

I had decided to treat myself to a visit to the largest and oldest library in the country. I was leaving it all to chance, having reserved no books nor made a list. To be honest, I hadn't even looked at the catalogue. I was going to the Great Library with my mind open, hands in my pockets, convincing myself that, somewhere on the premises, there was bound to be a book made for me.

This book: I didn't know its title, I didn't know what it was about, I didn't know what it could possibly look like. All I could say about it was that I had never read it. It, on the other hand, had some idea who I was. It had taken note of my reader profile. To it, my tastes and expectations were not unfamiliar.

A book was waiting for me at the Great Library and I couldn't help but believe it had been written especially for me.

Before arriving, I had undertaken a sort of inventory of my personal library, pulling volumes off the shelves one by one, caressing their smooth, woven, shiny, matte, dusty, filthy covers (with a little cleaning done along the way). I had not commenced this operation for pleasure, to look back on my readings, to appreciate the breadth of my collection, or take some sort of stock (and even less for the sake

of cleaning). No, in examining my library, I was hoping to get my hands on a book I had not yet read.

It had happened to me before, pulling out a book I didn't think I owned, or that I'd simply forgotten about. I'd opened it and, from the first lines, it was a done deal: it was exactly the book I'd needed. Having experienced this many times, I have come to doubt this type of happenstance is mere coincidence. The phenomenon has occurred too often to talk about strokes of luck. Rather, I believe these books had known to stay discreet, bide their time, watch for the moment I'd be free before they'd fall into my hands. I've come to believe it isn't always the readers who choose their books: in certain circumstances, it's the books who choose their readers.

This time, after three days of searching, nothing came from my library. This meant I had nothing left to read, not the slightest text, not even a pamphlet, magazine, or article. It was awful. I had to find something, and fast: my life as a reader depended on it.

With its fourteen million printed documents, the Great Library would certainly have a solution to offer me. One chance out of fourteen million, it wasn't necessarily a forgone conclusion.

**B**efore going to the Great Library, I couldn't help myself from gathering some information. I had, in the course of my online research, found an open-access text that traced the history of the Great Library. I wasn't sure whether this text fell under history or fiction. But it inspired confidence. I wanted to take it at its word. Maybe it was fiction, but so what? A good book of fiction, they say, contains more truth than a bad book of history.

I learned that within the realm of reading, it isn't called the Great Library but, rather, the Library. Others, in the Ministry, at the most senior level, dub it the Jewel, the Marvel, the National Treasure. The word *Trésor* must be taken literally. We are talking about a genuine treasure, the treasure of the national language, the wealth of written heritage, all of the printed matter published in the kingdom and republic which, save for the exceptional loan, are not allowed to leave the premises.

I know that today there are two ways to speak of Treasure. With respect and admiration, or with emphasis and irony.

The first comes from the institution's guarantors, its learned users, those who have good reason to believe that it is indeed a treasure. All you have to do is visit the regular

exhibitions of its rare and precious documents to see that. How can you not find them wonderful, these well-looked-after editions, these books with remarkable bindings, these ephemeral publications, these handwritten letters, these children's books, these artists' editions? How can you not admire these bits of the Treasure?

The second is used by smaller libraries, those relegated to the rank of subordinates, associated institutions at best. It can also be found in self-published books, all those without publishers who, despite their incessant attempts to gain legitimacy, are denied entry into the catalogue and are bitter and disappointed at being considered works without quality.

Those who mock its prestige and attack its presumed power, those who challenge its capacity to consecrate certain books and dismiss others, should know that the Library has not always been rich and powerful. The Treasure started small. At first, it was not a treasure nor even a library. From having read it, I can say that the history of the creation of the Library is a story both ancient and strange. Almost as ancient and strange as public readership, which it practically invented.

Before the invention of public libraries, readers had to procure books by their own means. Reading was for those and only those who possessed their own private libraries. You had to be rich to have reading. You had to be rich to be a reader. Not everyone had the means to buy themselves books in illuminated vellum, and the custom was to not