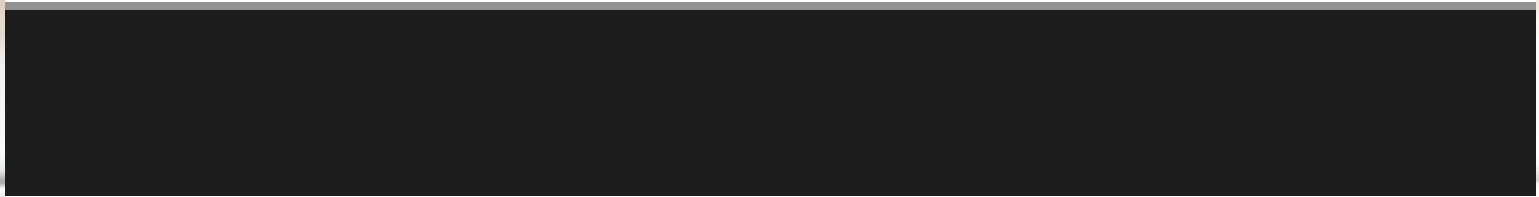
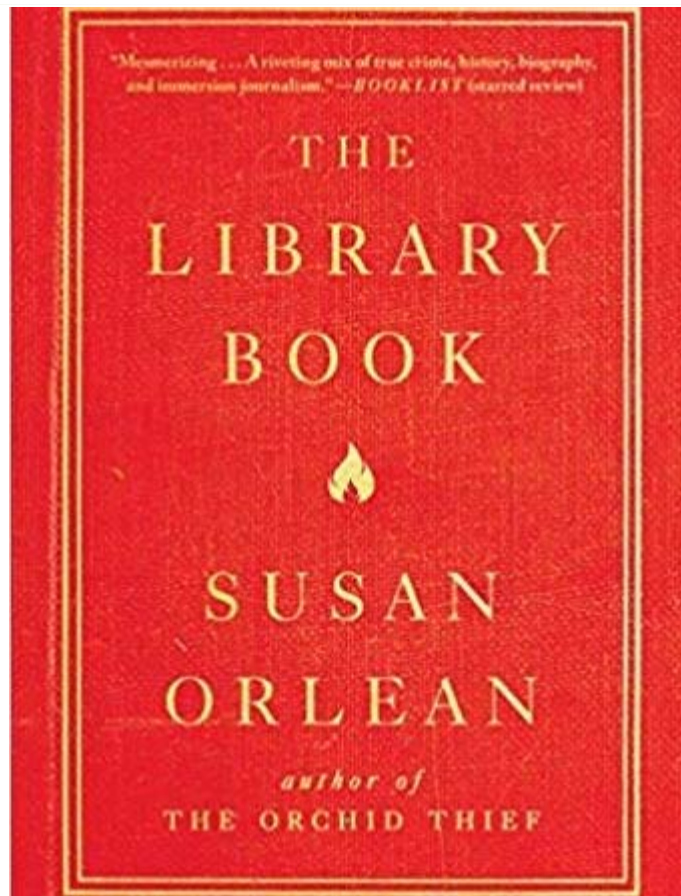


Saturday, February 16, 2019

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NON-FICTION

Check Out 'The Library Book'

Susan Orlean's Long-Overdue Celebration Of The Public Library

October 16, 2018 Michael Giltz

Author Susan Orlean has enjoyed extraordinary critical and popular success with books like *The Orchid Thief* and *Rin Tin Tin*, her biography of Hollywood's four-legged star. Heck, Meryl Streep even played her in a movie! And yet, she was done with writing. Orlean simply didn't have interest in devoting years and years of her life just to produce one more book.

Then she went to the library. Moving to Los Angeles and taking her son for his first visit to their new branch brought on a Proustian rush of memory. Orlean was overwhelmed by images from her own childhood when she and her mom shared visits to the library as a beloved ritual. The L.A. library was new to her but it immediately felt like home.

That prompted Orlean to take a private guided tour (the



Not actually Susan Orlean

privileges of fame) and that led to her becoming more and more excited by this almost invisible institution we take

for granted. In fact, legendary documentary filmmaker Frederick Wiseman has been focusing on institutions in America like hospitals and schools and zoos for 50 years. Even he only got around to the library in 2017.

Then Orlean's guide mentioned the fire. Fire, what fire? THE fire, he responded. On April 29, 1986 the Los Angeles Central Library went up in flames. It damaged or destroyed more than one million books and proved the worst library fire in US history. It was ruled as arson but no one was ever found guilty. The reason Orlean—and perhaps most people outside Los Angeles—have never heard of the fire? Well, it happened the same week as the Chernobyl nuclear meltdown. The end of a library vs. the end of the world? Well, the media focused on the end of the world.

Now Orlean has focused on the fire...and so much more. *The Library Book* does about two dozen things, all of them well. It covers the fire and its aftermath in fascinating detail, including the gay would-be actor who claimed to be the arsonist but proved such an inveterate liar he would drive friends and enemies alike to drink. It tells the history of the L.A. library system, including sketches of early head librarians from redoubtable women like Telsa Kesslo (who dared to go outdoors without a hat; scandalous!) to the colorful, unqualified but generally significant Charles Lummis, who made national news by walking from Ohio to L.A. in 1885.

The list goes on: How libraries work, the purpose of libraries, their changing role from a warehouse of books to a community center and source of information and services, the history of women as librarians, the latest on arson investigations, the life of that actor Harry Peak, all of it juggled masterfully in an unfolding narrative that never flags. It's the sort of book for which you'll gladly pay an overdue fine.

Simon & Schuster

(October 16, 2018)

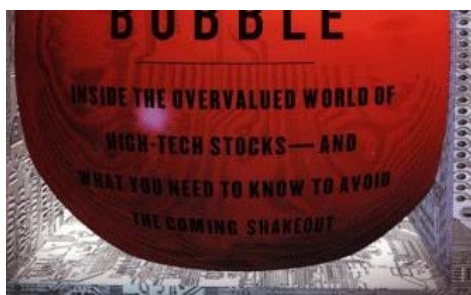
Tags: Frederick Wiseman, libraries, *Library Book*, Rin Tin Tin, Susan Orlean, *The Orchid Thief*



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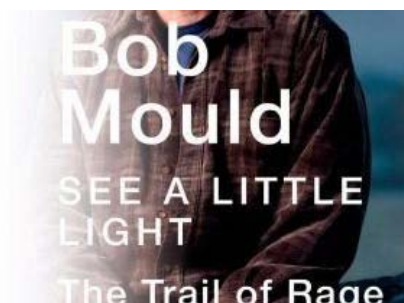
Michael Giltz is a freelance writer based in New York City covering all areas of entertainment, politics, sports and more. He has written extensively for many outlets, such as New York Post, New York Daily News, New York Magazine, The Advocate, Out, Huffington Post, Premiere Magazine, Entertainment Weekly, BookFilter, USA Today and the Los Angeles Times. He's co-host of the long-running podcast Showbiz Sandbox.

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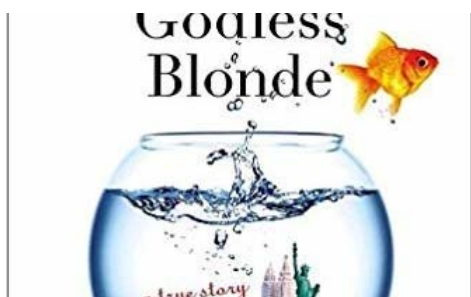
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