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## Books

# Who cares about libraries?

*Canadians apparently. Far from being under siege (except in Toronto), they're thriving—and experimenting.*

TO HEAR THE uproar in Toronto, an avid book borrower might be forgiven for imagining that Canadian libraries are coming under financial siege. The administration of the city's right-leaning, populist mayor, Rob Ford, is taking a hard look at closing branches of the Toronto Public Library to cut costs. That prospect has drawn fire from novelist Margaret Atwood and director Norman Jewison, and sparked petitions and angry public meetings. The debate will continue as the city's budget deliberations stretch into the fall. News from abroad gives Toronto library enthusiasts ample reason to be worried—state and local spending squeezes have led to closures or curtailed hours in the U.S., and British libraries are also struggling.

Yet top Canadian librarians do not see the Toronto scrap as a sign that the international malaise has arrived here. They point to upbeat developments in other Canadian cities. Just when Atwood was launching her Twitter war with Ford in late July, Calgary's city council voted to earmark \$135 million for a new central library, along with \$40 million it had already set aside for the ambitious project. The oil field capital will have to build a spectacular temple to books to outshine Surrey, B.C., which is slated to open its curvaceous, Bing Thom-designed, \$36-million City Centre Library later this month, or Halifax, which is spending \$55 million on a European-inspired, architecturally adventurous downtown library, slated to open in early 2014.

These and other gleaming new libraries are

only the most obvious indicators of seemingly solid political support for free reading. "The economic situation in the U.S. has seen some serious library casualties," says Karen Adams, president of the Canadian Library Association and the University of Manitoba's director of libraries. "But Canada has been spared most of those kinds of stresses." One reason is the comparative health of public finances in Canada, where government deficits are generally



**Coming soon:** Surrey, B.C., will open its \$36-million library later this month

less crushing than in other rich countries. As well, aversion among Canadian politicians to taxation to fund services is far less ferocious than in the U.S.

Beyond the sheer fiscal capacity of governments to keep paying for them, the case for libraries remains surprisingly solid in the online age. The Canadian Urban Libraries Council commissioned

Lumos Research to analyze the trends. The report, released last spring, found that for every person in a given Canadian city, the public library on average loaned out 11.3 books and other items in 2008-2009, up from 9.7 in 2000-2001. Over the same nine-year period, the number of visits to the libraries' websites jumped to five a year per capita from only one. More loans and Web hits refute the easy assumption that Google searches and cheap online book-selling must be rendering libraries obsolete. "People have preconceptions about libraries, and many of them are just inaccurate," says Ken Haycock, emeritus professor of the University of British Columbia's library science school. "The reality is that use is increasing, in foot traffic and in circulation."

Still, Haycock is sharply critical of librarians and library boosters for failing to properly frame the argument for the continued relevance of the public library. In the Toronto debate and other funding squabbles, he's frustrated by those who defend libraries as if their hallowed status puts them beyond financial scrutiny. "We're not talking about entitlements anymore," he says. "We're talking about value. The municipal government is investing in the service. What is the intended outcome? How do we measure it? How do we determine that our shareholders—the taxpayers—are getting a return on their investment?"

That sort of clarity is hard to come by. For starters, Statistics Canada does not compile data on library users. The libraries themselves often track loans and visits, but they don't offer demographic precision about who exactly drops in to borrow. Librarians contacted by *Maclean's* generally said their users reflect the income and age mix of their communities, though seniors and parents with young children are often seen as more likely to make regular use of their library cards. Many librarians also emphasize the services—including online job-hunting—they provide to low-income clients, who often can't afford to buy books and don't own computers.

The conviction that libraries have a special mission to lift up the less fortunate is deeply rooted. Free libraries in Canada began in Ontario in 1882, and spread to other provinces in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In the early decades of the last century, American industrialist Andrew Carnegie's famous philanthropy built 2,509 libraries around the world, including 125 in Canada, 111 of them in Ontario. (Seven of the Toronto Public Library's 98 branches are old Carnegie libraries.)

Among its goals, the Carnegie model sought to help immigrants learn about their new country and succeed in it, and that's still widely touted as a key library role. The Surrey library, for example, boasts collections and programs in Punjabi and Mandarin, aimed at helping newcomers to the fast-growing B.C. suburban community settle into Canadian life. Ken Roberts, the highly regarded chief librarian at Hamilton Public Library,

says kids from low-income families, often immigrants, seek out public libraries for the quiet study space and wireless Internet access their better-off classmates take for granted at home. Many libraries run pre-kindergarten book groups designed to boost school-readiness, particularly for immigrant kids who wouldn't otherwise be exposed to rhymes or stories in English or French.

Some library advocates, however, are uneasy about selling social uplift as their core mandate. Among those who paint a different picture of the community of frequent library

as serving only a certain strata of society, and it gets a certain funding level."

The rapid rise of BiblioCommons shows how libraries are adapting to the Internet age. The company grew out of a non-profit project in Toronto to encourage teens to use libraries by making reading a less isolated activity. Jefferson says that program yielded insights about how stodgy online library catalogues couldn't compete with commercial websites. Launched in 2006, BiblioCommons revamps online catalogue searches and adds social-network features, like letting borrowers share reviews of books, music and movies. That sort of social networking requires a lot of users; BiblioCommons boasts a client base of public libraries in cities like Toronto, Vancouver, Ottawa and Edmonton, and New York, Boston and Seattle. "No one library has enough users on its own," Jefferson says. "But together they are a very substantial force."

The emerging virtual community remains closely linked to the community of human beings who actually walk into buildings where the comforting smell of books hangs in the air. Much of the traffic to library websites is from borrowers who reserve books online, then drop by their branch to pick them up. But demand for electronic books that don't require a physical visit is rising fast. Jennifer Stirling, digital services manager at Ottawa Public Library, says last Christmas's boom in giving e-book readers as gifts was a watershed. After the holiday, she organized a wildly popular "digital road show" in the library's branches to tutor those who had been given Kindles and Kobos on how to use them.

Devoted library-goers typically resist being pigeonholed, though, as digital-only or books-on-paper readers. For instance, Belle Lee, 12, who drops by the Toronto Public Library's Goldhawk Park branch just about every day after school, uses the free WiFi to research projects and chat with friends, but also checks out real books, including romantic novels. "I find it convenient and fun," she sums up. Belle chats happily about her varied library habits, until asked what she would do if her branch ever closed. The prospect momentarily silences her. "Oh," is all she can think to say, "that would be bad." **JOHN GEDDES**

## *Some are uneasy about selling social uplift as libraries' core mandate: 'A library is not a social-welfare agency'*



**Who's there:** For every person in a given Canadian city, the public library on average loaned out 11.3 books and other items in 2008-2009

users is Beth Jefferson, co-founder and CEO of the Toronto company BiblioCommons, whose software aims to bring libraries into the social-media universe of Facebook and the mobile-networking world of smartphones. Jefferson says her firm's research shows that libraries attract "savvy readers and movie watchers" who also tend to spend a lot buying and renting what they read and watch. Borrowing from the library augments their for-cash consumption. "A library is not a social-welfare agency," she says. "It's a sophisticated organization that plays many roles. If it's seen as a social-welfare agency, it's seen