



Al Burt Papers

University of Florida Libraries

“On Libraries”

Talk to Friends of the Library, Fort Pierce, Florida, April 4, 1985

I think of libraries as a safe haven for ideas, ideas packaged in books. They are always ready to use as conveniently as fast food. They never have to be thawed out or heated up like TV dinners. Their atmosphere, their sense of quiet, the feeling I get that I am in a storehouse where the minds of great men and women are kept alive—nothing separates me from great discoveries, wisdom, tolerance that comes with knowing the substance of many different and conflicting ideas except some thin little book covers. The library is an exciting, wonderful place.

Harry Crews, that extraordinarily talented and wild writer who teaches at the University of Florida, sold some of his novels to the moviesand I once asked him if he did not worry about what they might do to his creations. “My books are in the library,” he said. “Nobody can hurt them.”

The people who run libraries are interesting, too. Crews offered another example. After he became successful enough to get his picture on page one of the newspaper in his mother’s home – a small town in south Georgia – she was appointed to the local library board. He liked that. His mother only went to the second grade in school, but she was on the library board.

“Ma’s never read a book, except the ones I’ve written,” Crews said. But he thought it was a good appointment. “Ma at one and the same time is primitive enough and sophisticated enough to know that it’s all magic, anyway,” he said.

After he sold his first novel, *The Gospel Singer*, Crews called his mother to tell her about it. She had just one question: “Son,” she said, “You didn’t try to pass that off as the truth, did you?”

Library boards have a big responsibility, and they take it seriously. I was reading just last year about a library board up East that was screening its material for things that might be objectionable. They came across a book called *Making It With Mademoiselle*, and of course they threw that one out. Obviously, it was too racy for the children. But later, as one board member went back and got the book to read – a matter of professional research, I am sure – he discovered that it was only a sewing guide for *Mademoiselle* magazine.

Educated people, of all sorts, impress me. I like to be around people who understand and appreciate realities, people like the man I once met while touring Mount Royal with a friend whose mother had been a public school teacher. We bumped into one of her former students, and the fellow insisted on expressing his appreciation. “Yessir,” he said, “I love your Mama. She was the one that learned me English.”

Libraries are free, legal, exhilarating and non-fattening. When I find myself running low on imagination, getting down to the cottony dry stuff, I search for a library the way a thirsty old tippler looks for a saloon. There, I can tipple all day and still walk.

Under the same roof, maybe on the same wall, they might have Billy Graham and Harry Crews and Dr. Norman Vincent Peale and Henry Miller. And nobody will be arguing or fighting. All of them will be standing there like gentlemen, right side up, each waiting his chance to make an argument.

When you lift a cover it is like opening Pandora’s Book, not the mythical box, and releasing ideas. Maybe they are pleasing and maybe they are disturbing, but you are in full control. You can interrupt books but they will never interrupt you.

I love libraries. I love to visit them, and I love the idea that my books are in them. Maybe I am only in the corner over there, alongside something like *Making It With Mademoiselle*, but I love it anyway. What could be a nicer thought than imagining that somewhere, in a library, at any time of the day, some stranger might be lifting my cover and finding entertainment?

I made it into the libraries under cover most recently with a book called *Becalmed in the Mullet Latitudes*. It was my third book and was a collection of columns written for *Tropic* magazine, *The Miami Herald’s* Sunday magazine. I have worked at the *Herald* for 30 years, but these columns came out of the past twelve, during which I have been a roving columnist in Florida.

My work is similar to what I once did as a correspondent in Latin America. I make an attempt to interpret the state in a broad way, keeping in mind that most of my readers live in the southern half of Florida. That’s not so far-fetched an idea when you consider that the differences between Miami and parts of North Florida are nearly as great as those between Miami and Latin America. I try to visit each part of the state at least once a year. I look at Florida as a layman would, not as an expert. I am concerned less with the blood-and-guts events that make headlines than with the common joys and dilemmas that help explain what life is like for the average Floridian.

For me, the mullet latitudes arise out of our individual moods and musings about the mystique of Florida, the things that make us love it. The mullet latitudes are like Indian Summer and Blackberry Winter, mysterious but nevertheless real.

They envelop newcomers and natives and urbanites and country Crackers alike, and they inspire a kind of reverence for Florida's natural side – a persistent concern for its fragility.

People get lost in those mullet latitudes. They become becalmed. It changes them. It is like falling in love. We have to hope that this sort of chemistry will work more powerfully. We have to hope because that is the best way.

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