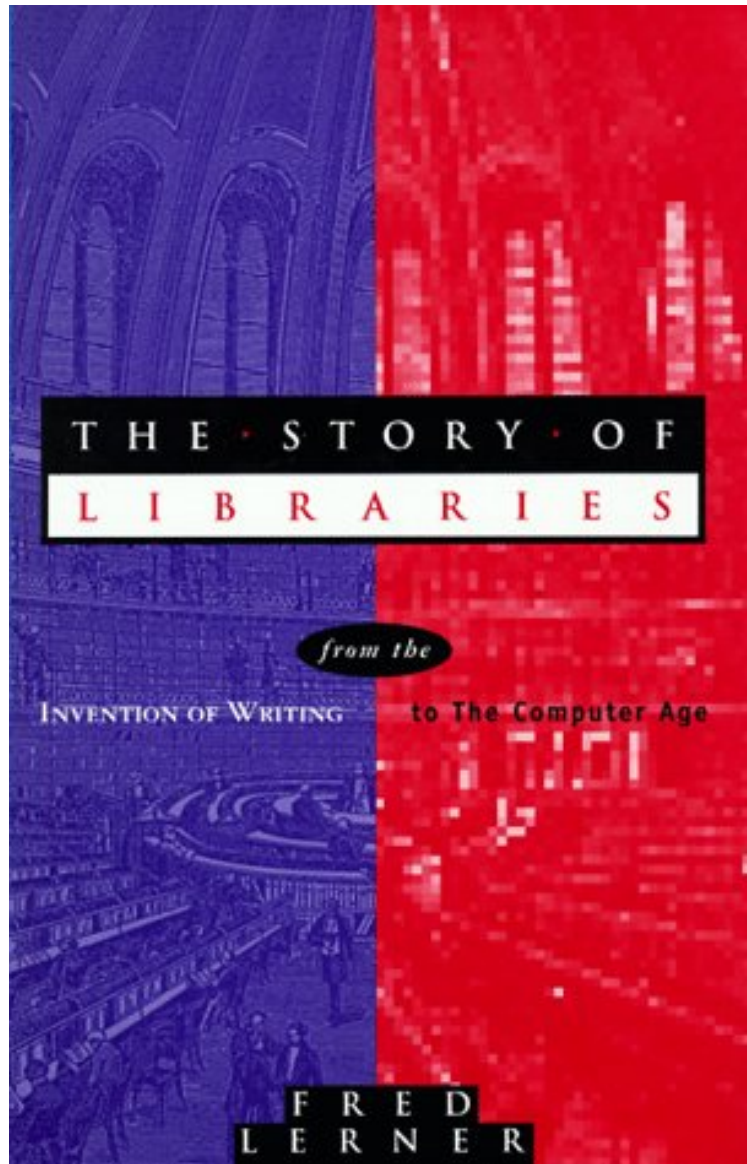


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# The Story of Libraries: From the Invention of Writing to the Computer Age

*Fred Lerner*

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**Fred Lerner : The Story of Libraries: From the Invention of Writing to the Computer Age** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Story of Libraries: From the Invention of Writing to the Computer Age:

48 of 53 people found the following review helpful. "The Story of Libraries"By Izabela Joanna BozekThe title "The

Story of Libraries" suggests from the very beginning that this is not a strictly historical treatise but rather more than that. Why is it "the story" and not "the history"? Lerner does not limit his work to lists of facts and description of collections and buildings from the past. If the title of that book had been The History of Libraries, it would have given us a chronologically organised body of facts and events. Happily it is more than that. The Story of Libraries deals not only with facts and figures, but also with ideas, philosophies, and with the spirit of libraries and librarianship over the centuries. The first libraries were established and maintained by early civilisations at a great expense and effort. As the objects of envy and desire they were affected adversely by wars, political and religious conflicts, and conquests. In the past very few people had an access to the library and very few were educated enough to take advantage of one. The difference between those who were users of the libraries and those who maintained them, who were anonymous and silent workers copying thousands of words, not even understanding them, such as the scribes, seems to be not comprehensible for an average modern library user. The story of libraries is not only the story of clay tablets, scrolls of papyrus, or parchment or books. It is also the story of technologies which were used to create records. It is a story of people who developed, influenced and controlled the developments. A reader gets the full and fascinating picture of all these aspects in the first, historical part of this book. Further chapters where author concentrates on ideas and the history of public libraries or the history of library services for children give us a deeper understanding of the library as an influential institution in society. The scope of this book is broader than one could expect. Apart the history of libraries the great part of the book is devoted to the sociological aspect of the librarianship and, what is most important, it attempts to give an image of the future of libraries. Here the author posits many crucial questions. Is it true that the entire future literature will be paperless? Would all the users be equal in accessing the wealth of the library resources on even grounds? Are the new technologies going to change the shape of the libraries to the point of them becoming the wall-less? How about the Internet? Digital technology? Data preservation? What Lerner underlines is that the modern times bring new challenges to librarianship. This book has some significant, even glaring omissions. Lerner writes in the preface: "The Story of Libraries" is a brief historical narrative, not an exhaustive statistical survey. No doubts there are documented exceptions to every generalisation it contains. [ . . . ] My aim in The Story of Libraries is to trace the evolution of libraries and to explore the role they played in the society [ . . . ]. I have tried [ . . . ] to explain how the major societies in the world history used libraries [ . . . ] (11). However, such a disclaimer does not justify that author seems to forget that "major societies of the world" are not only those that existed in the parts of the world that he writes about. The author mentions Central and Eastern Europe in a very brief way, disregarding the fact that they were an important part of the history of Western civilisation since the early Middle Ages. The same oversight concerns Scandinavian countries. There are well known cathedral and monastery libraries established in the Middle Ages in Om, Soro, and Herrdsvad in Denmark. The convent of Saint Brigitte in Sweden, which collected about 1500 volumes, is known as the biggest Scandinavian library of that time. There is even more proof confirming the importance of Lerner's negligence in omitting Central and Eastern Europe from the book. The first libraries in the Kievan Empire were established as early as in the tenth century, when Prince Jaroslav the Wise established the first library in Kiev. It consisted of Greek and Slavic religious texts, which were donated to the Kievan Synod in 1037. The oldest Bulgarian library was built by Tsar Symeon (circa 12th century). Serbia also had its libraries. Words describing "library" and "librarian" existed in the Serbian language as early as in 1350. Poland, located at the intersection of Eastern and Western cultures, had its first university established in 1364. It was divided in four departments; each of them had its own library which were enriched by donations and bequests from scholars. Beginning in the XVI century many of Polish kings and nobles founded their own private libraries. The first city libraries in Poland were established in 1535 in Poznan and in 1596 in Gdansk. Why has the author omitted such a plethora of significant historical details? The Story of Libraries also lacks more advanced analysis of how World War II affected European libraries and collections. For instance Polish libraries sustained great loss (80 percent of the collection) during the last war, through deliberate destruction by the German occupants. The losses include 2,200 incunabula, and 50,000 of pre-1800s books. Similar losses were suffered by many other nations. I would have more enjoyed this book if its typographic composition were different. For the amount of information it contains, it should have provided more maps, pictures, diagrams, and considering the vast amount of data it could use a larger font face. The book, it seems, is written not only for the librarians or the library studies students but also for those who are generally interested in the history of libraries and their story. It might be fascinating reading material even for general audience or it may serve as the reference source for a professional. It is impressive how the author moves with a great ease amongst different cultural and epochal regions, indicating his solid erudition and intellectual facility.

This text describes the role that libraries played in ancient Egypt, Han-dynasty China, the ancient Western Classical world, the Baghdad of Harun-al-Rashid, and medieval and Renaissance Europe. It continues with the libraries of colonial America, the Library of Congress, university libraries, and today's large public library systems. With the invention of the printing press and the spread of literacy, libraries served the common reader, as well as the priestly and princely elites against which Catholic and Protestant reformers rebelled. In the 20th century, libraries have supported both democratic institutions and have also been tools of Nazi and Soviet totalitarianism. Today, at the dawn

of the computer and telecommunication age, it is evident that libraries of the future will play a vital role in the preservation of crumbling books and documents, and in forming new ways of preserving increasingly digitized and technological forms of culture. The text suggests that the role of librarians and libraries in the information age promises to be more important than ever.

.com Libraries are significant on many levels. Their existence shows the depth and history of a people, culture, and nation, while their inclusiveness highlights the level of democracy that exists there. Fred Lerner's overview of the history of libraries sheds light on an invaluable part of human life often taken for granted: Though writing may have been invented to record land ownership and keep track of debts, it was not long before poets, priests, and prophets found other uses for it. My aim ... is to trace the evolution of libraries and to explore the role they played in society, from the invention of writing to our own day and beyond. He considers the Afro-Asian origins of the earliest libraries in Mesopotamia and in ancient Egypt, leading up to the glory of the Alexandria library. The book moves on, through classical Greece and the medieval institutions of Europe's Dark Ages to the Renaissance, in which Europeans benefited greatly from the collected scholarship of Islamic and Asian civilizations. Modern libraries like the United States Library of Congress, the British Library, and France's *Bibliothque Nationale* are also examined, as well as the technological advances of the computer and the Internet, which will undoubtedly transform and expand the function of the library in the 21st century and beyond. -- Eugene Holley Jr. From *Library Journal*

This is a popular history of libraries and librarianship from ancient times to the present. The author, a librarian who has previously written about science fiction, also includes some cautionary reflections on the future of libraries and digital technology. While similar to Michael H. Harris's *History of Libraries in the Western World* (Professional Reading, LJ 8/95), his book is not limited to the West. The fourth chapter surveys the history of writing, printing, and libraries in China, India, Korea, and Japan until the 18th or 19th century. In order to broaden his scope and keep the book relatively brief, however, Lerner provides less detail on such topics as the development of university libraries in Europe and North America. Both books have extensive bibliographies, but Harris incorporates more on the new history of the book. Less like a textbook, Lerner's work may appeal more to the general reader. ?Thomas F. O'Connor, *Manhattan Coll. Libs.*, New York

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The first libraries were established 5,000 years ago as archives for business records and repositories of collections of hymns, prayers, and incantations. Lerner begins even earlier, with the invention of writing, and proceeds to the establishment of those first libraries and the rest of the history of the institution. Much of the book is devoted to the Western world, though separate chapters consider libraries in the Islamic world and in the Orient. Other chapters deal with libraries in academe and with the rise of the public library. Finally, Lerner looks to the future of libraries and librarians. A well-done, readable one-volume history that should be in libraries of all types. Edward Swanson