

THE LIBRARIAN

Methods of preservation.

BY ROBERT DAWSON

The Librarian rolled slowly through the stacks, its rubber treads making no sound. Its side cameras scanned the spines of the books, 100 call numbers every second. One book — a hardback copy of *Murder on the Orient Express*, last borrowed five years ago — was upside down and shelved out of order. The Librarian stopped, took the book from the shelf, and replaced it, right-way-up, in its proper location.

It made a U-turn into the next aisle. Its way was blocked by a small human, estimated age about 12, probably male. He was studying the spines intently, moving his lips very slightly as he read the titles.

“Can I help you find anything?” the Librarian asked.

“Do you have any of these?” He held out a much-read copy of *R is for Rocket*, and turned it towards the Librarian. The book was open very near the front, at a long column of titles, each centred on its line.

“Ray Bradbury?” the Librarian asked. “Up on the top shelf here.” Its laser pointer painted a stripe of red light across the spines. “Can you reach?”

“I think so.” He gripped a shelf for balance, and stood tiptoe on sneakered feet, head and shoulders twisted for more reach. Scrabbling fingers seized a spine, brought the prize down to eye level. “*The Martian Chronicles*? Is that a good one?”

The Librarian analysed 33 reviews relevant to younger readers’ tastes. “Very good.”

“Uh, thanks.” He walked quickly over to a chair by the window and began to read.

The Librarian went back to checking the shelves.

With every year that passed, fewer books were read or borrowed. The Librarian paused after its daily tour of the stacks. Should it rearrange the books to eliminate the dark gaps like missing teeth, where books had gone missing? It had been seven years since there had been a budget for acquisition or replacement.

Near the checkout counter, three adult humans stood talking. They seemed more interested in the walls and the pillars than in the books. As the Librarian approached, they dropped their voices, even though the library had never had a silence policy except in the one room designated for quiet reading.



“Can I help you find anything?” asked the Librarian.

“I don’t think so,” said one of the humans, a short dark-haired female. She carried a tablet and a laser measure. “We’re here to study ways in which this space can be repurposed.” She paused. “Physical storage of books is unnecessary in this century.” A male behind her nodded firmly.

“If you will wait a moment,” the Librarian said, “I will fetch you something that may help you.” It spun around, and headed towards the dark climate-controlled room that housed special collections. Over the years, it had scanned every volume there, every manuscript: for such items, the catalogue was often insufficient. Deep in the labyrinth of narrow stacks the Librarian stopped, and extracted a flat box made of acid-free cardboard.

Back outside, it showed the contents of the box to the humans. “This is the original deed of gift by which this library was founded, 137 years ago. It includes, on the fifth page, the terms upon which the city can cease to use the premises as a library.”

The human who had spoken first leafed through the long papers. “But this is crazy!” she said. “Repayment to the foundation at 5% above the bank rate, compounded annually? That would be...” She reached for her tablet.

“About \$53 billion,” said the Librarian.

She turned to the other two. “Gaah! What sort of fool

would agree to such stupid conditions? This is going to have to go back to the Planning Office.”

The others agreed, and they left, their voices buzzing like a worn air conditioner.

Years passed, and the library grew ever quieter.

One day, the Librarian found a tall, grey-haired male human perusing the books.

“Can I help you find something?” the Librarian asked.

He smiled. “I just came in to read something. Do you have... What did I use to read here when I was a kid? Oh, yeah. Do you have anything by Bradbury?”

“Malcolm? Laura? Ray?”

He laughed. “Oh, Ray, definitely. D’you have *The Martian Chronicles*?”

“I am sorry. That book was borrowed 12 years ago and not returned. I could probably get it for you on interlibrary loan.”

“No, there won’t be time. Did you know —” The human paused. “That the government passed a special law to let the city close this library? They lock the doors next week.”

“I had seen that on the news feed.”

“They said preserving the terms of a 150-year-old contract wasn’t in the public interest. Huh! Maybe they should close the Legislative Building instead. *There’s a waste of space.*”

“You may be right.” What other book could it recommend? “Have you read *Dandelion Wine*?”

“Of course I have!” The human smiled. “But yeah, that’d be perfect.”

The Librarian showed the human where to find the book, and watched as he took it to a comfortable chair by the window. The sunlight filtering through the orange leaves outside threw dappled moving shadows on the book, on the human’s face, and, as the minutes slipped by, on the silent, free-running tears.

Slowly, so as not to disturb the human, the Librarian trundled to a nearby stack, and selected a copy of *I, Robot*. It rolled back to an empty spot near the human’s chair, stopped, and opened the book. ■

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