





The only response to the destruction of books is more books. Ideally in fact, this precise book. Spread the words in this book, so that we can ensure words will always be spread.

- Richard Nash
publisher, *Red Lemonade*, *Soft Skull Press*

Knowledge is power—and because of that, it's dangerous. There's no better contemporary example of this maxim than the People's Library of Occupy Wall Street. And there's no better account of the birth, destruction and the resurrection of People's Library than Melissa Gira Grant's essential, lively, first-hand account of what happened when a group of activist-nerds decided that books matter. Infused with the love and spirit that guided the Occupy movement, her chronicle deserves a prime place on the People's shelf—and on yours!

Richard Kim
The Nation

*Those who were around for the early days and weeks of Occupy Wall Street know that, to really get it, you had to be there. But Melissa Gira Grant's *Take This Book* ensures that even the most far-flung bibliophiles can be there too. Through the Occupy Wall Street Library's story of spontaneous generation and hideous desecration, she shows how and why the Occupy movement has been and always will be one bearing books. Whatever the movement's future might hold, I hope that this book will always be taken—and borrowed, and given, and cherished—among them.*

Nathan Schneider
editor, *Waging Nonviolence*, *Killing the Buddha*

What Melissa Gira Grant is doing here with Take This Book is important stuff. It can only ever be a work in progress. The Library and the ever-changing Occupy Wall Street movement are themselves a work in progress, a first draft, an eruption of big beautiful conflicting ideas and raw energy that resist consistent shape. Grant is observing the arrival of something completely new, its birth pangs, its attempts to walk and speak and define itself. She describes a handful of the astoundingly brave human beings who have migrated from all corners to make this crazy experiment matter, and in the process found themselves on the wrong side of one of the largest paramilitary groups in the world, embroiled in Kafka-esque bureaucracy.

In an era where information flies at us hard and fast, and yet the ability to distort information is ever more insidious, this document causes me to breathe a deep sigh of relief. Many will claim to possess the gospel on the Occupy Movement, and there are as many stories and perspectives as there are stars in the sky. This is one of those stars, its credibility ensured by the fact that Grant was there, and she reports what she saw, clearly and calmly, with humor and empathy. No one can possibly know what comes next in the evolution of the Occupy Library; but with Take This Book there can be no obfuscating its beginnings.

Nathan Larson

film composer and author, *The Dewey Decimal System*

TAKE THIS BOOK



a history of the People's Library at Occupy Wall Street
by Melissa Gira Grant

Glass Houses 



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For all the librarians who #Occupy

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INTRODUCTION

OCCUPY WALL STREET, the now global movement taking direct action for economic and social justice, rooted itself in Lower Manhattan just over six months ago – as of this writing, from Brooklyn, about a thirty minute subway ride away from Zuccotti Park, in a cafe where (no lie) “Born In The USA” is playing – and where is it today?

Let’s check Twitter, since by the time I get on the train so I can tell you myself, this information will be out of date.

It looks like Charlie, one of the Occupy librarians, is hanging out at 100 Centre Street, just released from the jail there, a day after being arrested in Union Square, where the People’s Library – one of the Occupy movement’s most beloved and most policed institutions – had set-up once more after being evicted from Zuccotti Park, again.

(There’s familiar rituals to Occupy now. The reciprocal accumulation of books and cops in public squares, as documented in the pages that follow here, is just one of them.)

This most recent eviction from Zuccotti Park was just five days ago, when there were nearly a thousand of us reunited there, on the first really balmy weekend night all year, St. Patrick’s Day. When a bagpipe band presumably in town for the holiday heard us, and marched over, wanting to come in and serenade us, hundreds of Occupiers raced to one side of Zuccotti to meet them. The librarians hung back. From their vantage point by the books, they could hear the bagpipers, watch the crowd swell

around them, but the news that the bagpipers had been attacked by the cops came over phones. I stood with them, with the books, for another few minutes, but not long after, raced back to what friends were around and we left, just as dozens of cops filed past us. By the time we were on the train home, at least 70 occupiers would be arrested, hands jerked behind their backs with plastic zipties, forced to the ground face-down.

Maybe that – six months out now – is what many expect from Occupy, the story of Occupy: the confrontation. Red city neon reflecting off the powder blue of a riot helmet. A jerky Livestream chase down a broad avenue to keep up with a march as it passes down a narrow dark street and emerges again in the glare of billboards and taxis and – almost always – cop scooters’ headlights. Even when you’re there, it’s hard not to have those be the moments that you are waiting out.

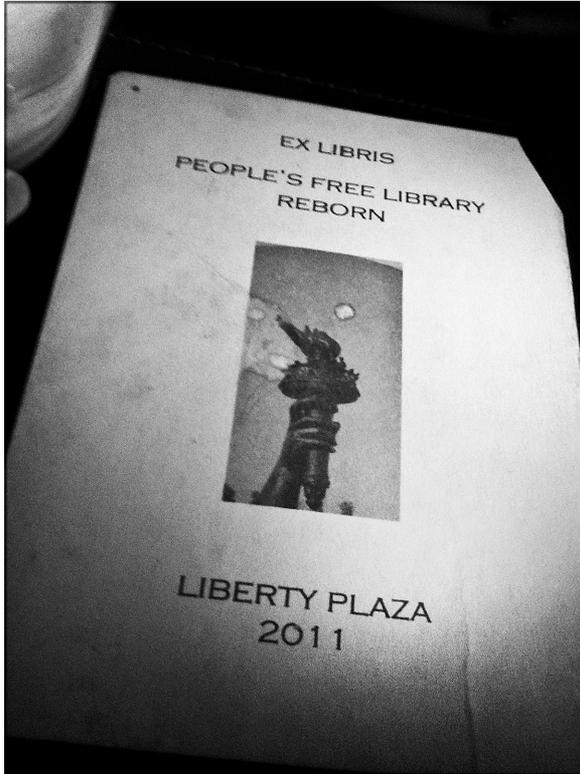
But this, these other rituals, occasion all that, and come first:

The tents, forbidden now, and so are brought in on posts, held aloft about ten feet over the heads of the people who bear them, illuminated, like lanterns, inscribed with slogans. “You can’t evict an idea whose time has come.” Little homes for no one, and always on the move;

Sam Cooke singing, “A Change Is Gonna Come,” flowing out the doors of an *A-Team*-style white van decked out with a sound system, a super-charged digital projector mounted on top, and book shelves built into the doors. It’s called The Illuminator, and it beams a circle of the brightest white light surrounding the now canonical “99%” slogan, onto a Bank of America, or a home under foreclosure, or wherever it’s called to be and to represent;

The sigh, over and over, as people filter back into whatever new square has been occupied, and there’s been a few of them, as cops continue to kick people out, as cops throw barricades back up illegally, as the winter wore on and gave way to spring, that sigh, that first recognition, when the people coming in see it again, “*Oh! There’s the library!*” – a sign that nothing has changed and everything is still possible.

Melissa, March 2012



*No one founded the library.
The library founded itself.*

- Jaime Taylor
Occupy Wall Street librarian

THIS CAN'T BE A HISTORY. It's still happening. It could be a tribute. That's less grandiose, and that's fitting, because no one meant this to end up as this in the first place: the poster with the ballerina and the bull, the call, then Zuccotti, which was occupied and renamed Liberty Plaza on September 17, 2011, and raided two days shy of two months later.

It was a dystopian scene that Ray Bradbury could barely have improved upon. In the aftermath, Michele Hardesty, an assistant professor of U.S. literatures at Hampshire College and for the last several weeks, a librarian at Occupy Wall Street in Manhattan's Zuccotti Park, returned to of the book Bradbury actually wrote in a library, *Fahrenheit 451*. She'd been stuck on a quote in the novel for the last few days, since the destruction of more than 3,000 books that had made up The People's Library. Under Mayor Michael Bloomberg's orders, the park's private security and the New York Police Department had carried out the violent, dead-of-night raid. Along with more than a hundred others in the camp at Zuccotti Park, two of the People's librarians were sprayed with tear gas and arrested.

Michele held the book open between us as she described the plot, and when she was ready, she read a passage:

"Don't ask for guarantees. And don't look to be saved in any one thing, person, machine, or library. Do your own bit of saving, and if you drown, at least die knowing you were headed for shore."

No one could tell me where the books first came from. Since the beginning, they'd been there, left near a slab of pink-and-gray-specked Atlantic granite that serves as a bench along Zuccotti's north side, a few feet into the park from the corner of Broadway and Liberty.

"I got to Wall Street a few days after it started," said Briar Somerville, one of the first Occupy librarians. Briar was, until November, a New York University student but dropped out in part to support the occupation. Briar uses "it" as a gender pronoun, and, when we met during a rally at Union Square, Briar was wearing winter-ready layers and a smart, old-mannish hat. "There were books back then—about a few dozen—piled on a tarp," Briar told me. "They weren't really sorted... they weren't really *whatever*. So I went to the info table and asked, 'Is anyone taking care of these?'—well, *no*. So I started sorting books."

When Janos Marton, an activist and member of the Legal Working Group, arrived on September 19, two days into the occupation, he found a couple of cardboard boxes of books on the ground at the wall along Liberty. "And me being—I guess—a book junkie," he said, "I decided to explore what they were." He joined a few people who were sorting them into fiction and nonfiction. Briar was there as well as librarian Eric Seligson. "And a kid, who was about 12," Briar told me, "and he helped us sort that once. He'd spent the summer doing that at his local public library. Cute as a button." When Janos asked around, nobody knew exactly where the books had come from. "Somebody had even donated a bunch of legal books that were not practical legal books—they were really old. And we just had those there for show, you know, the way you have fake books in some people's houses."

"On one of my first few trips to the library," Briar told me, "I took a piece of paper, and I wrote, 'The People's Library Needs...' and I taped it to the wall, and left it with a Sharpie, and started writing things, like, OK, I guess we need some foreign-language books. Ah, we should probably have boxes, tape, pens, pencils, notebooks... and uh, I guess there aren't any zines here, do you have ideas about what you want in a library, sure, why don't we have a *this*? And then so, me, and two or three other people just standing watching me, concocted this little list, and we left it there."

When Janos returned the next night, he found another note posted above the books "I'm Betsy," it said, "and I want to help with the library." He got in touch, and they started an e-mail listserv.

Betsy Fagin's LinkedIn page identifies her current occupation as librarian at Occupy Wall Street, a position she has held since September 2011. She's also a poet and member of the American Library Association. On September 27, Betsy posted a photo of the People's Library to her website. You can see the legal books acting as a shelf, and two hand-lettered signs: Fiction, Nonfiction.

"I was away from the occupation for a couple days at school," Briar said, "and I wondered, if anyone was kind of doing anything with the library. And I started going on Twitter, and I was tweeting about the library, like—I just started a hashtag, #OWSLibrary, to find out if anyone else was talking about it. And some people were! And some people had posted pictures of our sign."

Their sign reads:

THE LIBRARY NEEDS

Tape
 Genre Signs
 People to mark new donations
 (Occupy Wall St Library)
 People to fix book-bindings
 More books!
 Tarps
 Paper, pens, notebooks
 Sharpies
 People to collect and request donations
 (long distance runs? Universities? More periodicals)
KIDS' books
 Volunteer librarians
 (organize, help folks find books, re-assess library's needs)
 Reading Lights
 non-English books
 local resources
 people to expand this list
 a better system for periodicals
 ... maybe boxes?

On September 28, in Greencastle, Indiana, Mandy Henk saw a photo of the sign online and realized she had to head to New York. "It said they needed librarians, and that's what made me decide I had to go as soon as I could. And it really surprised the heck out of people here," she said of

her colleagues at the Roy O. West Library at DePauw University. "I think everyone knew I was really liberal. Everyone knew I was a far progressive type. I don't think anyone would anticipate that I was the sort who, when the revolution came, would drive all night to participate in it." Bringing along her husband, young daughter and son, she spent the night at her uncle's on Staten Island and then made her way to Zuccotti.

When she arrived on October 1, it was Day 15 of the library at Occupy Wall Street. Just the one sign was posted on the stone wall above the books on the Liberty side of the park, marking it *The People's Library*. "And when I showed up," Mandy said, "there was no one from the library actually staffing the library, and everything was really wet. Everything had been in cardboard boxes. I sent my husband out to get plastic bins for the books, and we spent some time sorting out wet books from not-wet books and organizing them by topic. And I was really happy, just to be able to walk in and start doing stuff."

Earlier that day, Janos and another librarian named Michael had been tidying up. Under a gray sky hanging wet and low, they sorted books drenched in a downpour and re-shelved others that had been scattered when a huge crowd that had gathered for a march spilled into the library. "We had done a really nice job of sorting everything into genre," he said, "but then that day, there were more people in the park than there had ever been, and people were stepping on books" and shoving the few boxes that contained the collection out of order and out of the library's invisible boundaries. There were no structures and no borders, just a few posted signs and the point where the books ran out. "Then, when everybody left to go on a march, we stayed behind to clean up, to reorient, and to make it clear: The library is real, and it's a space to be respected."

Around five o'clock, a young man who had been working on a laptop at the media desk at the park's center stood up and called, "Mic check!" The crowd of several dozen turned and listened. "We need you all to gather in around us," he said. Holding a mobile phone to his ear, he recited what the person on the other end of the line was saying. Down at the Brooklyn Bridge, a short walk away, the New York Police Department had closed in around the march that had left the park earlier that day. The demonstrators had gone to City Hall Plaza, and then to the entrance of the bridge, where, and no one knew just how, they had moved off the pedestrian walkway and into traffic. They police had sealed them in, pulling bright orange netting around the marchers, holding it to block their path. The photos we were getting on Twitter and our phones showed hundreds of people on the bridge. It would take until nearly morning for police to arrest them—more than 700 in all. Janos said he had just finished putting the library back together, "and I contemplated walking on over when we started getting those reports of mass arrests. I missed getting arrested by about 25 minutes, since the library kept me back."

If the videos of cops pepper-spraying young activists and journalists in Union Square the weekend before had brought out hundreds to protest on October 1, then the arrest of hundreds of those protesters in one of the largest mass-arrests in American history only drove the turnout higher. On October 2, Jaime arrived at the library for the first time. "I'm a librarian in real life," she said, "and I heard there was a library at the occupation, so I knew that's where I'd be involved." Only, when she arrived at the library that Sunday, no one else was there. "So I spent all day with the tubs of books. Ten tubs, arranging books. And at the end of the day, Betsy came up to me and said, 'Oh, hey, you're working on the library' and

asked me if I would go to the General Assembly, when the occupation meets, and propose the library as a formal working group. We composed the text right there, and I got up at the GA that night and spoke, and I've been down here pretty much every day since."

"That was the most simple, elegant, fleeting period," Briar said. "The library seemed to grow out of thin air." It didn't matter where the books came from.



The New York Department of Sanitation building was on 12th Avenue, almost as far on the West Side of Manhattan as one can go before landing in the Hudson. It was unmarked. After the November 15th raid on the occupation, what the police had tossed into bins had ended up out here. I came up around the 55th Street side, after some construction workers I'd asked for directions had waved me up to 57th Street. "It's that big—it's the whole block." My glasses were covered with rain. I wiped them, then wiped my phone, and then thumbed back to the text message from Kate Black, one of the newest Occupy librarians, with the address where the books were being held. I texted her back, "If I'm on 12th will I see you? I'm near the cop car." Kate stepped out of the one open door into Sanitation, into the drizzle, and waved. Her bangs and bob were streaked magenta and red, and a professional DSLR camera hung on a strap around her neck.



I followed Kate through the open door and into a room guarded by two cops. I slid my phone back into my blazer pocket. “Can I warm up in here?” I asked one of the cops at the door, who looked like the Boston cops I’d known more from TV than from Boston, even though I grew up there. He was white, stocky, and flushed in the cheeks from the cold tile floor, the florescent light, and the open door.

“It’s not that warm in here,” he said. “Actually, you know what the warmest place in here is? The bathroom.”

“She’s a librarian,” Kate said.

“Wow,” the cop said. “There’s a lot of librarians.”

I glanced around for the books. There they were, just inside the door, in a big blue bin on wheels and stacked in a clear plastic box on a hand truck. There was also a busted wooden chair with a “LIBRARY” sticker still stuck to it, on which Michele, the assistant professor, was posing for us. “It used to have slats,” she said. Michele and Kate are roommates out in Bushwick, and following a blog post the library had made that morning asking for help to haul what books were left out of the Sanitation building, I joined them for the first time. Michele’s phone was buzzing almost constantly, with calls from journalists and calls from the occupation, and this might have meant she was the one in charge of the library, but just for this moment. Kate and Michele were waiting for a car to pick up what had been excavated from the piles of torn nylon and slowly rotting food and wet clothes heaped up in the building’s main storage room. Press weren’t allowed inside. “There was a pigeon, dying,” Kate told me, “hopping around all the stuff, and this cop was just looking at it.”

All that the librarians had been able to pull from the storage room that day were four of their five laptops, each not just broken but destroyed, smashed open and flat. They also rescued the wooden chair with the broken slats, a round table and two folding chairs, and a few plastic bins of books. “There was a pile of bad porn mags that the sanitation workers put with the books,” Michele said. “I guess they were sorting by kind, and they considered the magazines books. We are mostly pro-porn at the library, but these were mainstream porn mags. Clearly not the library’s.

We left them behind when we separated the library's things from everything else, but later I discovered that someone had put them with our stuff again. I put them back. Later I noticed that that cops were laughing and paging through them, joking about how they would divvy them up."

A man leaned into the door jam, identifying himself as a photographer from Reuters. "Come on in," I said.

"He can't come in here," one of the cops said. "No press." I palmed my phone.

A car pulled up, and we carried the few boxes toward the door, staging them along the threshold to keep them as dry as possible: The rain was blowing cold and sideways. The police kept watch as we worked.

"Where'd all these come from?" one of the cops asked.

"From people," we said.

"How many?" the cop asked about the books.

"About 5,000," Michele said.

"That's a lot," one of the cops said.

The other cop said, "So there aren't many left."

"No," all three of us said, as nicely as we could.

The Reuters photographer stood back from the door as we came out. He shot photos through the clear lids of the book boxes and then into the back of the station wagon now parked at the curb on the east side of 12th Avenue. The cops stayed inside. Kate took a few other pictures: Jami Attenberg, a writer who also worked at the WORD bookstore in Brooklyn, standing next to the open hatch of her station wagon, and me next to her. I asked the Reuters photographer not to shoot my face for no reason in particular, unsure still if I was in the story or a pair of helping hands or both. It was pouring now. Jami got into the driver's seat and took off north. The rest of us headed to the train to meet the books—where? At the park? Could they even get in now? At the storage space at 52 Broadway, managed by a working group that may or may not have enough members out of jail to receive the books? Michele had vetoed Jami's original suggestion to bring them to Word. "We need to take inventory," Michele said, to match to the online card catalogue, to see what titles were missing. So we walked east to Columbus Circle, and I learned that Michele played in the Rude Mechanical Orchestra, an activist-inflected marching band, and that she had a call to return to the author and journalist Jeff Sharlet, and that in addition to thousands of books and the tent that sheltered the library and the backpacks and clothing and cell phones of the librarians that had been left inside the tent at the time of the raid, which was now 34 hours ago, two librarians were still unaccounted for: Charlie and Scales.



Before he came down to Zuccotti the first time, Jeff Sharlet went through his shelves pulling out books. Jeff co-founded the solidarity site OccupyWriters.com, where authors can have their names added to a growing list of thousands in support of OWS. Each writer's name is followed by a book title—which was important, Jeff said, because assuming readers would recognize all these supportive writers could reinforce a brand of celebrity that the movement was already pushing hard against. Who on the list is famous? It doesn't matter, because everyone who signs on has his or her name included along with their work.

“When I was choosing what books to give to the library,” Jeff told me, “I didn't want to do the didactic thing. So I set myself two criteria: I could bring books I had multiple copies of, and I could bring books that I loved so much I knew I wouldn't forget to replace them.” Giving a book to the library wasn't an opportunity to dictate “the right books” to the movement, to educate it. You contributed what you could spare, gently, to what would then become your own collection.

When the library first needed to organize its holdings, the librarians chose to divide the books into fiction and nonfiction. “With the fiction,” Janos told me, “it was obvious somebody thought that would be helpful to donate. And later it turned out that fiction was pretty popular—people wanted to get away from the stress of being down there all the time.”

Almost immediately, the library exceeded even the early Occupiers' conception of important and necessary books. As Jeff put it in the days after the raids, “The genius of the library is how good they've been at resisting that. It rescues us from what can be the true tediousness of the left.” Rather than picking up a book out of a dreary sense of perfecting the mind, he said, “When you go to the library, you are joining the world.”

If the world is defined by the books we stacked up at the People's Library, this what you could find on September 25, the ninth day of the occupation: William Gibson, Abbie Hoffman, and Howard Zinn. *Witchcraft and Sorcery*. *The Master and Margarita*. *The Complete Poems of Walt Whitman*. *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Paper Politics: Socially Engaged Printmaking Today*. Hesse. Faulkner. Brecht. Horizontalism, in English and in Spanish.

By the time I brought down a book of my own, on October 2, I knew you didn't want to be the tenth person toting in, as respectable as these are, your personally annotated *People's History of the United States* or maybe *No Logo* or *Debt*. Donating a frivolous but necessary book was something to feel good about, that let me get around questions I couldn't square (of how well I was doing compared to whatever slice of the 99% I was imagining in that moment or of how I could return to a warm apartment after my public protest for the day). It was also a vain act. *Here, let me decide what someone can have.*

Charity, I thought, is too often lent mostly in the service of the self, and as the women of the radical collective INCITE say, the revolution will not be funded. Who knows what it will want to read?

Mandy returned to the occupation on her fall break from the library in Indiana, where people generally supported her use of her working hours to remotely tend the occupation's library, to an overstuffed group Gmail account, and, as was becoming customary if not expected of Occupy's working groups, a blog and a Twitter and a Facebook. "There weren't tents yet," she said of her October visit before the raid, "just complicated structures involving tarps and boxes of books. We had a really nice lean-to, eventually: There was an air mattress and piles of books, boxes of books, and then there was a tarp covering those, and that was the sleeping area. And there was a front area with chairs and an umbrella." Rain poured down, and police sirens and floodlights woke them at odd hours, and still somehow Zuccotti felt sleepover-esque. "You know, I have a nine-year-old boy," Mandy explained, "and one night, one of the librarians was running around just like that: 'We made a fort again!' Now, I don't mean to be *essentializing* about gender, but he was acting *exactly* like you'd expect a nine-year-old boy camping in a park amongst boxes of books would act."

"I never felt a rift between us, the librarians who slept out in the park and who occupied, and those of us who didn't," Michele told me. It was a real divide that, by late October, threatened to splinter the whole occupation, those who held the park, and those who confined their work to off-site meetings at places like 60 Wall Street, in the lobby of a building that resembled the kind of always-vacant food court Donald Trump might find elegant. With its tables, Wi-Fi, and electricity, it had become a satellite of Zuccotti. But of the working groups who had to be in the park to do their work—and in the cases of the Kitchen, Comfort, Medical, the Info

Desk, and the Library, to give a backbone to the occupation itself—the questions of how to occupy and how to survive the occupation were at the fore.

At first, Stephen and Eric maintained all-night watches over the books, just to ensure they'd be there the next day. Those were the "cardboard days," as a librarian subtitled the accompanying historic video of the Library on YouTube. Rain, or the trouncing steps of a few hundred people who expected Radiohead to show up, could take out a whole day's donations.

Later, once the library was established, with open hours and protocols for recording and shelving donations and making reference material available, librarians who couldn't physically occupy had more work to do: entering ISBN's into the donated LibraryThing database, answering press requests. The library was also one of the few places in the park, Michele told me, where those who slept overnight rolled up their sleeping gear in the morning to make room for people to walk freely through their space. It was also, as many of the librarians observed, one of the first places in Zuccotti newcomers would find themselves, whether because of the library's location at the foot of the steps at Broadway and Liberty, or whether it was just less obvious for a stranger to the occupation to know how to behave around a protest than around the protest's books.

That's where Alec Baldwin positioned himself, Mandy said, when he came to Zuccotti in October. "And right as we were getting ready to go to bed. He might not have realized he was in the library?" She posed this as a question, talking to me by phone from Indiana while her daughter

played in their backyard. “But the media gathered, and some occupiers gathered—people like to talk to Alec Baldwin. And you know, the only thing I said to him was I think his show is really, really mean to people and wildly inappropriate for my children to watch. And you know, he turned to me and he said, ‘You’re absolutely right about that.’ And that was the only genuine, not totally pompous-ass thing I heard him say.”

In October, the library was nominated for a Best Small Library in America award, which, in addition to the honor, comes with a \$15,000 grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. “We were invited to speak at the American Library Association conference,” Mandy said. The librarians lobbied for a group of them to go to collectively represent their work. Occupiers from solidarity camps in Occupy New Haven and Occupy Dallas visited the library to see how it was run. The librarians who tended the Acampada Sol Library in Madrid, in the anti-austerity occupation of Puerta del Sol Square that Occupy Wall Street modeled itself on, sent a paper letter in solidarity:

We have been following OWS from the very first day and let’s say we are glad to see that you found the way out to organise you up almost in the same way we did while we were camping at the city hall square in Madrid at Puerta del Sol.

What we saw at the pics of OWS was quite impressive, but you couldn’t imagine how surprised we were when we realized that OWS has also a library. It may sound stupid but when we knew that, we celebrated it as the born of a new one in the family.

Why? well, it’s difficult to explain but during the nearly seven weeks we lived there hearing the rain fall over the piece of plastic that barely covered our books (not us) we had a lot of time to think about what we were going through. The media described us as bums, the government as the most dangerous kind of terrorists (the pacifist’s kind) and we slept always waiting for the final police riot that would throw everything down. We had time for joy and also for despair. We never knew what we were doing, we only knew that it was right.

The letter, Jaime Taylor told me, was one of the only remains of the reference section recovered from the raid.



Remove everything but the books. The librarians who were most versed in direct-action tactics—from participating in various peaceful and spirited disruptions, at street protests against the Republican National Convention in New York in 2004, or while bringing cheer to Wall Street police barricades as a roving brass band—had worked out a plan for what they would do in case of a raid. Whoever was in the library would grab the laptops, the archives, the reference section—countless signed editions among them—and ferry them to safety.

“Philosophically,” Jaime said, “the books stay with the occupation.”

There had been a dry run, too, the night the Occupiers prepared for the city to evict them. On October 13, Bloomberg announced that Brookfield Properties, which legally owned the park, wanted to clean Zuccotti, and the Occupiers anticipated that the mayor would also send in the New York Police Department to remove them. So the Occupiers took this order both graciously and defiantly: They would clean the park themselves, and early in the morning, when the cops and the cleaners were to arrive, the Occupiers would refuse to leave. Someone posted an invitation to Facebook on the day of the cleanup, calling people to gather before Wall Street's opening bell, and to bring brooms and mops and pails. All day, wearing ponchos and latex gloves, Occupiers scrubbed the stone steps of Zuccotti, swept the grounds, and straightened their camp's stations. As night fell, some of the camp's infrastructure was evacuated: most of the Kitchen, the Media Center, and almost all of the sleeping bags, foam mats, and blankets that people weren't using at that moment, and at that moment, the moment I entered the park, just after two in the morning on the day we'd been told we'd be evicted, a dozen or two people were still curled up on mats, plastic tarps drawn over their faces, in the swells of rain that joined us as we arrived in the park, that took us down the clean stone steps leading to Broadway, and that ran two-inches deep and quick, into my boots and into the blankets of the few people still trying to sleep.

But near those stone steps, just off to the north side of the park, along Liberty Street, was the library. It was still there, raised up on clear plastic bins, taped over with tarps covered in slogans. That afternoon and into the night, the librarian Stephen Boyer prepared it: lining up the boxes and taping down the tarps. If someone had slashed into the plastic, she

would have seen yards and yards of books, lined up in their clear plastic bins, and there would be no doubt that what she had discovered had been ordered, taken care of, and if doubt still remained, then there was the poetry written on the tarps, too.

The covered-up mass of the library stretched at least 20 feet in length, five or so feet high, a dull-blue mound gleaming with rain that sheltered those of us sitting beside it. There was the woman with the ash-blond curls and the good boots and trench coat, a media badge around her neck, who, each time I looked up at her over the course of hours, could be found rolling a cigarette on the top of her suitcase. There were the three of us—my protest pals for the night, Darryl and Joanne—talking and pacing and inadvertently sleeping on the stone bench set into the wall along Liberty, which was where I always told people who were coming to the park for the first time to meet me. We didn't talk about where we were going—I just led us there, and we sat. Darryl had two onions in his canvas tote bag because when he had been in Tahrir Square that summer, he had carried them in case they used tear gas against the protesters, to breathe through to filter the gas. Every 10 minutes, I thought I might throw up because nobody knew if or when the cops were coming, how many there would be, how they would move or remove us. So that was how I ended up spending hours in the library, with the library, and woke from a soft sleep around half past four as someone called out *Mic Check!* and asked for help carrying the library to a van parked down Broadway. I don't know how many hands came forward to do it, but the transfer was done in just a few minutes and then nothing but a corkboard was left on the stone bench where the library began.



Shortly before one in the morning on November 15, the New York Police Department surrounded Zuccotti with floodlights and, through a ring of speakers, again blared an order to disperse. One announcement bled into another and radiated through the park in a single voice's multiple-channel assault. Stephen Boyer was one of a handful of librarians present. "It was sprung on us," he said. After waking up the librarians who had camped inside the tent that housed the books, Stephen leapt onto a table and began reciting poetry from the library's own anthology, which he had edited and bound with plastic covers to protect it from the rain. The poems are one of a kind. Each week, Stephen adds new ones to the collection. On the day of the raid, the anthology had more than 400 pages.

When the cops headed in, Stephen strapped the poetry anthology to his body. "I just got what I could in one load," he said, "and that was all I could save." When he rushed back for more, the cops wouldn't let anyone re-enter the park. They held him, with scores of others who were clamoring to witness since there wasn't much else to be done now at Liberty and Broadway except hold their bodies on that corner. Stephen blogged the next morning:

*...on the corner I immediately launched into action
and again started reading from the OWS POETRY*

ANTHOLOGY. Someone in the crowd said the cops wouldn't respond to the poems but I countered, it's not about the cops, it's about making the voices of all those that have sent poems to the anthology heard. A few cops then got in my face and began pushing the crowd I was in up Broadway. I kept reading poems as they waved batons in our faces, and fellow protesters cried as we realized they were forcing all witnesses away from the park. The further we were pushed away, it seemed the louder the park became as the police became increasingly brutal. We watched in horror as the police entered the park swinging billy-clubs and slashing tents...

The pieces of the library Stephen had to leave behind, in part, were listed in a post by the OWS Library within hours of the raid:

- Between 2,000 and 4,000 books (we'll know if it looks right when we see it), this includes five boxes of "Reference" materials many of which were autographed by the authors;
- Our custom made "OWS library stamps;"
- 5 (4?) laptop computers;
- Our wifi device;
- miscellaneous paper supplies;
- A round portable table;
- a rectangular portable table;
- 6 metal shelves (five of which had been set up in two pieces);
- three sets of wooden drawers;
- a periodicals spinning rack;

- Approximately 60 plastic tubs/bins of varying sizes (most small, but several big);
- archival materials;
- posters (including many original posters created by OWS participants);
- two lamps;
- four solar lights;
- 7 (or so) chairs;
- a wooden dinner table (that was ours right?);
- periodicals/newspapers/zines (not counted in our book total);
- our awesome tent;
- signage;
- personal belongings of librarians;
- two librarians

Had those remaining Occupiers not been shoved and cordoned off in a series of NYPD barricades blocks away, and had the media not been forbidden access to Zuccotti, and had the Wall Street subway exits not been closed and the Brooklyn Bridge's Brooklyn-to-Manhattan span not been closed, there may have been more than the single published video of the destruction of the library. This, after months of cameras, cameras panning every face and placard in the park, cameras catching Zuccotti's low yellow leaves in every shot—this is the one published video of this moment: crowd sounds and clanging start over black and the title, and then the camera rights itself, and a man in a helmet and a neon-yellow safety vest who looks like a cop walks through the shot, and another man who looks like an Occupier with a green dust mask stands in the back, while a third man, close to the lens with his stubble in focus, says, “They’ve

just removed the press—they’re taking the press out. They’ve removed the press before.” The video cuts to a longer shot, of half a dozen cops standing around the arc-shaped canopy that sheltered the library, a gift unofficially made by poet and rock star Patti Smith, which is unofficially called “fort smith.” You can hear several echoes of the order to disperse and the metal of the tent stakes rattling against one another as the nylon is torn from them. A cop in a powder-blue and black riot helmet, who had been guarding what had been the entrance to the library, turns and walks out of the shot.

The destruction of this library—and it was, in every single possible sense, a real and a true library—it was a library built by donations, it was a library whose collection embodied both the spirit of the movement and the spirit of the age, the spirit of the time in which we live—the destruction of this library was an attempt to silence and destroy our movement.

We aren't going to allow this to happen, and we can't allow this to happen. If we can't create a public space in which we can share books with each other, what kind of people are we?

– Mandy Henk
Occupy Wall Street librarian

panicked and freaked out. But I go anyway. I took up a spot halfway down Liberty, near a girl holding a sign with just a photo of the library at its brightest and the words “Mayor Bloomberg, What Have You Done To The People’s Library?” I think at that point I had already decided that this was what I was going to write about. The cat and mouse of chasing cops from corner to corner was making me sick. I don’t know that I had any anger left, anyway, and whatever there was broke that night when news came that even though Bloomberg had just gotten his way and the temporary restraining order preventing him from using cops to keep protesters from the park was rescinded, the barricades had been opened. I still had the book I had stashed in my purse that morning, the only one I had a second copy of to give, and with some embarrassment: *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*.

The library had been open for exactly as long it had been since the court decision came down and the cops had to open up the barricades and let people back into the park, but only with what each person could carry. No carts. No boxes. Zach and Laura and three other librarians returned, and they came with a half dozen books, stashed in bags and under coats, and again, returned to the strip of Atlantic granite on the Liberty side of the park, and they were joined by others gathering around them with new donations. Zach took my contribution, wrote “OWSL” onto the spine, and set it with the others on the bench that had served as a shelf for the last two months, now with what we could reimagine as one brief interruption care of the New York Police Department. We cheered with each donation that came in, but loudest and most pointedly when the Constitution came back. “How do I check the law back in?” someone asked. “All library rules have been suspended!” someone shouted. Then

Zach stepped away to face the Broadway steps, now lined with cops, and took up a cardboard sign that read, in the style of the movement’s most outraged anti-slogans, “Historically the good guys were *not* the ones throwing books away.”

You can give a book without actually entering the occupation—you can even pass it over the barricades. Someone will take it. But the other half of the library’s business requires you to. If you want to know what people have given, if you want to see how the library has been organized and the hands and faces of the people who did it, if you want to discover something, then as with the rest of Occupy, you must go.

We all think we’re supposed to give, Jeff said to me when we talked a few days after the raid. “But when I brought my books down, the thing I remember them saying is, ‘Take a book.’ Which is a dangerous thing to say to a person.” the American Library Association, “the oldest and largest library association in the world,” openly affirmed the danger in books and their commitment to that danger:

“We believe that what people read is deeply important; that ideas can be dangerous; but that the suppression of ideas is fatal to a democratic society. Freedom itself is a dangerous way of life, but it is ours.”

THE FIRST THING you might have noticed in the park in those early weeks were the mums: yellow, gold, and burgundy, set in stone planters about the diameter of a person laying on the ground with her arms and legs outstretched. I went for the first time on September 27. Two different friends had texted me that afternoon: “Meet us by the circle of flowers.” I went alone, after my companion bailed when I suggested that we drop by Zuccotti on our way home from lunch. It was no big thing, because I didn’t know much about his politics except that he thought of himself as the kind of person who would support this kind of movement. But no, he said, “I wouldn’t know how to *be down there*.”

What do you do at an occupation? Is just stepping off of Broadway—through the line of 20 or 30 people, each holding a handmade placard at chest level—and crossing into the park, is that occupying? Or do you have to do something? We were in that last streak of summer at the end of September. You would be spending this day staring out the window, wanting to skip class or your meetings or whatever was before you and come to this place, just to do nothing.

By the time I had left my companion at the train, I had sweat down the backs of my knees, and my friends were gone. After pacing around the park a bit and reading the signs—some covered with print so small they could be an entire blog post, and a few probably were—I sat myself on the pink-and-grey-specked Atlantic granite planter holding the mums. Someone would come, I thought. Something would happen.

Across from me on a bench along the Liberty side of the park, someone had stacked up a few issues of *The Onion*, and beside those were two dozen books or so, and a hand-painted sign that said LIBRARY. Something in me remembered, *you can read in a park, this is a thing that we do here*, but I didn't want to pull out a book, so I read Twitter for a minute. Then I decided to go.

Just as I was about to step off the curb at Liberty, I saw Molly Crabapple. She was bearing tarps. Molly's an illustrator, and she'd spent the last few days contributing a load of Occupy-themed art for screen-printing wherever people needed a little punch of ink—a vampire squid (after *Rolling Stone* columnist Matt Taibbi's moniker for Goldman Sachs) or a fattened cat hoarding cookies from worker mice. Now we had a thing we could do, I thought. We were helping.

As I re-entered the park, I saw the friend I'd missed by the mums. Molly left us to go back to work, and across from us, a woman stood and announced, "Mic check! Charleston lessons in five minutes! Right here!" and on the spot that would be the home of hundreds of books a few days later, we watched as two people began to dance.

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And to all the Occupy librarians.

TAKE THIS BOOK



MELISSA GIRA GRANT is a writer and independent journalist, who has reported on the Occupy movement for AlterNet and the *New York Observer*. Her work has also appeared in *Glamour*, the *Guardian*, *Slate*, and *Jezebel*, among others. She is the co-editor of *Coming & Crying* (Glass Houses, 2010), an anthology of true stories about sex. Melissa lives in Brooklyn and on the internet at melissagira.com.

TAKE THIS BOOK traces the history of
the People's Library at Occupy Wall Street, as told to writer and
independent journalist Melissa Gira Grant.

Founded in September 2011 in Zuccotti Park, and built from thousands
of books shared freely with anyone who asked, the People's Library was
seized in November 2011, in a dead-of-night police raid, ending in
tear gas, arrests and the destruction of the books.

As those who seek to destroy this movement target its books
and their defenders, the People's Library rises again and again
as a commitment to freedom.

Intended to be as open and adaptable as the Occupy library itself,
TAKE THIS BOOK can't be the whole story,
because it's still happening.



“Many will claim to possess the gospel on the Occupy Movement, and there are
as many stories and perspectives as there are stars in the sky. Take This Book is
one of those stars, its credibility ensured by the fact that Melissa Gira Grant was
there, and she reports what she saw with humor and empathy.”

- *Nathan Larson, film composer and author, The Dewey Decimal System*

“Those who were around for the early days and weeks of Occupy Wall Street
know that, to really get it, you had to be there. But Melissa Gira Grant's Take
This Book ensures that even the most far-flung bibliophiles can be there too.”

- *Nathan Schneider, editor, Waging Nonviolence, Killing the Buddha*

“Melissa Gira Grant's essential, lively, first-hand account is infused with the love
and spirit that guided the Occupy movement. Her chronicle deserves a prime
place on the People's shelf—and on yours!”

- *Richard Kim, The Nation*