

The Library at Night by Alberto Manguel

Reviewed by Peter Ackroyd

The Times May 8, 2008

There is an old superstition that books, alone in the night and the silence, whisper one to another; the library then becomes an echo chamber of words and syllables, conjuring up the great general drama of the human spirit. Libraries are legendary places. Libraries enter myth as well as history. Lost libraries, like that of Alexandria, are a reminder of the transience of human achievement and of human learning. “No place,” Samuel Jonson said, “affords a more striking conviction of the vanity of human hopes than a public library.”

In the wake of Jorge Luis Borges, perhaps, Alberto Manguel celebrates the power of the library over the creative imagination. For some it is a place of order, where the co-ordinates of scholarship are drawn up and displayed. For others the library attests to the incipient chaos of all recorded expression. The reader may go from book to book, like a butterfly, and extract a phrase before dipping into another and another volume. “One book calls to another unexpectedly,” Manguel writes, “creating alliances across different cultures and centuries.”

The Library of Alexandria, founded by Ptolemy I of Egypt, was meant to encompass the whole world of learning. Ptolemy wrote to all the rulers of the Earth, asking them to send to him specimens of every type of book by every kind of writer. That ambition exists still, as the bibliophilic equivalent of the Grand Unified Theory of particle physics. It represents the desire to order and control the whole. The preservation of memory in written form is a manifestation of power. It is an attempt to thwart or to defeat death itself.

It is stated in one Islamic text that “one scholar is more powerful against the Devil than a thousand worshippers”. What are the passing generations but shadows moving over the page? It has been said, therefore, that each reader is but one chapter in the life of a book. That is why libraries have been deemed to hold the key to the secrets of magic. Swedenborgians and Theosophists used to meet in Bloomsbury, in the shadow of the British Museum that once held the British Library. The domed reading room was one of the great spaces of the world. The present British Library has lost its historic purpose and has become a playground for young students.

Manguel himself was an early and indefatigable reader. “The truth is,” he writes, “I can't remember a time when I did not live surrounded by my library. By the age of 7 or 8 I had assembled in my room a minuscule Alexandria...” There are some who love learning, and there are others who love reading. Manguel falls into the latter category. He is not unlearned, but his learning is of the allusive and elusive type commonly associated with reading. He adumbrates no general theory, and he makes no conclusive statements. His method is one of association and accidental recovery. He is an accidental scholar in the tradition of Robert Burton or of Thomas Browne; he is a snapper-up of recondite trifles.

His book is entitled *The Library at Night*. Why does he wish to share this nocturnal experience? In the silent hours of darkness the books are enmeshed in shadow, creating a world where there is no beginning and no end, no story and no meaning. At night the volumes can be said to form “a continuous narrative stream in which all genres, all styles, all stories converge, and all protagonists and all locations are unidentified...”. The reader is dipped into the swelling tide of language and is borne away. Yet there may be disadvantages to this experience. The reading of too many books may induce lassitude, wistfulness and fatalism.

Manguel also tells the story of one New Yorker who was literally overburdened with books. At the end of 2003, after a decade of book-buying, Patrice Moore was trapped under an “avalanche” that had descended from the shelves, and was not rescued for two days. He was buried alive by words, and the neighbours could hear him “moaning and mumbling” from beneath the piles of paper. It is a salutary warning to the overenthusiastic reader.

There are more obvious problems with libraries. In one chapter Manguel ponders the intricacies of classification; in another he expatiates on the seemingly infinite accumulation of books in the world. No library will be complete. There are always new volumes to be acquired and ingested.

And, contrary to the rubbish of received wisdom, there is no substitute for the book. Manguel estimates that electronic material can be preserved for a decade at best. That is why books can be considered dangerous. That is why they have been burnt. Libraries have been destroyed so that an indigenous culture can be forgotten; a fanatic priest from Spain destroyed most of Aztec literature, while the book burnings of Nazi Germany and the Inquisition are notorious.

It is written in Ecclesiastes that “of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh”. This can be construed as a celebration of, or warning concerning, the plenitude and power of books. The book can help us to interpret the past and to imagine the future. That is the achievement of *The Library at Night*. Out of the darkness of one man's library shines a beacon.

The Library at Night by Alberto Manguel

Yale University Press, 384pp