

disputed; they were treated as unfit for public expression or consumption and exploited in an eventually successful campaign to oust him.

What are the prospects for a new age of reason in America? Jacoby makes the obligatory attempt to end her profoundly pessimistic critique with a stab at optimism, but it's appropriately halfhearted. The de facto publishing rule that critical analyses of serious problems must conclude with proposed solutions reflects the intellectual shallowness that is the subject of Jacoby's book. She does not yield to it. "To seize

the moment," she writes, "Americans must recognize that we are living through an overarching crisis of memory and knowledge, involving everything about the way we learn and think." In other words, Americans must reason their way through the crisis of unreason, like people learning to walk on atrophied limbs. No wonder she's discouraged. It takes more than reason—it takes faith—to rest on improbabilities.

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## Reading in the Dark

Reviewed by Matthew Battles

OLD AS WRITING, THE LIBRARY IS AN INSTITUTION and an archetype. Its symbolic dimensions embody the contradictions of civilization: It's a token of authority that threatens to undermine regnant powers, a figure of memory and forgetting, an object of longing and loathing. With its promise of comprehensive wisdom, it forever reminds us of the incompleteness of our knowledge, the limits of our vision. But it's also a physical place—a home for books and a workshop for those who read and care for them.

Like the world itself, the library dichotomizes. Books are included or excluded; they are free for all or reserved for the select few; some enjoy attention and acclaim, while others lie shrouded in obscurity—just as after nightfall, light falls on open volumes while other pages remain in darkness. In Alberto Manguel's evocative formulation, it's this last either/or—the turning of day into night—that reveals the library's tensions. And he recalls Virginia Woolf's useful distinction between two types of readers, the scholarly and the casual. While the former, Woolf tells us, "searches through books to discover some particular grain of truth upon which he has set his heart," the latter eschews the impulse to read systematically, which "is very apt to kill . . . the more

humane passion for pure and disinterested reading." What to Woolf is a matter of taxonomy, however, for Manguel is a question of diurnal rhythm.

"During the day," he writes, "the concentration and system tempt me; at night I can read with a lightheartedness verging on insouciance." When night falls, amid pools of lamplight and glittering books his library in France seems to float like a ship on the sea; it becomes "a universe of self-serving rules that pretend to replace or translate those of the shapeless universe beyond."

Like Manguel's best-known work, *A History of Reading* (1996), *The Library at Night* is a sentimental history. That earlier book introduced a wide circle of readers to the revelation, previously appreciated only by historians of the book, that reading has not been the same thing in all times and places, but that its textures change with alterations to culture and the nature of the individual consciousness as much as with changes in the media of writing and publishing. In *The Library at Night*, Manguel's point is a different, nearly opposite one: All libraries partake of the same dream of completeness. Behind and

### THE LIBRARY AT NIGHT.

By Alberto Manguel.  
Yale Univ. Press.  
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beyond each collection of books is an ideal, shimmering and unrealizable, which haunts the sensitive reader.

Ranging through history and mythology, Manguel searches for the library's avatars. "The Tower of Babel collapsed in the prehistory of storytelling," he writes; "the Library of Alexandria rose when stories took on the shape of books, and strove to find a syntax that would lend each word, each tablet, each scroll its illuminating and necessary place." That syntax, the ordering of books on the shelves, is a dynamic to which Manguel is drawn throughout a book whose chapters take the form of meditations on a series of similes: "The Library as Shadow," "The Library as Chance," "The Library as Oblivion." Again and again, Manguel's imagination returns to the labor and compulsion of putting books together and making them talk to one another. In the ordering of books, Manguel senses a tension that lies at the heart not only of library making but of the project of civilization itself. Although the universe we live in may be characterized by a "dearth of meaning and lack of discernible purpose," we build and arrange collections of books as if they could represent a universal order, or will one into being as if by sympathetic magic.

The powers and tensions of the library as symbol have played havoc with our understanding of libraries as institutions. For libraries are not one and the same thing across cultures, in all times and places. A private book collection is a very different thing from a public library, speaking to different orderings of power and privilege, access and understanding. A research library, likewise, differs fundamentally from an ecclesiastical one, despite their historical ties. A public library in Nazi Germany or the American South under Jim Crow differs in crucial ways from mid-western Carnegie libraries or the great urban public libraries of Boston, New York, and Chicago. Libraries aren't always used for the purpose of opening minds; those that exclude certain kinds of books and readers can be instruments of oppression and alienation.

Manguel, however, is less interested in the poli-

tics of library history than he is in its poetry. His historicity is of a distinctly literary cast: allusive, magpielike, unafraid of anachronism and Whiggish teleology. *The Library at Night* is larded with fascinating figures, telling anecdotes, and library lore. Michelangelo and Melvil Dewey, Antonio Panizzi and Sextus Propertius, George Orwell and Caliph Omar I all make appearances. Manguel writes evocatively of libraries that sprang up at the intersection of ancient trading routes, such as

Chinguetti in Mauritania, which over the centuries became a trove of collections devoted to the learning of Islamic poets, scholars, and scientists; and Dunhuang on the Silk Road, where works from China, Tibet, and India mingled with treasured texts of Persia

and the Hellenic world. Elsewhere, he tells of 17th-century Iceland, where the people, impoverished by their long, cruel vassalage under Denmark, ransacked the libraries to supply themselves with paper and vellum for insulation and clothing. In 1702, King Frederick IV of Denmark had the remnants of the destroyed books exhaustively retrieved, reassembled, and shipped back to Copenhagen—where, less than 30 years later, they were destroyed in a fire.

There are odd errors here and there. At one point, Manguel asserts that the Internet makes banned books accessible to readers in Rhodesia (it became Zimbabwe in 1980). Elsewhere, he reports that Google has abandoned its controversial project to digitize the world's books with the cooperation of numerous university and public libraries; in fact, the program continues to grow. This last error is telling, for it betrays Manguel's reluctance to see the Internet as the epoch-making phenomenon that it is.

The physical collections to which Manguel devotes his book bear the traces of their makers and readers, intrinsic markers of ownership and

On the Web, books talk to one another of their own accord as their owners and readers scan them, tag them, annotate and hyperlink and mash them up, and blog about them.

experience. Such traces are harder to discern on the Web, where books talk to one another of their own accord as their owners and readers scan them, tag them, annotate and hyperlink and mash them up, and blog about them. Not only Google and Amazon.com, but the Open Content Alliance (a group of libraries that have opted to digitize materials without Google), LibraryThing (a site where members make and share their personal electronic book catalogs), Project Gutenberg (a large collection of free electronic books), and a host of other initiatives ensure that books will enjoy a rich life in the digital age. The ongoing digitization of books promises an apotheosis of sorts, as the world's printed matter merges into One Big Book, an encyclopedic vade mecum.

Networked text is marvelously malleable stuff, and its ease of manipulation grants greater scope for invention and expression. Using the Internet, we're able to build vast personal libraries. They may lack the savor and heft of physical libraries, but they enrich and complicate the world of texts as a whole. On the Web, we're able to register the shifts in direction our sensibility takes as we move from book to book, and we find and delight in the

traces of migrations undertaken by others. Far from supplanting or destroying the kind of library Manguel values most highly—a private library that tastes of the universe—the Internet makes possible a multiverse of reading, knowing worlds.

But Manguel can be forgiven if he underestimates the value and beauty of the Internet. The strength of his book doesn't lie in scholarship and analysis, but in humane meditation. Like Montaigne, who had a tower-ensconced library of his own, Manguel revels in the possibilities of the word "essay." His chapters are tries, trials, takes. Reaching into the vast store of books in his shadowed memory, he pulls down volume after volume, trying the weight and feel of one against the other. The success of *The Library at Night* rests largely on Manguel's own fulfillment of a trope familiar from antiquity: the human mind as library. *The Library at Night* is the product of a mind made by reading, and the realization of its own essential argument: The library is a mirror in which we find ourselves and our world reflecting and interpenetrating.

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## Culture Clash

*Reviewed by Colin Fleming*

LINES WERE EVERYWHERE IN WEIMAR Germany—in radically chic art forms, in the façades of bold architectural designs, between political groups. And demarcations are what both defined and destroyed the Weimar Republic, as the German state during the period 1919–33 is popularly known. Though this interval is sometimes dismissed as an intermission between the country's ignominious defeat in World War I and the rise of Adolf Hitler, *Weimar Germany* presents us with a republic that unleashed enough developments on our modern world to rival those of fin-de-siècle Vienna or impressionist France at its height.

The story of the Weimar Republic is the story of Germany's journey from fallen Old World power to the ultimate symbol of modern horror—of cutthroat politics, lingering postwar resentments, new freedoms, and modernist art. Eric D. Weitz, a University of Minnesota historian, sorts through this knotty mass of narratives in order to describe how German consciousness was uprooted from the Bavarian forests and ushered into the ferocity—and beauty—of the machine age. The book focuses on Weimar's culture,

**WEIMAR  
GERMANY:**  
Promise and  
Tragedy.

*By Eric D. Weitz.*  
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