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Paradise by Jackie Flanagan



My career began in the Bowness public library, where I went to seek solace from the world. "I have always imagined that Paradise will be a kind of library," wrote Jorge Luis Borges. That's how I felt about our library: the hushed atmosphere; the respectful and curious readers; the helpful librarians, ready to answer any questions; and all those books, the repository of so much wisdom and delight. All free and available to everyone, regardless of social class, wealth or position; free and available to all who hunger for something beyond the experience of daily life.

I loved to read. The joy of entering another world compensated for the sadder side of life. My father was a tuberculosis patient and my mother worked as a nurse at the Baker Memorial Sanitarium. There were five children in my family. We had few goods of our own, but we had access to many public goods: Bowness Park, the community centre, the skating rink, the health clinic, the public schools, the public library. So we *felt* rich. I received a good education in the public school system, and through reading books from the public library. I received a Queen Elizabeth Scholarship and went to UBC to study English literature. Counsellors advised me to take a secretarial course, to do something practical so that I would be able to get a job and support myself. My mother said, "Do what you love. It's your scholarship." While completing a master's degree, I was hired to teach at Mount Royal College. I got the best job I could have imagined. I couldn't believe someone was paying me to discuss novels and short stories and poetry. When students asked my advice about what they should do, I said, "Do what you love, and you'll get a job."

Whatever we achieve, it is by working together. We stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us and given us so much. I have been the beneficiary of the

efforts of those who built our civil society—our schools, hospitals, libraries, civic institutions—and their commitment to the common good. I want to make my contribution.

Beginning in the 1990s, we witnessed a transformation in our province, an undermining of the concept of the public good. User fees were introduced for library cards and some health-care benefits. Many government services were privatized, the role of government diminished. Health, education and welfare suffered severe cutbacks. The shift toward individualism—each of us solely responsible for our fate—dismissed the effects of circumstance, environment, social conditions and culture. But worse, it fostered a false sense of self-sufficiency.

One night at a dinner party I attended, an entrepreneur was grouching about having to pay taxes. "Why should I pay taxes for schools—I don't have any kids." He seemed to take sole credit for the success of his business. Who taught him to read? Who wrote the textbooks he studied in university that gave him the knowledge and skills he needs to do his work? Who built the roads that his trucks drive on? Who pays for the health care of his employees? The whole society has contributed to this man's success. But his false sense of self-sufficiency prevails in Alberta today and is reflected in government actions—the underfunding of education, for example.

When my kids came home from their first day of school with requests for hundreds of dollars for fees and supplies, I could only wonder what the impoverished working mother did. If there had been user fees when I was growing up in Bowness, my mother could not have afforded library cards for us kids, never mind school expenses, and I would not likely be writing this today. But because back then people believed in the public good, for example in a truly *public* library, I had access to books—and to a better life.