

WHY
I (STILL)
❤️
THE
LIBRARY

BECAUSE IT'S STILL THE BEST PLACE TO FIND FABULOUS BOOKS AND QUIET INSPIRATION

BY ROD DAVIS PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHAD WINDHAM

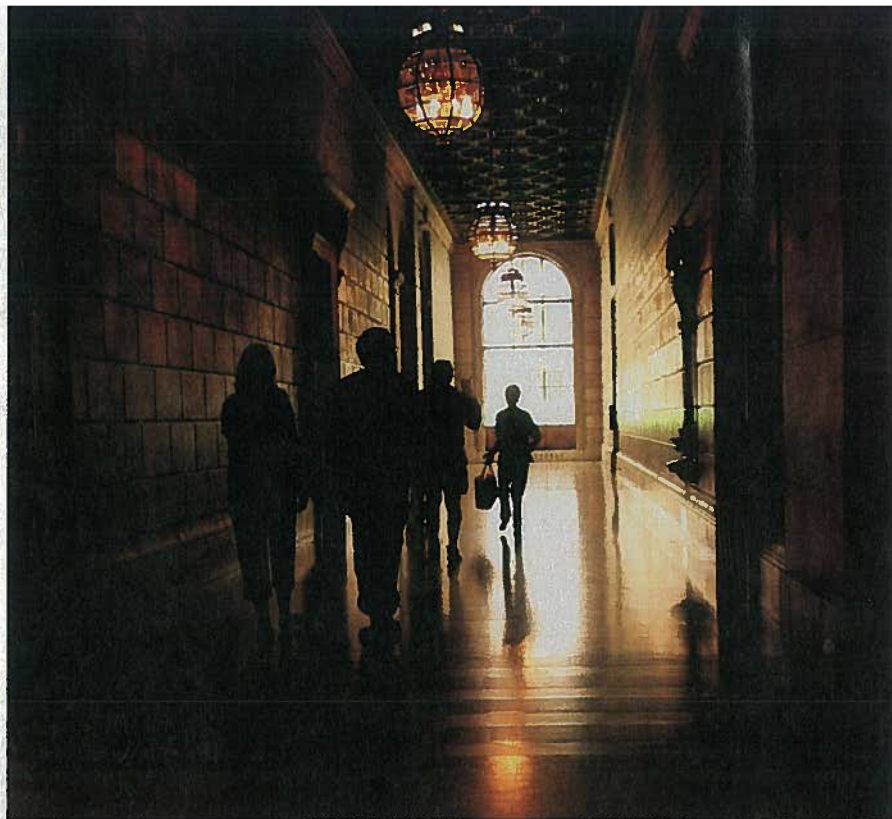
I'M SITTING AT A POLISHED WOODEN TABLE LOOKING OUT THE WALL-LENGTH PICTURE WINDOW ON THE FIFTH FLOOR OF THE DALLAS CENTRAL PUBLIC LIBRARY. IT'S A BUSY FRIDAY DOWNTOWN AND

sweltering outside. But in here it's pretty much what Hemingway once sought in Paris: a clean, well-lighted place, albeit without France. I can see thunderheads building off to the south and, just across the street, bureaucrats in the tiered windows of City Hall. No way I want to be over there, where mortals struggle with the demands of governing, when I can be here, free to lose my thoughts in shelf after shelf of authors famous or esoteric.

It is a perfect place. Or close, considering the options. It is where I come — always have — to think, work, escape. To a library. An island of the imagination, manifest in real bricks and mortar. It is why I always have loved libraries, and have camped out in them from the Heart of Texas to the rolling hills of rural England, from college days in Missouri to Army days in South Korea. They are not only the repositories of books — of knowledge — but temples. The spirits in these hallowed places are open to all points of view, limited to none.

I chose this spot on the fifth floor mostly for the view, but I have roamed all eight levels depending on what I might be researching — business, history, urban affairs, humanities, genealogy, science, economics. On the second floor, there's a section especially for kids, including a play area and a kids-only bathroom — which any parent knows ought to be mandatory everywhere. When I got here, I parked underground, also sheltered from heat and cold, and with rates half the price or less than anywhere else downtown.

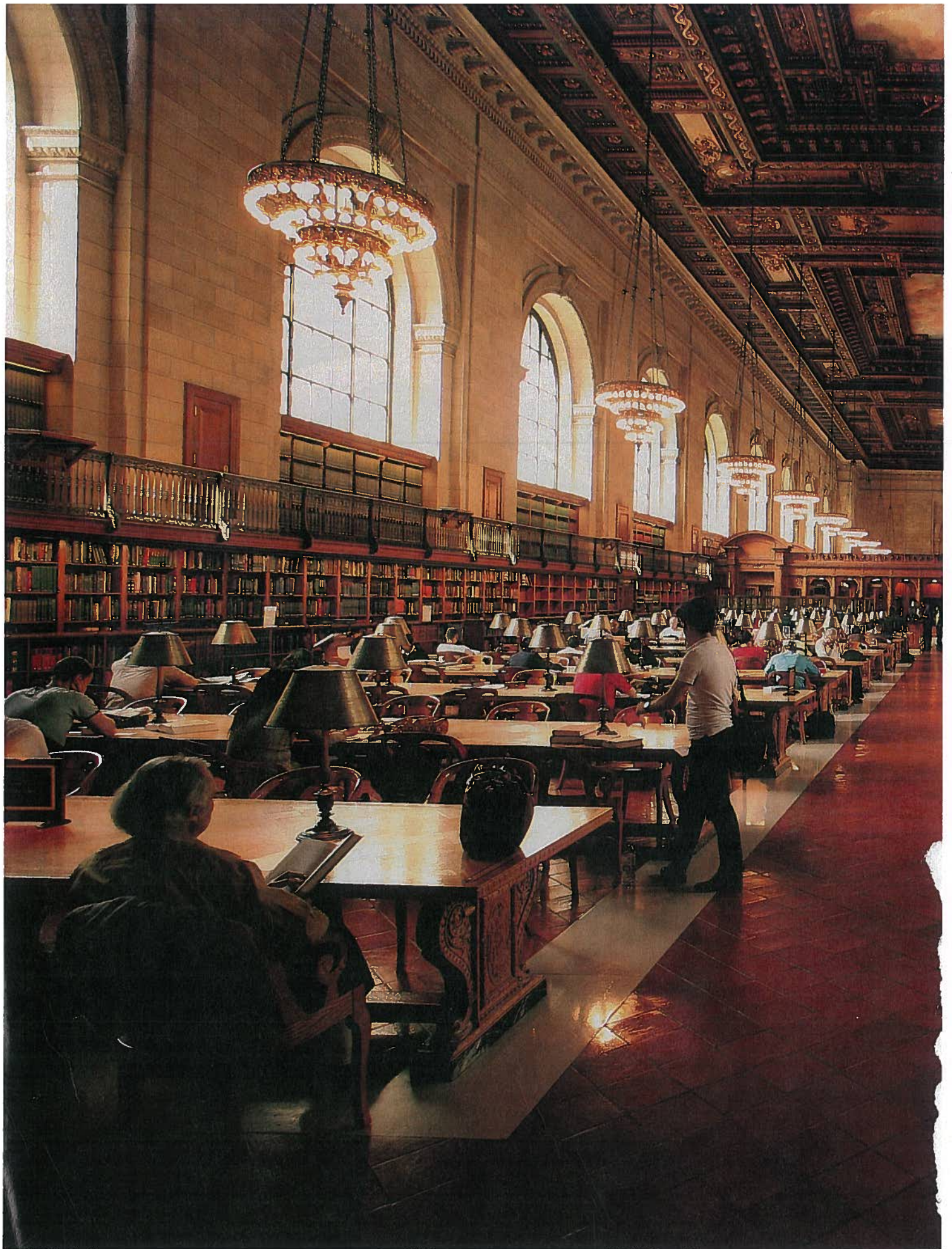
My friends think it's weird to like libraries these days, that they are dinosaurs circumvented by the Internet, by television — by Starbucks, for that matter. They complain because the homeless like to wander in the lobby or sit at the tables or sleep there. To the former objection, I simply note the facts. In Dallas last year, library circulation rose 20 percent in the central facility, and 13 percent in the 23 community satel-

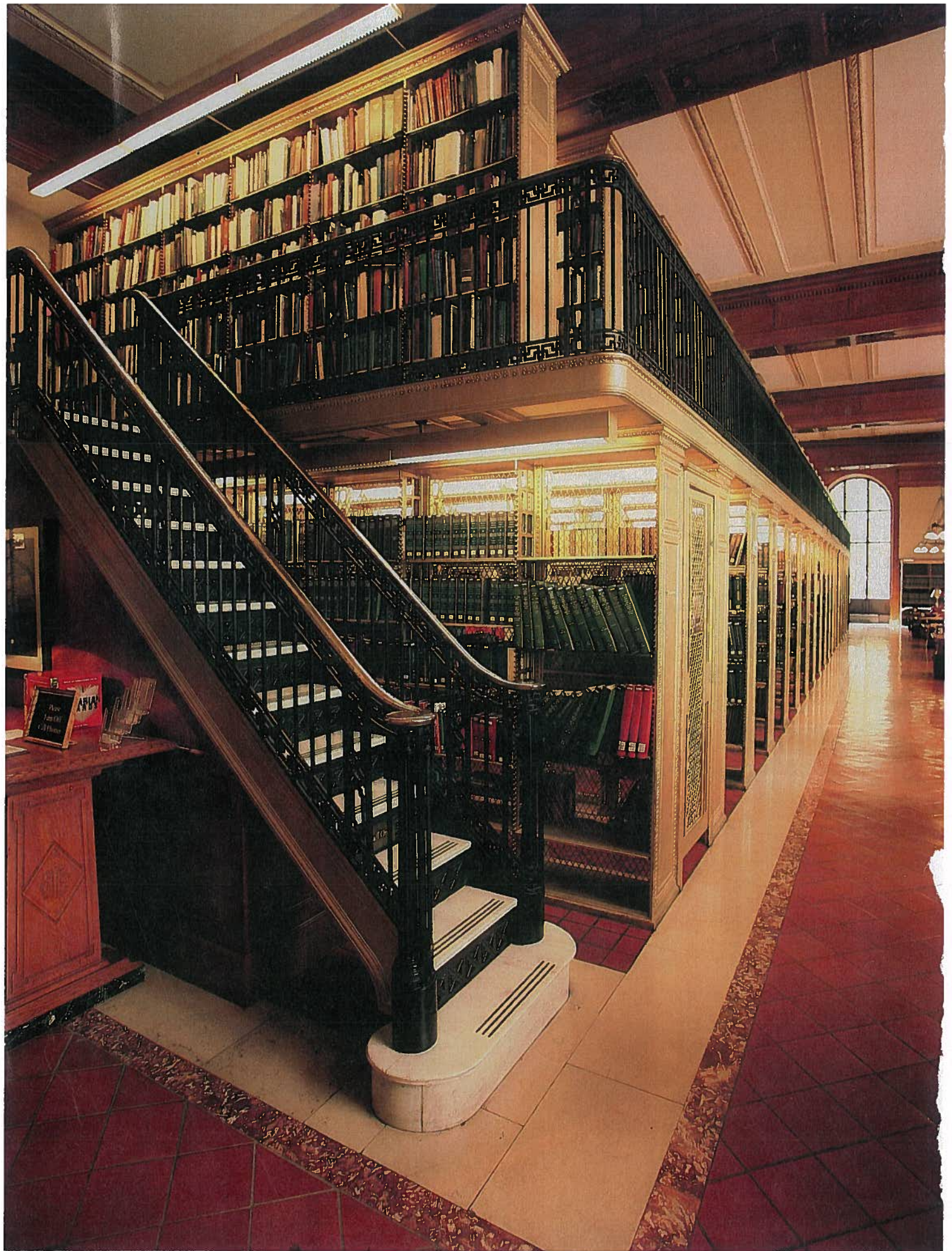


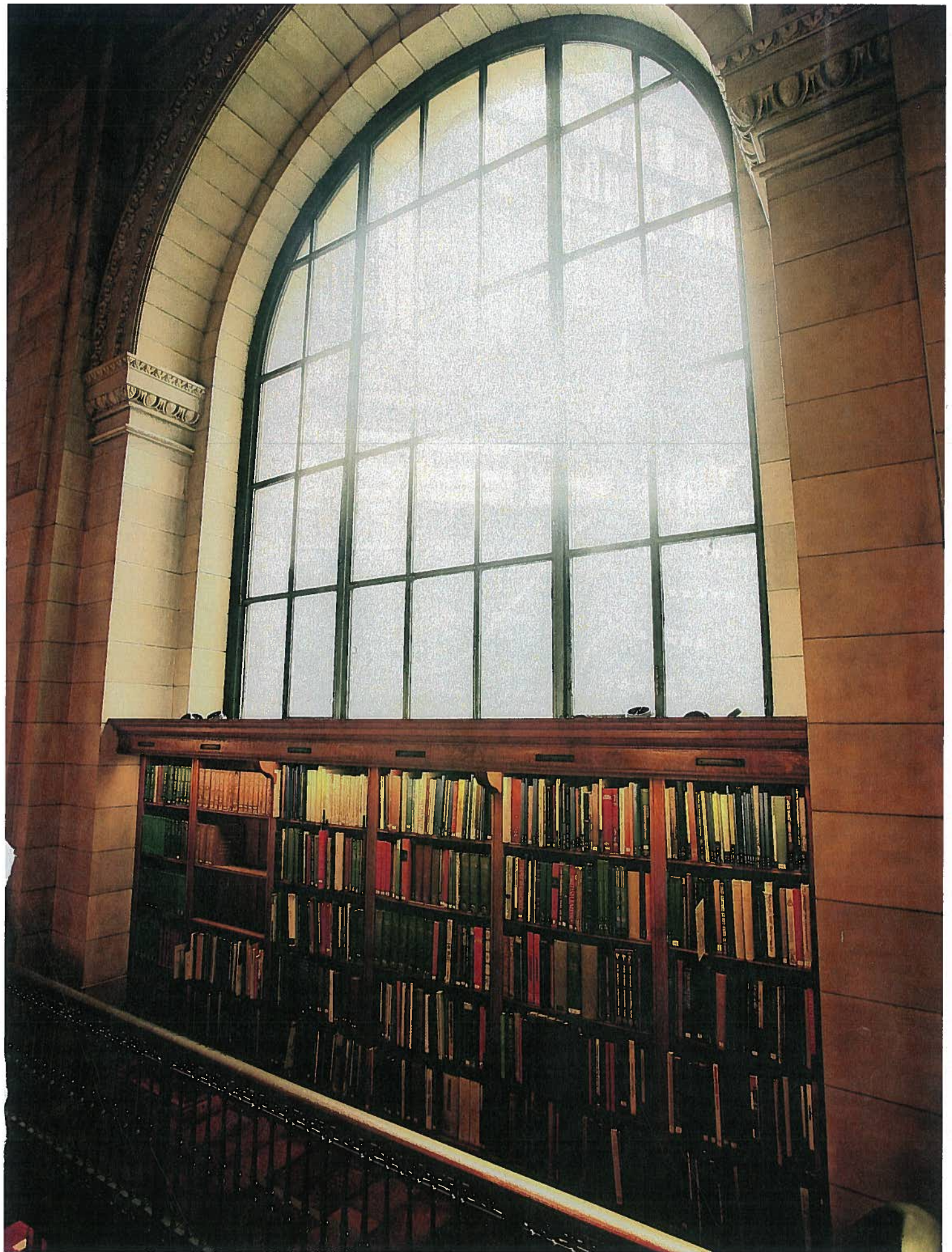
All photos of The New York Public Library. Below, American Library Association President Leslie Burger.

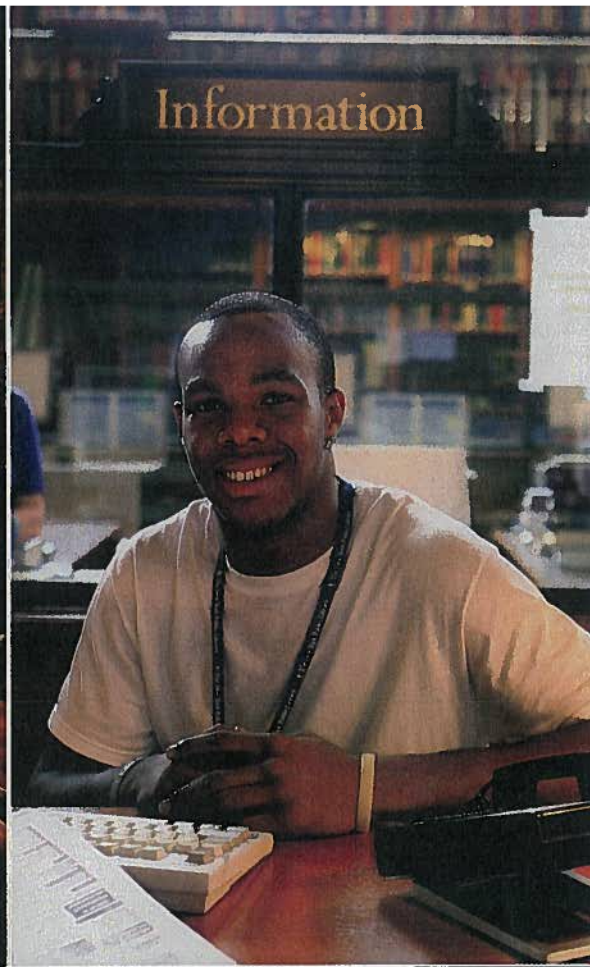


MY FRIENDS THINK IT'S WEIRD TO LIKE LIBRARIES THESE DAYS, THAT THEY ARE DINOSAURS CIRCUMVENTED BY THE INTERNET, BY TELEVISION — BY STARBUCKS, FOR THAT MATTER.









I COULD PICK A SMALL TABLE, OR PERHAPS A LUMPY SOFA, AND READ ABOUT WORLDS THAT HAD NO LIMITS, THEN WANDER INTO THE LOCAL PUB OR TEA ROOM FOR SUSTENANCE BEFORE GOING HOME.

lites, which are expanding. Last summer, the system added the \$4.4 million Paul L. Dunbar Lancaster-Kiest Branch Library in a historically black neighborhood. Inside limestone walls that seem more Texas Hill Country than urban metropolis, state-of-the-art modern library services include computer-ready meeting rooms, wireless access, and self-checkout stations. The walls are filled with rare collections of African-American literature and art.

As for the homeless who come to these and other libraries — they, too, are escaping, and where better than in a knowledge shelter?

RISING BOATS

Actually, libraries in America are doing not only better than you'd think in the snarky and snazzy 21st century, but pretty well, period. The American Library Association says 92 percent of us think libraries are important, 62 percent of adults have a library card, and overall circulation rose 7 percent as of 2005, the last study period.

As for Internet competition, the nation's libraries recorded an increase in electronic resources of 13.4 percent based on the latest studies and are also the number-one point of online access for people without Internet connections at home, school, or work. About 18 percent of libraries offer wireless, and another 21 percent plan to do so in the next year, the ALA says.

The country has 117,662 libraries of all kinds, of which 9,211 are public, 3,527 academic (university level), and 93,861 are in schools. The total also includes 9,526 specialized libraries (medical, law, etc.), 1,225 government libraries, and 314 armed forces libraries.

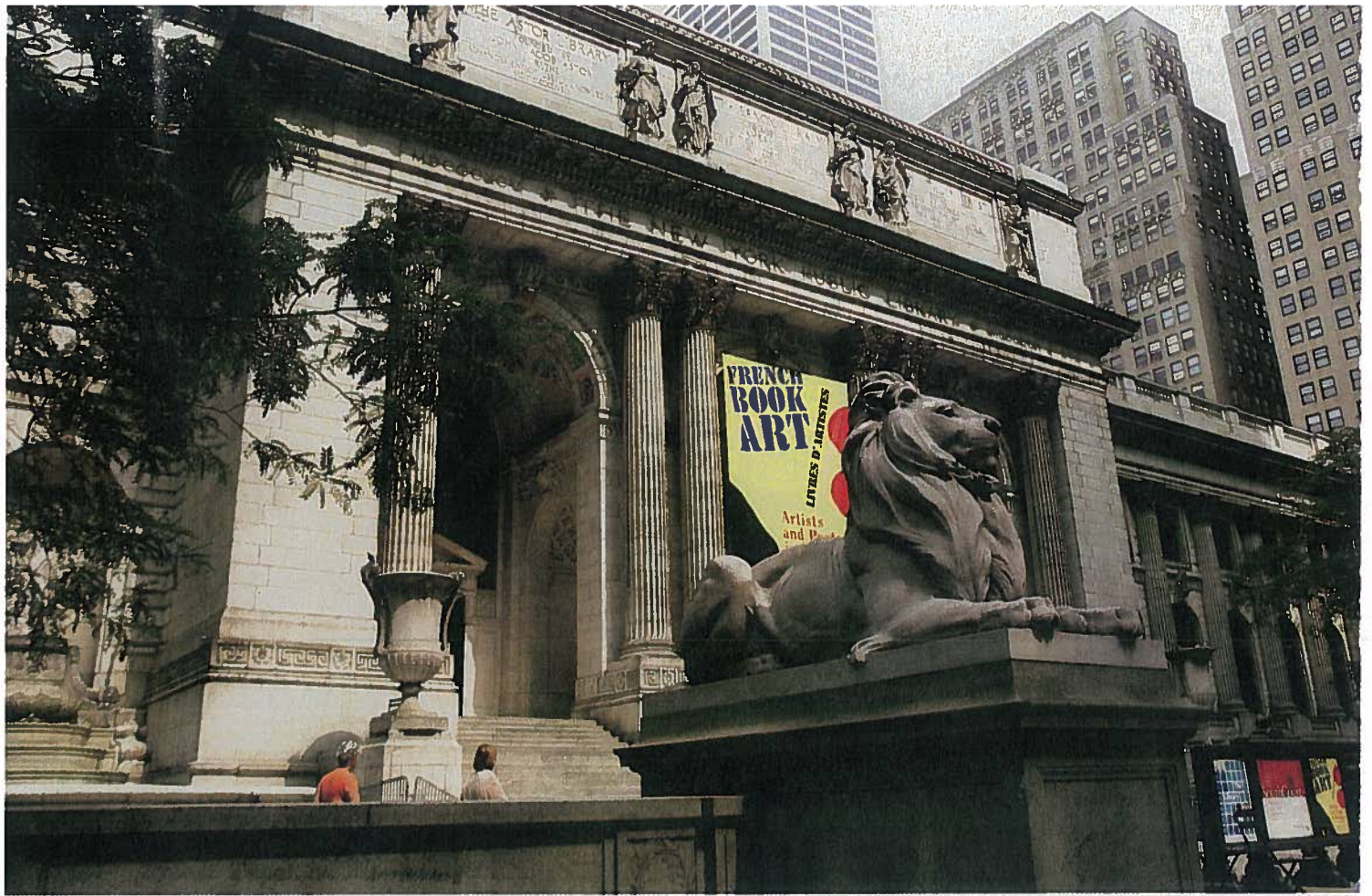
Running them employs 400,000 librarians and general staff, about 17,000 of whom gathered in June in New Orleans for the ALA convention — the first major convention in the city since Hurricane Katrina. It was not only a statement, but a demonstration of the connection between libraries and communities. Newly elected ALA President Leslie Burger, director of the Princ-

eton Public Library, is all about that. "I like to think libraries are open and inclusive. We have always been places where people who are not wealthy or more educated can come ... public institutions that believe in empowering people," she says.

Which is not to say libraries are on easy street. A House subcommittee has recommended a \$10.2 million funding increase for the Library Services and Technology Act, which provides federal funds for libraries, raising the total for fiscal 2007 to \$220.8 million, if Congress approves. But the bulk of library operating budgets depends on local governments, donations, and school districts, and things have gotten tight. According to the ALA website (www.ala.org), many libraries, including those in Dallas, have endured funding cuts totaling at least \$162 million in the past three years.

FREE RANGE

But libraries aren't really about numbers — other than the Dewey Decimal System, or the newer Library of Congress system.



You don't have to master either of them to find a book these days. You can just ask a librarian, or you can search for it on the computer terminals that have long since supplanted card file searches in most libraries. (Although I kind of miss the card files.)

Libraries aren't about sales, either. Good thing to remember. Supporting your local nonchain bookstore is great, but libraries can use attention, too. And in libraries, you get the same array as in bookstores — or maybe 1,000 times more — for free. The only requirement is sending the book back, which shouldn't really tax the abilities of generations trained to rent and return DVDs in 48 hours. For that matter, some libraries, such as San Antonio's bold, "enchilada red" main building, designed by Ricardo Legorreta, also are great for movie buffs. When I couldn't find *La Dolce Vita* at the retail chains, I borrowed it from the library's video room. For free.

But even that's not it.

What we know of the past we know because of libraries. The great ones of the world — at least the ones I've seen in New York, London, Mexico City, Madrid, Seoul, and Tokyo, not to say the hundreds of others in world-class cities like Jerusalem, Cairo, Rome, Athens, Istanbul, Moscow,

Beijing, or Sydney — are the true cairns of the human path to civilization. Governments and leaders rise and fall, but libraries, which supplanted the previous information storage role of churches, are the indispensable museums of recorded thought. In their shelves, their digital databases, in the minds of their patrons reside all that we are, have dared dream. It wasn't by accident that the New York public library was refuge to the small band of survivors in *The Day After Tomorrow*. Nor was it coincidental that one of the most famous opening scenes in cinema is the overhead shot in the Library of Congress at the beginning of *All the President's Men*, the ageless story of the power of knowledge and words to overwhelm worldly corruption and evil.

But librarians are not just about the past. There's a sense in modern libraries of connecting the feel for knowledge, at any level, to those at other levels. People do Web searches for used cars or play games on the ubiquitous computer screens at least as much as they search for the name of the president of Paraguay. The Dallas main library offers museum-style exhibits such as the "Lost Copy" of the Declaration of Independence, one of only 23 copies from the first printing, and an original

of Shakespeare's First Folio, one of only about 250 copies left of the 1623 text.

At the Princeton Public Library, on a whim the staff set up a special room with a big-screen TV monitor tuned to the World Cup in July. A few people showed up as word got around, and by the final matches, it was standing-room only. It's not pandering. It's doing what libraries always have done. It's being open to all human curiosity.

For Burger, the quest to know more — to be in a place where knowing more was everything — started in Bridgeport, Connecticut, when she was 4. Her mom took her to the old Carnegie library often, especially for the newest Dr. Seuss offering. But one day was different. "I was desperate to have my own library card," Burger recalls. "I wrote my name on the library card application in very big letters. I thought, I can do anything I want within this library ... I think it was the first day I knew I loved libraries."

ALWAYS

I had a slightly different path. An odd string of circumstances found me the only officer on a softball team that eventually won the 8th Army championship in South Korea

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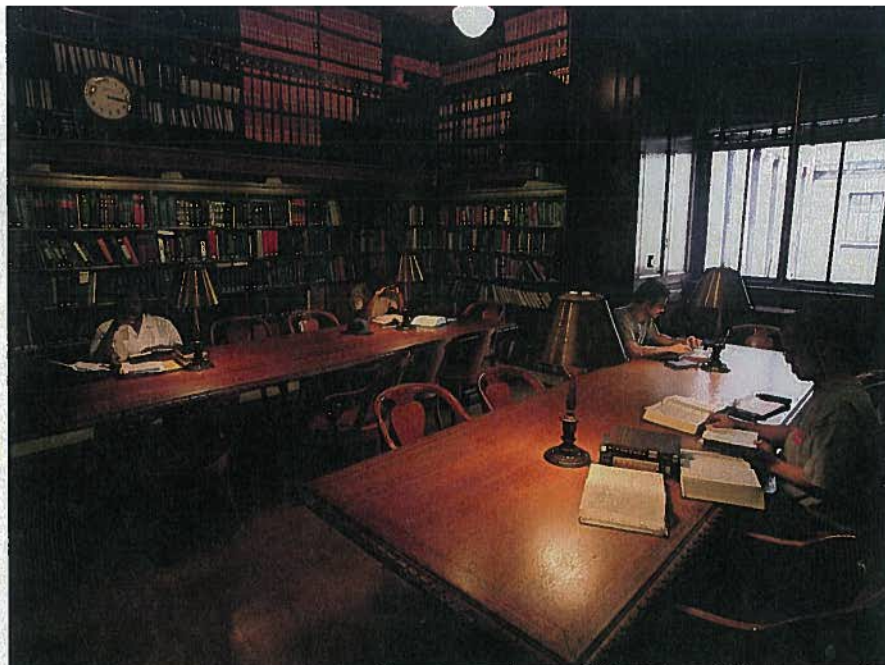
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"I like to think libraries are open and inclusive," says American Library Association President Leslie Burger. "We have always been places where people who are not wealthy or more educated can come."

back in the day. Our battalion team toured up and down the peninsula while everyone else was fending off the North Korean invasion, but as any rock band knows, life on the road can be hard. One night we were holed up in a little town near a base in the center of the country. My cohorts went out carousing as usual, but I wanted some other kind of diversion. I walked down a narrow street until I spotted a tiny USO and noticed, through its street-side window, a reading room. It was really just a table and a few shelves of books. I went inside, found a worn copy of Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*, the back cover half-torn off, and read until the USO closed. Then I "borrowed" the book and read up on the dangers of Ice-Nine in town after town, after we had dispatched its local artillery team.

I kept the book for years as a souvenir, until I loaned it to someone whose name I can't recall and never saw it again. But I'll never forget that reading room. I think it's where I knew that I wanted to be a writer.

Libraries all over the country eventually became my redoubts. In Denver, I walked from my job at the *Rocky Mountain News* down to the main library during lunch, if it wasn't snowing too hard. While looking for a new novel by John Le Carré, I learned from a fabulously cranky librarian that the reason I couldn't find it was that I was searching the wrong author. *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* was shelved with the other works by David Cornwell, she informed me. Not under his pen name. Duh.

In the green rural hills of Shropshire, England, where I lived after getting married, and later in sparsely populated Hereford on

the Welsh border, where my daughter was born, I used the libraries like personal book clubs. I could pick a small table, or perhaps a lumpy sofa, and read about worlds that had no limits, then wander into the local pub or tea room for sustenance before going home. It was a fantasy world, cloaked in the soft hues of English mornings and evenings, as close to the source of my own language as I could imagine. It was my own seat at the World Cup. It still is.

One brutal summer in Austin, when I had to live sans air conditioning, I kept cool and sane with two rituals. Each afternoon I went down to Barton Springs or Deep Eddy to jump in the cold water, and most mornings I spent a couple of hours at the library. In the pre-Internet days, it was one of the only places in town for true research. Those of us who worked at *The Texas Observer* were merciless in calling the librarians for help with the most bizarre and obscure of facts. They never minded, and always got back to us quickly. Often as not, they were quite proud of what they'd dug up. Deservedly so.

Sure, now there's Google and Yahoo and the other search engines, and while they're fast, they're not always reliable. And they are only digital, a collection of ones and zeros. Somewhere behind those codes are the real documents. That is where I like to be. It is where my own books are now. Definitely more esoteric than famous, but they are among the archived treasures nonetheless. Will be, long after I am gone. ☺

Rod Davis is a senior editor at *D Magazine*, the city magazine of Dallas, and author of *Corina's Way* and *American Voodoo*.