

## LIFE BY THE BOOK

By Kristianne Huntsberger

» I spot **Nancy Pearl** checking out a book as I enter the brightly lit atrium at the heart of Seattle's Central Library, within the building's famously angular glass-and-steel exterior. A newspaper review has inspired Pearl to track down *The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee* by David Treuer to see how this book frames Native American history since 1890 as a story of resilience rather than mere tragedy.

Pearl knows well the power of reviews and recommendations. "Once a librarian, always a librarian," says Pearl, now seated beside me at a library table. She has spent a good part of her life recommending books to others—as a beloved librarian and, more recently, as an author of books about books (the best-selling "Book Lust" series) and as a regular contributor to NPR's *Morning Edition*. A frequent speaker to literacy organizations and library groups, Pearl also is the author of the 2017 novel *George and Lizzie*. She was the Library Journal Librarian of the Year in 2011, several years after she retired from her position as executive director of the Washington Center for the Book at the Seattle Public Library. And

she was the model and inspiration for the Librarian Action Figure produced by Seattle gift-and-novelty retailer Archie McPhee.

Most librarians aren't cast as action figures, and Pearl's sensibilities sometimes also break from what you might expect of someone in her field. She doesn't believe in conventional book genres, and she isn't averse to skipping to the last page of a mystery or to dropping a book that doesn't get her attention early. She can usually tell by the first paragraph if a book is a match for her. "It's like falling in love," she says. "Your heart beats faster, and everything is just so clear. I'll start a book, and it'll be so good, I'll just feel like, *I can't read it now—I just want to hold it in my hand*," she says, and starts to blush. "It's so romantic."

Pearl knew of her deep love for books and even her life's calling by age 10. "There wasn't really a runner-up," she says. "I was determined to be a librarian."



Nancy Pearl.

Much of this early commitment was thanks to the devoted staff of Detroit Public Library's Parkman Branch near Pearl's childhood home. They made her feel welcome and appreciated.

"The children's librarian there recognized my hunger to read and to escape into the pages of a book. She gave me the world."

Pearl's own first librarian job, with Detroit Public Library's bookmobile, sealed the deal. And, after time off to start a family, and a move to Tulsa, where she worked for nine years in a bookstore, she felt drawn to return to the library. She became a librarian again, in Tulsa.

Pearl started at the Seattle Public Library in 1993. In 1998, she helped launch Seattle Reads, a program that has since been adapted in cities around the world. This initiative began with a question she and her colleagues were asking: "What if all Seattle residents read the same book?" The program provided community members a chance to meet and discuss big ideas in the context of a story, starting with discussions of coping with loss, spawned by Russell Banks' *The Sweet Hereafter*.

To Pearl, a library is a "People's University," a place for all people to learn. As libraries face changing circumstances, they have stepped up to provide social assistance to patrons in need. Pearl respects this, and also feels the original mission of libraries should be kept essential.

"The library is the only institution where you can walk inside—whoever you are—and lose yourself in the pages of a book ... and find yourself in the pages of a book." ✕

### SPRINGTIME SUGGESTIONS

#### National Library Week

is April 7–13, and National Library Workers Day is April 9. Of course, libraries and librarians can be honored year-round. The best way to show love for your local library, says Nancy Pearl, is to use it. Here are some books she recommends:

- *American Spy*, by Lauren Wilkinson: "It's 1986; you're an African American woman; you're an FBI agent; and you're sent to West Africa for nefarious and questionable



reasons—this novel has quite the setup."

- *The Library Book*, by Susan Orlean: "Orlean can make any subject fascinating, whether it's orchids, Rin Tin Tin or—in this case—the Los Angeles Public Library. Just trust me on this."

- *Ninety-Nine Glimpses of Princess Margaret*, by Craig Brown: "If you know that a good biography has almost as much to do with its author as its subject, and you loved *The Crown* on Netflix, then you will enjoy this lively work by Brown, an acclaimed English critic and satirist."