

Bringing Books and People Together: Jennie Maas Flexner, First Readers' Advisory Librarian at the New York Public Library

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Jennie Maas Flexner was born in 1882 in Louisville, Kentucky to Dr. Jacob Abraham and Rosa Maas Flexner both of German-Jewish ancestry. Jacob's parents, Moritz and Esther Abraham Flexner, migrated to the United States from Germany in 1851. They had seven sons and two daughters. Jacob, Jennie's father and the oldest of Moritz (Morris) and Esther, born in 1857, was a well-known diagnostician in Louisville, and was the first doctor to use diphtheria antitoxin in that city, and also was a founding member of the Anti-Tuberculosis Association.¹ Notable siblings to Morris included Simon, born in 1863, who was a leading pathologist and bacteriologist, and was the first director of the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research in New York.² Bernard, born in 1865, was an attorney and early advocate of the juvenile court movement, was the founder and first president of the Palestine Economic Corporation, and served as counsel for the Zionist delegation to the Paris Peace Conference (1918-1919).³ Abraham, born in 1866, was an influential educator and founder of the Institute of Advanced Study at Princeton, and author of *Medical Education in the United States and Canada*, commonly known as *The Flexner Report*. The report led to the establishment of the first nation-wide professional standards for medical education.⁴

¹ Esther Johnston, *Pioneering Leaders in Librarianship*, ed. Emily M. Danton (Chicago: American Library Association, 1953), 62.

² See, James T. Flexner, *An American Saga: The Story of Helen Thomas and Simon Flexner* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1993). See also, Simon Flexner Papers, American Philosophical Society.

³ See, "Bernard Flexner Papers, 1882-1946," Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University Library.

⁴ See, Thomas N. Bonner, *Iconoclast: Abraham Flexner and a Life in Learning* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

Jennie Maas Flexner's family life included rich intellectual stimulation and educational encouragement. She was the oldest of five children. She had three sisters. Hortense was a poet, Alice was a social worker, Carolin was a secretary, and her brother, Morris, was a physician. Her supportive family influenced and encouraged her to pursue an education and find a career that suited her abilities and personality. An example of her intimate family relations included a life-long correspondence with her Uncle Simon, one of the few sources of information available about her personal life.⁵

After graduating from Commercial High School in Louisville at the age of 17, Flexner worked as a secretary for her uncle Bernard who was chief attorney for Samuel Insull, the utilities tycoon. She later worked for *The Louisville Herald*, then after a conversation with her mother and a friend of her mother, Jennie was encouraged to inquire about a job at the new Andrew Carnegie-funded library in Louisville. It needed a girl who could type and liked books.⁶ This was Flexner's introduction to a life-long career in librarianship.

The Louisville Free Public Library (LFPL) hired Flexner as a circulation assistant from 1905 to 1908. Her assorted tasks included loaning books, and, on occasion, ordering and classifying them. The library's director, William F. Yust, recognized Flexner's enthusiasm and abilities and recommended formal training in Cleveland, Ohio at the new library school at Western Reserve University. She studied nightly for the entrance exam and earned a scholarship for the year-long training. She earned a certificate in 1909 then returned to LFPL.

Flexner temporarily returned to the circulation department, on arrival from Western Reserve, but soon transferred to the cataloging department because of personnel conflicts with another worker over her ideas about patron-oriented service. Flexner learned picked up her strong service philosophy from William H. Brett, librarian of the Cleveland Public Library (CPL) and founder of the Western Reserve

⁵ Renee Feinberg, "Jennie Flexner and the Readers' Advisory Services at the New York Public Library," *Urban Academic Librarian* 9 (1995): 5.

⁶ Esther Johnston, *Pioneering Leaders in Librarianship*, ed. Emily M. Danton (Chicago: American Library Association, 1953), 63.

University Library School; and Linda Eastman, vice-librarian at CPL.⁷ There, readers' adviser programs were well-established. Flexner also led LFPL's training classes, soon after returning from Western Reserve.

Flexner was promoted to head of the circulation department in 1912. She immediately implemented her ideas of readers' adviser services uncontested and with full consent and encouragement from the library's director. When Flexner began working at LFPL, it had received generous support from the Carnegie Foundation, as did many other public libraries at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, and many, including LFPL, fundamentally changed their circulation policies during this same period. Older policies established a closed-shelf system where library patrons provided a written list of books to the circulation attendant who then retrieved them from bookshelves inaccessible to, and often out of sight from, the public. Patrons could not browse a library's collection except abstractly through a catalog of holdings, often in order of accession or by subject.

The trend in circulation services invited patrons to browse the fully accessible open shelves of a library's collection. This was a revolutionary idea because common thought among librarians was that the general public was not sophisticated enough to comprehend the complex subject-oriented classification system nor were they proficient enough to know how to select books according to their interests and reading levels. The new open-shelf arrangement was more democratic, but patrons still needed assistance finding books.

As the physical wall between patrons and books was removed, Flexner began dismantling the invisible wall separating indifferent library employees from the needs of ambitious patrons. As head of the circulation department, Flexner trained her assistants to guide patrons cordially in their search for books and encouraged her assistants to read broadly, keeping patrons' interests in mind. She believed

⁷ *The Encyclopedia of Cleveland History*, s.v. "BRETT, WILLIAM HOWARD," "EASTMAN, LINDA ANNE," and "CLEVELAND PUBLIC LIBRARY," accessed June 10, 2013, <http://ech.case.edu/index.html>.

that the circulation loan desk was the “hub of the library,” and that the well-read loan assistant should match skillfully “books and people.”⁸

In 1926, the American Library Association invited Flexner to write the first in a series of “Curriculum Studies” textbooks edited by W. W. Charters. Charters recognized Flexner’s passion and skill in circulation services. Flexner took a leave of absence from LFPL to conduct a study with over 150 participating circulation librarians from which she described effective practices of proper circulation loan operations. She also presented her ideas of circulation staff as well-read and service-oriented advocates guiding patrons to their desired books. The result of her efforts, *Circulation Work in Public Libraries*, became the standard circulation services text for library school training and gave Flexner the opportunity to express in writing her patron-centered and service-oriented philosophy of library work. Public libraries’ primary purpose was to introduce readers to books as Flexner laid out in her introduction.

A knowledge of books and of their varied uses is the librarian’s chief asset. ... The circulation assistant whose primary function is to secure for the borrower the book that will please, will need to be a thoughtful student of practical psychology. He should learn to treat each reader as an individual whose request is an important matter. He will cultivate in the reader’s mind the thought that personal service from the library to the borrower is the end and aim of the institution and its staff.⁹

The history of The New York Public Library (NYPL) is as interesting as it is varied much like the history of New York City with its mosaic of cultures, languages, and ethnicities. NYPL is a consolidation of private and public libraries scattered throughout the city. These autonomous collections merged at a time when New York became a world-class city during the late 19th century, surpassing Paris in population, and quickly approached London as the most populous city in the world.

⁸ Jennie Flexner, “The Loan Desk from Both Sides,” *Library Journal* 49 (1924): 410.

⁹ Jennie Flexner, *Circulation Work in Public Libraries* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1927): 2-3.

The Astor Library, the Lenox Library, and the Tilden Trust were the principle players in the development of a city-wide and unified public library. The Astor Library (1848-1895), created by John Jacob Astor, a German immigrant, who at the time of his death in 1848 was the wealthiest man in the United States from his American Fur Company, considered the first American monopoly. He later became one of the largest real estate investors in New York. This was the foundation of his heirs' fortune. He left \$400,000 upon his death, establishing a reference library in New York.¹⁰

The Lenox Library (1870-1895) was founded by James Lenox, the son of a wealthy Scottish merchant. Lenox inherited several million dollars and property in New York from his father and spent most of his life acquiring rare books and manuscripts including a complete Gutenberg Bible, early editions of Shakespeare, Milton, John Bunyan, and numerous works about North and South America. He originally intended his collection for scholarly use only but it was made available to the general public in 1870.¹¹

The third primary party in this consolidation was the Tilden Trust established by former New York governor, Samuel J. Tilden, who upon his death in 1886 bestowed \$2.4 million for the establishment and maintenance of a free library and reading room in New York.¹² The Astor and Lenox libraries were public institutions but one had to obtain a ticket of admission for their use. They were not the kind of library Tilden had envisioned for general public use.

The Astor and Lenox libraries experienced financial difficulty by 1892 because of their diminishing endowments and burgeoning collections. John Bigelow, a New York attorney and Tilden trustee, developed a vision to combine the libraries and resources of the Astor and Lenox libraries with the Tilden Trust. The trustees of each entity signed the agreement on May 23, 1895, and together they

¹⁰ See, Axel Madsen, *John Jacob Astor: America's First Multimillionaire* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley, 2001).

¹¹ See, Henry Stevens, *Recollections of James Lenox and the Formation of His Library* (New York: New York Public Library, 1951).

¹² See, Alexander Clarence Flick and Gustav S. Lobrano, *Samuel Jones Tilden: A Study in Political Sagacity* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1973).

were the nucleus of NYPL. NYPL, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations, as it was officially known, formed the bulk of the non-circulating reference collection, eventually housed in the central library building on Fifth Avenue between 40th and 42nd Streets. The central library, now known as the Humanities and Social Sciences Library, was built by the architectural firm, Carrère and Hastings, under the supervision of library director, John Shaw Billings who also designed the building. The building was completed in 1911.

In February 1901, NYPL merged with the New York Free Circulating Library (1878-1900). The New York Free collection made up the bulk of NYPL's circulating collection. One month later, Andrew Carnegie committed \$5.2 million to build a system of neighborhood branches with the stipulation that the City of New York provided sites and funds for maintenance and operations. Later that same year, NYPL contracted with the City to operate thirty-nine branches in the boroughs of the Bronx, Manhattan, and Staten Island. Queens and Brooklyn operated their own library systems.¹³ From its inception, NYPL committed resources to the growing immigrant population. As early as 1897 it added Jewish and Slavic divisions and materials in immigrants' native languages.¹⁴

In post-World War I extravagance, readers eagerly devoured the latest authors' works. For those with a modest education, the idea of continuing their education was desirable and obtainable. However, those with little or no education, the goal of obtaining formal education or supplementing what little they had was possible through the resources of NYPL and its branches. There was also a strong adult education movement in the United States that tapped public libraries for resources.

According to the late library educator, Margaret E. Monroe, the adult education movement sprang from three primary sources: First, the 1919 Report of the Adult Education Committee of the

¹³ For more on the history of The New York Public Library see, Harry M. Lydenberg, *History of The New York Public Library* (New York: The New York Public Library, 1923). Phyllis Dain, *The New York Public Library: A History of Its Founding and Early Years* (New York: The New York Public Library, 1972). The New York Public Library. "NYPL History," <http://www.nypl.org/pr/history.cfm>.

¹⁴ Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York's Jews, 1870-1914* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 239.

British Ministry of Reconstruction gave worldwide attention to the theme of adult education. Second, the American Library Association provided books to World War I servicemen, which revealed the potential of patron-assisted learning through reading guidance from trained librarians. Third, Frederick P. Keppel, president of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, commissioned William S. Learned's 1924 influential study, *The American Public Library and the Diffusion of Knowledge*. He investigated the potential and promise of the American public library "as an agency of adult education."¹⁵

Likewise, in *Continuing Education for Adult Through the American Public Library, 1833-1964*, Robert Ellis Lee reveals six factors influential to the growth of adult readers' services in public libraries during the 1920s and 1930s. First, the educational level of the overall population increased, creating a larger number of serious readers. Second, the average work week dropped from slightly over fifty-one hours in 1920 to just over forty hours in 1940, allowing workers more leisure opportunities, translating into library use and more time for reading. Third, the adult education movement itself prompted public libraries to respond to its demand for reading and learning. Fourth, the need for libraries to provide recreational activities decreased because of an increase in availability of mass communications for average citizens particularly through radios, movie theaters, and magazines. Libraries devoted more resources to educational services in response. Fifth, during the Great Depression public libraries were under scrutiny about their value and relevance to society, so librarians were aware of their responsibility to address the needs of people. Finally, advances in educational studies encouraged librarians to address the educational needs of adults rather than focus their attention and services primarily to children.¹⁶

Also,

¹⁵ Margaret E. Monroe, *Partners for Lifelong Learning: Public Libraries and Adult Education*, eds. Margaret E. Monroe and Kathleen M. Heim (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1991), 4.

¹⁶ Robert Lee Ellis, *Continuing Education for Adult Through the American Public Library, 1833-1964* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1966), 70.

In 1924, ALA formed the Commission on the Library and Adult Education. . . . Their charge was ‘to study the adult education movement, and the work of libraries for adults and of older boys and girls out of school, and to report its findings and recommendations to the A.L.A. Council. The Carnegie Corporation provided funding for the study. Following the 1926 publication of the commission's report *Libraries and Adult Education*, ALA established the Board on Library and Adult Education.’¹⁷

In the same year of Learned’s study, Franklin F. Hopper, director of the Circulation Department of NYPL, developed informal advisory services to individuals and groups but he wanted to establish a position to expand these services from the central library and to supervise, with more guidance than he was able to provide, readers’ advisory services in many of NYPL’s branches.¹⁸ His efforts met a major obstacle when the Circulation Department’s budget did not compensate for a new position. He approached Edwin H. Anderson, NYPL’s director, to approve funds from the Reference Department to create the Readers’ Advisers position. Anderson agreed.¹⁹

Anderson and Hopper recognized Jennie Flexner’s enthusiasm and experience in circulation services from her tenure at the LFPL and recognized her potential as a Readers’ Adviser through the success and content of *Circulation Work in Public Libraries*. They offered her a job, allowing her to put into practice her ideas of matching the right book to the right reader. Flexner moved to New York and began working at NYPL in September 1928 in the newly created position, Readers’ Adviser Librarian. The job called for the “ability to guide readers through a great reference department with its formidable material and complex arrangement, as well as through the general collection dispersed through the 65 branches of the circulation department.”²⁰ Flexner took over the new Office of Readers’ Advisory on March 4, 1929.

¹⁷ “Contemporary Libraries: 1920s,” accessed June 10, 2013, <http://eduscapes.com/history/contemporary/1920.htm>.

¹⁸ Margaret E. Monroe, *Library Adult Education: The Biography of an Idea* (New York: The Scarecrow Press, 1963), 277.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 297.

²⁰ Esther Johnston, *Pioneering Leaders in Librarianship*, ed. Emily M. Danton (Chicago: American Library Association, 1953), 62.

The Office of Readers' Advisory opened unannounced but word soon spread of its services and benefits to patrons.²¹ It helped that Flexner's office was located near the main entrance and the catalog on the main floor, unlike the Reference Department and the circulating collection, which were located on the third floor.²²

"For Flexner, readers' advisory service was an aspect of adult education, offering informal, personal aid, free of condescension, and alive with an interest in people."²³ Adult education was essentially continuing or self-education for the adult who desired to learn by "his own hands"²⁴ regardless of his previous educational attainment. Flexner provided as many educational resources possible, namely books, to as many readers possible.

Flexner emphasized the significance of the unique interests in each individual. She and her assistants at the central library and at the various branches interviewed every reader face-to-face. Between 1933 and 1939, the Office of Readers' Advisory interviewed 17, 895 patrons and prepared a total of 6,226 lists.²⁵ These reading lists were specialized to each individual reader according to his or her tastes, level of education or reading, and command of English. Flexner believed this personalized service between adviser and reader was important in establishing lasting relationships between NYPL and its patrons. The American Library Association, and other reading advocates, produced general reading lists for wide-spread use but Flexner felt that these were not as effective as unique and

²¹ *Ibid.*, 66. See also, "New Library Office Is Aid to Learning," *New York Times*, January 5, 1930.

²² Renee Feinberg, "Jennie Flexner and the Readers' Advisory Services at the New York Public Library," *Urban Academic Librarian* 9 (1995): 9.

²³ Margaret E. Monroe, *Library Adult Education: The Biography of an Idea* (New York: The Scarecrow Press, 1963), 297.

²⁴ Jennie M. Flexner, *Circulation Work in Public Libraries* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1927), 186.

²⁵ Renee Feinberg, "Jennie Flexner and the Readers' Advisory Services at the New York Public Library," *Urban Academic Librarian* 9 (1995): 13.

personalized lists for individual readers. Her process was labor intensive but, for Flexner, it was worth the effort.

Franklin Hopper expected patrons to seek advice for more casual reading needs, and when the Office of Readers' Advisory Services opened in early March 1929 those were the kind of readers Flexner encountered. However, after Tuesday October 29, 1929, and the following years of the Great Depression, readers began seeking more practical and technical training books and reading lists. Many of Flexner's early patrons were young professionals, wealthy businessmen, and bored housewives seeking books on culturally relevant topics such as literature, art, philosophy, psychology, history, and travel. After the Stock Market crash, "the shift in reading [went toward] books giving practical information on all sorts of useful occupations, from rabbit farming and house painting to traffic management, or ... economics and international affairs."²⁶ Even when patrons asked for casual or recreational reading they reflected more serious motivations. The books helped "preserve morale" or "fight inertia" or were "substitutes for more inaccessible means of relaxation."²⁷

Flexner engaged and challenged other librarians and institutions on a national level during her tenure at NYPL. As an active member of the American Library Association she chaired the Committee to Aid Refugee Librarians at the height of Hitler's reign in Germany. She appealed to American libraries to hire European librarians-in-exile from nations suffering under Nazi oppression and persecution. Some libraries, public and academic, dismissed her appeals stating that many of the European librarians were overqualified because of their advanced education. In her report to the American Library Association in 1941, Flexner wrote, "[T]hese people should be employed just as American born librarians are because of their abilities to make special contributions for particular jobs. Their language equipment is one of their greatest assets as it is large and varied."²⁸ Flexner felt the committee should have been more

²⁶ Jennie M. Flexner, *New Experiences with Books*, *Journal of Adult Education* 7 (1935): 413.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Jennie M. Flexner, *Board and Committee Reports: Refugee Librarians*, *American Library Association Bulletin* 35 (1941): 645.

successful than it was but of the fifty-seven applications from European refugees, twenty-eight completed one year of education in American Library Association-accredited schools, five completed at least one course, and, of these thirty-five enrolled in library school, seven found permanent employment.²⁹ Flexner's inspiration and motivation for refugee aid may have come from her Uncle Abraham who founded the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton University and placed European refugee intellectuals there. It also may have come through an acquaintance, Alvin S. Johnson, founder and president of The New School for Social Research, who recognized early the devastation Hitler would cause European intellectuals and scholars, therefore, he aggressively lobbied the U. S. government and universities to employ these intellectual émigrés before they were censored or worse under the Nazi regime.³⁰ Johnson recognized Flexner in his written contribution to adult education in public libraries in his influential work, *The Public Library—A People's University*.³¹

Also in 1941, Flexner chaired the American Library Association's Round Table on Work with the Foreign Born. She respected any reader who had a personal desire to learn through books but she especially showed compassion to immigrants, usually whose first language was not English, knowing that her descendents were in a similar position only two generations previous. Flexner recognized that the new wave of immigrants of the 1930s was much different than her grandparents' generation.

These refugees are all different, ... [t]his migration is not the result of generations of steady mistreatment, the achievement of desire often painfully accomplished. Most of the new émigrés had never thought of leaving the places where they lived with more or less comfort and success. ... Almost always their books have had to be left behind by hundreds of thousands, often destroyed. Since, in contrast to the earlier waves of immigration, these are almost always

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 644.

³⁰ For more see, Laura Fermi, *Illustrious Immigrants: The Intellectual Migration from Europe, 1930-41* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968) and Claus-Dieter Krohn, *Intellectuals in Exile: Refugee Scholars and the New School for Social Research*, trans. Rita and Robert Kimber (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1993).

³¹ Alvin S. Johnson, *The Public Library—A People's University* (New York: American Association for Adult Education, 1938).

educated and cultured, often scholarly people, the public library offers them, as one man said, their ‘first real touch of freedom.’³²

Flexner wrote several speeches, articles, and books about library services, especially readers’ advisory services. *Readers’ Advisers at Work: A Survey of Development in the New York Public Library*, co-authored with Bryon C. Hopkins, described the creation, evolution, and history of the Readers’ Advisory Services of NYPL.³³ *A Readers’ Advisory Service*, co-authored with Sigrid A. Edge, discussed how public libraries can implement their own readers’ advisory service.³⁴ According to her NYPL co-worker, Esther Johnston, *Making Books Work: A Guide to the Use of Libraries* was Flexner’s proudest written achievement. It was written for the general reader and user of libraries.³⁵

Flexner also promoted readers’ services through a variety of innovative media outreach opportunities. In 1935, NBC radio aired a program, “America’s Town Meeting of the Air,” to whom Flexner supplied the program with a weekly reading list.³⁶ She was involved in several reading discussion groups including the original Great Books Group and the Book Mobilization Committee that prepared a list of fifty books to promote the efforts of World War II. She chaired the Library Committee of the Council on Books in Wartime and selected about 500 titles sent to Allied prisoners in German camps from the War Prisoners Aid of the YMCA.³⁷

³² Jennie M. Flexner, *Readers’ Advisory Work with the New Émigré*, *Library Journal* 66 (1941): 593.

³³ Jennie M. Flexner and Byron C. Hopkins, *Readers’ Advisers at Work: A Survey of Development in the New York Public Library* (New York: American Association for Adult Education, 1941).

³⁴ Jennie M. Flexner and Sigrid A Edge, *A Readers’ Advisory Service* (New York: American Association for Adult Education, 1934).

³⁵ Jennie M. Flexner, *Making Books Work: A Guide to the Use of Libraries* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1943).

³⁶ James S. Fishkin, *The Voice of the People: Public Opinion and Democracy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 136.

³⁷ Esther Johnston, *Pioneering Leaders in Librarianship*, ed. Emily M. Danton (Chicago: American Library Association, 1953), 71.

Jennie Flexner believed in books and their power to transform an individual's educational life. She believed if men and women desired and determined to learn and had resources, in the form of books, at their disposal they could reach their educational and reading goals. She proclaimed,

All that librarians ask is that they be provided first with books and enough of them and next with the tools that will enable them to accomplish their purpose: to help men find the books they need in order that they may live more fully and intelligently. For, in the words of Aldous Huxley, 'Every man who knows how to read has it in his power to magnify himself, to multiply the ways in which he exists, to make his life full, significant, and interesting.'³⁸

Jennie Flexner desired to know more everyday. She learned from her family, friends, teachers, and work, but, possibly most of all, through books. She shared this thirst for knowledge to countless others, and then showed them how to quench that thirst. She willingly helped all who wanted to learn and know more regardless of how much they currently knew. She knew there was much to learn and would always be more to learn. She worked in perhaps the greatest public library in the world, then and now, housing more books than one could read in numerous lifetimes. Flexner knew, however, that within those miles of books there was at least one for every reader.

Jennie Maas Flexner died on November 17, 1944 at the age of 62. One month later at her memorial service, Morse A. Cartwright, director of the American Association for Adult Education, delivered the main address, stating that Flexner was "an educator first and a librarian second" and that "[b]ooks to her were means to the end of helping the other fellow, particularly the fellow to whom life had been cruel and unjust."³⁹ A Louisville newspaper obituary read, "She saw education, and education through books, as the solution to certain of their most knotty problems," and *The New York Times'* obituary stated that "her greatest contribution was a ready and effective sympathy for all efforts to bring books and people together."⁴⁰

³⁸ Jennie M. Flexner, "New Experiences with Books," *Journal of Adult Education* 7 (1935): 413.

³⁹ Renee Feinberg, "Jennie Flexner and the Readers' Advisory Services at the New York Public Library," *Urban Academic Librarian* 9 (1995): 14.

⁴⁰ Ibid.