explorer. The book is about his early ascent of Mount Ararat, in the Caucasus region of historical Armenia. It's supposedly where Noah's Ark came to rest. What's amazing is that Bryce not only climbs Mount Ararat – not an easy thing – but also pauses to describe every plant on the way up, every mineral specimen, and even the clouds. How did he have time to do this? Decades later Bryce wrote about the Armenian Genocide. And after that he became the British ambassador to the United States. And a century after that, I happen to spot his mountain book in the public library and take it out, many times. It was a real treasure, and I asked the library if I could buy the book. No way, they said. So I gave them my name, just in case they decided to ... ahem ... 'de-acquisition' this beautiful old tome. But no such luck. The library closed for remodeling and digitizing – and the book simply vanished. Sold off, maybe, or just thrown out. Maybe I should have ... ahem ... 'de-acquisitioned' it myself ... Once more, Alan Inouey.

Alan Inouey: This kind of pruning has always happened in libraries, and especially in public libraries, because the role of a public library is primarily not preservation. As you can imagine, some libraries, like the Library of Congress or maybe some of the big university research libraries ... that they see part of their mission as being stewards of the nation's cultural heritage, and so they want to have comprehensive collections of whatever. But most public libraries, like the one down on the corner or even your main public library in your city, they don't really see their role as doing that so much. So it's really to support what their residents want, in terms of leisure reading, in terms of reading to support improving job skills, or kids who are in school, or college students, or what have you. And so there is this natural weeding of the shelves that has always taken place. I think in recent years that has probably accelerated some, in part because of the need for these new collaborative spaces, to have more computers and internet access, and whatever, and that there's less demand for some of these old books, especially the ones that are older like this. There is a kind of related issue, especially in the digital age: with printed books libraries have the rights to make this decision – that we bought this copy of this book and so we decide how long it's worth keeping, in terms of providing service; but with digital materials you generally don't have that right, because they're all licensed. There's a contract which governs exactly what you can do with it. So there is a bigger question in terms of, well, what does it mean to have a collection of digital materials, and in particular to preserve them – or whether you even have the right to do that.

Alex van Oss: In 1837, the great Russian poet, Alexander Pushkin, died in St. Petersburg, mortally wounded in a duel. He lingered in agony for two days as thousands came to say goodbye. Pushkin lay on a sofa in his apartment, in the library ... surrounded by books. Towards the end he waved to them and said: 'Farewell, my friends.'

Alex van Oss: [WHISPERING] Shhhhhhh! It's a library! ...

[SOUNDS OF KIDS, FOOTSTEPS, BOOK CLOSING, MOZART MUSIC, DISTANT REPRISÉ OF THE WATERFALL OF VOICES, OVERLAPPING; MURMURS FADING OUT: 'WHERE'S THE BOOK? WHERE'S THE BOOK? WHERE, WHERE, WHERE'S THE BOOK?']

Alex van Oss: For THE BIG POND, this is Alex van Oss.

[SOUNDS AND MOZART FADE OUT]

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