

Irving Layton

Afterword / Postface

Written by Irving Layton in 1948, this piece originally served as the introduction to the "Annual Library Book of the Jewish Public Library." The Library not only profited from Layton's writing in this era, but also his teaching. Layton served as an instructor for the Yidishe folks universitet (YIFO), teaching such classes as philosophy and Canadian history. The piece acts as an example of the close relationship between the Jewish Public Library and the writers, poets and artists that filled the Library's shelves with their works. Cultural luminaries such as A.M. Klein, Rochl Korn, and J.I. Segal, led the Library in thought, word, and deed.

The Jewish Public Library

Perhaps I am prejudiced, but I cannot conceive of unhappy people in a library. Deeply troubled, yes; or hurt and perplexed, of course; but your person with a book is beyond the reach of unhappiness. For he knows that perplexity often engenders its own cure. And the most characteristically human creation is, after all, not a building, but a book; a library is not a collection of volumes arranged on shelves – it is an act of faith.

If, therefore, you are looking for happy people, seek for them in the Jewish Public Library on Esplanade Avenue. You will have little difficulty in locating this most useful building. It has a squat, reddish-brown, solid exterior which for some reason or other reminds me of the stance of the vigorous bull frog. When someone approaches the white steps, book under arm, steal quietly behind and follow her in. Do you see all those good people at the reading table, some with newspapers spread before them, and some clutching their books as though they were ingots of gold? These people are fabulously rich, they have a chair at the Jewish Public Library! Sit down beside any of these rapt and silent readers. Tonight let Jeremiah or Socrates instruct you.

The magic of this wonderful place has entered into the lives of countless people. Rich and poor, young and old, the dreamers, the angry ones, the visionaries and mystics, or the indispensable idlers who keep alive a tradition of profitable loafing. They have thumbed through as many pages here as there are leaves in the forest. Some of them, I think, have left their eyes here. They have, indeed feasted well; but they have not forgotten. For whenever two or three of them come together they recall that bond of unselfish and devoted people, who, year after year, have striven to maintain the Library, to keep it growing. And they speak their names softly.