In one of those happy intellectual convergences that occur every so often in life, I recently encountered an article in The Walrus—a Canadian literary magazine—not on the heels of the recent, triumphant reopening of Charleston’s beautifully renovated Kanawha County Library.

No self-respecting lover of books could have turned away from the article’s intriguing premise: it was entitled, “Twilight of the Libraries: What Gets Lost When Books Go Off Site and Online.” [Ed: read the article in full at https://thewalrus.ca/library-digitalization.]

Written by Andrew Stauffer, professor of English at the University of Virginia, the piece makes a case for how overly-aggressive deaccessioning—getting rid—of books from public libraries can result in a loss of institutional memory. Librarians collect books at different times for different reasons; Stauffer posits, and the willfully-nilly tossing overboard of traditional print material just because it is now digitally available elsewhere risks pitching something important: the concrete record of what was collected and read by that library in each of its evolutionary stages.

Each library has “a historical integrity as an archive of what we gathered and what we knew. Both directly and inadvertently, for better and worse, old shelves tell stories we need to hear. Moreover, future generations will need to know that we heard them, in all of their specific details.” The library as a physical repository of books, he says, makes it the “guardian” of “the textual humanities.”

I have no bones to pick with the professor’s case, but Stauffer doesn’t approach another point I believe is essential to the library’s role in the humanities: it is the most publicly accessible warehouse for the knowledge we don’t know we don’t know. The ultimate place for encountering that which we were unaware of seeking.

A bazaar in which to go...window shopping for knowledge.

Searching digitally for information requires input to jumpstart the process. When you type in the web address google.com, you’re conveyed to a relatively blank page with an even more barren search bar. You pause. You consider the information you hope to obtain. You type in a word anticipated to return desired results.

The algorithm toiling deep in Google’s Cretan labyrinth instantly churns out a thousand thousand pages in response. The topmost several have usually paid for that privileged position with cold, hard, advertising dollars. The algorithm’s best guess at what you wanted, limited by the pages it could find based on the metadata

Two important filters have thus dictated your path to knowledge.

First, the initial query you shaped: what you thought you needed to know, which you consciously had to craft to know we don’t know. The ultimate place for encountering that which we were unaware of seeking.

But your library wouldn’t do that to you.

Breezing through the remodeled Kanawha County Library’s glittering new stacks this summer—open for the first time since the pandemic began—I was almost immediately struck by the contrast between the internet-based information funnel to which we’ve all become accustomed, versus the wide-open vistas of trawling the library shelves with only the loosest of objectives in mind. I strolled to their West Virginia section to make sure it hadn’t downsized during the transition. Pretty soon I was walking away with four books in my arms.
You see, for months we've been working on an updated version of the Council's Civil War and statehood traveling exhibit, Born of Rebellion. I've been constantly on the lookout for texts to supply primary source quotes or intimate glimpses into West Virginians' everyday lives during the struggle. Stumbling into the striking red spine of Rebecca Harding Davis: A Life Among Writers by Sharon Harris (WVU Press, 2018) reminded me that I'd been meaning to further investigate Wheeling's literary genius. Davis frequently rubbed elbows with Union leaders and generals in "Restored" Virginia's wartime capital, and her fiction concerning the war was appearing in The Atlantic as the conflict unfolded around her. Yup, I needed this. Other titles were soon heaped high atop Davis.

Lugging my armful of treasures around, I steamed past the reference shelf containing Charleston city directories ranging back a century. Sure, there are copies in the State Archives, but the public library has longer visiting hours and is open on Mondays. That's pesky local history project for which I still need to check a listing in the 1920s.

There's no arguing that one can't stumble into information on the internet—we do it all the time. But consider the physical act of browsing. Your natural field of vision is so much wider than any screen allows, which, paired with your movement through the library space, conspires to bump you into unexpected influences. You cross the room to ask the librarian a question, and your eyes take in the thousandfold stimuli of book covers you don't come to search for—but they touch the fringe of your consciousness nonetheless. Perhaps you make up to pick one up, prompting fresh discoveries.

I'm not trying to tout one form of information-seeking as superior to another. Every tool has its place. The online search bar is par excellence for a targeted deep-dive, since a computer can scan countless records for a specific word faster than any set of human eyes. When it comes to delivering you directly to influences. You cross the room to ask the librarian a question, and your eyes take in the thousandfold stimuli of book covers you don't come to search for—but they touch the fringe of your consciousness nonetheless. Perhaps you make up to pick one up, prompting fresh discoveries.

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There's plenty more to write about, but we want to know what you think! We've prepared a 10-question reader poll so you can tell us more about what you'd like to see in future issues of The Broad Side. Type the link below into your browser and share your opinion before September 1, 2022.


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WEST VIRGINIA HUMANITIES COUNCIL

It is possible that Laura and Stonewall grew estranged because of the war, as she was a staunch Unionist, while he served as one of the Confederacy’s top generals. For the majority of the war, following the Battle of Rich Mountain, Beverly was occupied by federal forces. During this time, Laura opened her home to care for sick and injured Union troops, as well as some Confederate troops. Union General George B. McClellan, a classmate of Stonewall at West Point, was a notable visitor to the home. After her brother’s death in 1863 at the Battle of Chancellorsville, Laura reportedly was saddened, yet she said she “would rather know that he was dead than to have him a leader in the rebel army.” In 1864, Laura wrote a letter to President Abraham Lincoln strongly expressing her support of the Union.

Laura’s marriage also was strained by the war. Unlike her wife, Jonathan Arnold opposed the Union cause. Laura eventually filed for divorce, resulting in a lengthy case in which Jonathan claimed his wife was unfaithful during the war by having affairs with soldiers that stayed at their home. Laura’s lawyer countered by explaining that for many years Laura suffered from a medical condition in which intercourse was painful, implying that her husband’s allegations were unlikely to be true. In August 1870, the judge ruled in Laura’s favor, awarding her $400 per year.

In her later years, Laura lived at a sanitarium in Columbus, Ohio. Many veterans honored her in the decades following the Civil War. In 1897, she was named an honorary member of the Society of the Army of West Virginia. At a 1905 reunion of the 5th West Virginia Cavalry, she was proclaimed the “Mother of the Regiment.” In 1910, Laura returned to her home state. She spent her final days living in Buckhannon, Upshur County. She died on September 24, 1911, and is buried in Buckhannon’s Heavener Cemetery.

In 2018, a state historical marker was unveiled outside Laura and Jonathan’s home in Beverly, commemorating Laura’s contributions during the Civil War.

“MOTHER OF THE REGIMENT”

(Continued from front)