



## **In Real Life**

First-person America

### **Life at the New York Public Zoo... er, Library**

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New Yorker City—Manhattanites often express envy the life of a freelancer: the freedom, the flexibility, the chance to sit in pajamas all day and eat cold cereal out of a box. But go into any Starbucks and you'll find legions of freelancers who can't handle the distractions of home. And the two of us—working on a book and a doctoral dissertation during the last two years—couldn't even handle the distractions of Starbucks. So we settled on meeting each day at the main branch of the New York Public Library.

The grand main reading room brings seriousness to any project, we reasoned, and it offers more light than most Manhattan apartments. But while we were there in search of a quiet working environment, we found our fellow library patrons wanted something a little different.

Some went in search of love. Within two weeks of beginning this routine, one of us received a marriage proposal from an etymologist claiming "independent wealth." Well, to be accurate, it began as a proposal to accompany the gentleman to Tahiti and then when she balked, he suggested matrimony first.

The other received a rather creepy Yahoo email from an unknown suitor who suggested she was "pretty" and he "knew" she was "smart." The library's security cameras were employed to solve this problem.

Another middle-aged gentleman tried to elicit help from both of us on separate occasions. He told one of us that he was blind and needed assistance saving his work onto a computer disk. Yet in the weeks that followed, we noticed that he seemed to have no problem selecting only young, attractive women to help him with his technical problems.

Of course, not everyone was looking to us for love. A respectable looking gentleman showed up in a three-piece suit and spent eight hours surfing Match.com and instant-messaging various candidates. He followed the same routine each day for two straight weeks.

One young woman kept herself entertained by looking at photos of herself until closing time. There was no one else in the photos, you understand. Another man had placed an illustration of himself on the top of his laptop, a surprising likeness. Perhaps we should have introduced them?

Some people brought their loves to the library mistaking the reading room for their bedroom. But others needed no real companionship. Certain men always seemed to use more than their share of time on the public computers, browsing adult websites.

And some people mistake the library tables for a family style restaurant. We have watched a businessman eat tuna fish from a can out of his briefcase, a young woman pour multiple cups of espresso from her thermos. And there are times when you just know that there's Big Mac around somewhere. In all honesty, we would be remiss if we did not acknowledge some slight guilt of our own in this area: From discreet items like small candies to an ill-advised experiment with leftover gazpacho, we'll admit to a snack or two.

The smells of food are not the only ones wafting in the air. A friend once told me that the New York Public libraries have a policy whereby they may turn away people who do not practice good hygiene. Perhaps, but not at this branch. Newbies to the library see several mostly empty tables in the back right hand corner of the South reading room, and may be tempted to sit down, but they will soon find a squatter has already marked his territory there. The smell is pervasive. And when his grooming rituals begin—he combs his hair while reading the newspapers—even the most polite visitor to his area makes a hasty exit.

Don't get us wrong: The New York Public Library is a valuable city resource and we're thankful for the books, the Internet access and the escape from our own apartments that it offered us. In the two years we spent at 42<sup>nd</sup> Street and Fifth Avenue, we finished our respective projects and embarked on new ones. The librarians are endlessly patient and helpful, and the security guards always have a kind greeting.

It's just that it's a little different from your usual Manhattan corporate office. Sure, there's plenty of intra-office drama, but it has ended more than once in the use of handcuffs. Like in any cubicle situation, the volume of conversation is always an issue—technically cell phones are not allowed in the library of course, but... “excuse me, this is important!”

Unlike the investment banks and law firms in midtown, we found our working hours were pretty reasonable. The librarians actually made us leave each day after about eight

hours, sometimes turning off the lights while we were still there. We even had Mondays off (when the library's closed due to budget cuts).

Where others might revel in the water cooler conversation with a colleague, we had a chat with the young man who had bullet-holes in his laptop—stickers, upon closer inspection, thankfully. And then one day, we heard a man on his cell phone insisting to the party on the other end that he was in the Bellevue Emergency room. Perhaps we were the ones who were confused.

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