Lending Books

by Daniel Harris

In the late 60's, I lived on West 71st street in Manhattan and borrowed books from a store. It was a stationery/news store with books to buy and borrow in the back, located on West 72nd between West End and Broadway, next to where I had my shirts laundered. There was a five-dollar membership fee. Books were free for three days and ten cents a week afterward.

In those days, one had to have a student I.D. or a copy of a utility bill to procure a library card at the public library. For those of us living in Single Room Occupancy (SRO) quarters, we had neither; we relied on these commercial lending libraries.

Though small by public library standards, the collection was first rate with classics from the canon (poetry, plays, essays) and the best of new literature. Mass market books were not on the lending shelves. There was a large section of non-fiction and self-help books, as well as “Learn English” books in a dozen languages.

The neighborhood was populated by recent and pre-WWII Eastern European Jewish refugees —many with concentration camp tattoos. Because of the plentiful cheap SRO housing, there were young aspiring actors, musicians, dancers, and other performing artist types. Nearby public housing projects contributed Sharks & Jets characters who could have stepped out of *West Side Story*. The triangle park at the intersection of Broadway, 72nd and Amsterdam was known as Needle Park and later the subject of a book and movie about those desperate people and the darker side of the 'hood.

What is interesting about this library was the owner's desire to promote reading and learning, rather than make a commercial success of the library. I always suspected that the owner — a twinkle-eyed lady with a haystack of silver hair — considered herself a later-day Sylvia Beech. I remember her loaning me, at no fee, a portable typewriter to fill out a Composer-In-The-Schools application. There was a similar store on Amsterdam, up a few blocks, that also loaned books and rented typewriters for small fees.

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It specialized in textbooks and music scores. If you had a membership in the library of one of the stores, you had borrowing privileges at the other store. Sadly, when I became an urban pioneer and moved to what is now TriBeca, there were no lending libraries in that sparsely populated neighborhood.