

OPENING WINDOWS TO THE WORLD

Growing up in a small town on the plains of Montana, Janet Skeslien Charles' mother would drive her grandmother to the grocery store and the library every week. From these treks, she understood that books were as nourishing as food, and that the library was a window to the world.

In my hometown of Shelby, I loved spending time with my neighbour, a war bride from Normandy. When Claudine spoke English with her lilting French accent, she made the language sound so much better. Even as a child, I understood that she was incredibly brave to leave her friends, her family, and even her language behind. Just out of university, I applied to work as a teaching assistant in France, and soon began working at a Parisian school.

As a small-town girl, I had a hard time adjusting to life in the city. Everything was expensive, and everyone was in a rush. With my one-year teaching contract, colleagues viewed me as yet another foreigner passing through. To find friends, I volunteered at the American Library in Paris. Its membership, which represents sixty nationalities, was an array of students and retirees, people on a budget and billionaires, French and foreign. Most impressive were the dedicated librarians. They tracked down information, offered book recommendations, and comforted people who feel homesick. The library was the first place in Paris where I felt at home. When I got a job there, it felt like a dream came true.

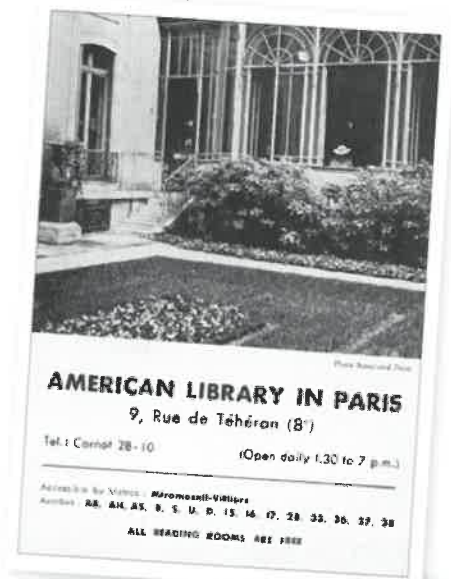
As the program manager, I coordinated book clubs, wrote the newsletter, and organised the weekly 'Evenings with an Author' series, with topic ranging from Italian renaissance gardens to racism to the Résistance. When colleagues told me the World War II history of the library, I knew it was a novel.

The Paris Library tells the true tale of the brave librarians who defied the Nazis in order to hand-deliver books

to Jewish readers. Research and a need for quiet took me to the French National Library. With 40 million items in its collection, this institution is not only the living memory of France, but of the world. The vast research library, located in the sub-basement, has no distractions or windows. What stands out is the devoted librarians and their willingness to help. I'm so grateful to librarians, for all that they do for the people in their community, for their support of writers, and for the care they give the books that we authors spend years writing.

Each time I return to my hometown, Heidi the librarian hugs me, and I'm reassured by the comforting smell of crisp newspaper pages and musty books and an arrowhead collection that's been on display there since the 1970s. But times also change. The library now exhibits artwork from the local prison as a way of including inmates in our community. Computer stations are full of people applying for jobs. Library classes offer everything from creative writing to how to balance a budget. Growing up, not everyone has the same opportunities, but libraries ensure that patrons have the skills and knowledge that they need to thrive.

Hachette Australia & New Zealand have offered a number of giveaway copies of The Paris Library for ALIA members. To win a copy of this book, email incite@alia.org.au by Friday 21 May. 📖



Dorothy Reeder, Director of the American Library in Paris, 1936.



Dorothy Reeder (above) and Audrey Chapuis, current Director of the American Library in Paris.