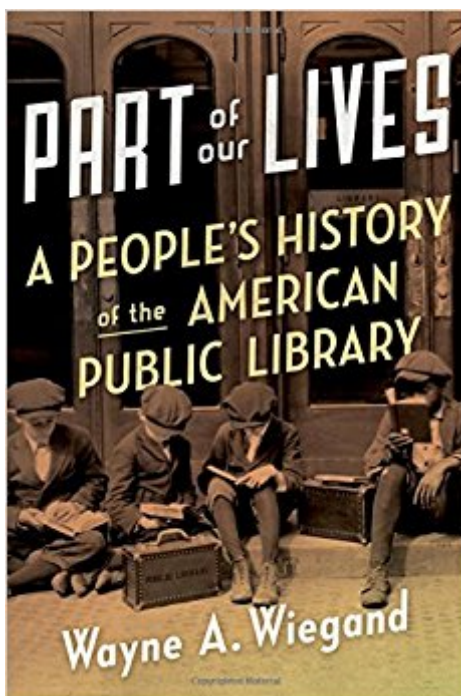


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# Part Of Our Lives: A People's History Of The American Public Library



## Synopsis

Despite dire predictions in the late twentieth century that public libraries would not survive the turn of the millennium, their numbers have only increased. Two of three Americans frequent a public library at least once a year, and nearly that many are registered borrowers. Although library authorities have argued that the public library functions primarily as a civic institution necessary for maintaining democracy, generations of library patrons tell a different story. In *Part of Our Lives*, Wayne A. Wiegand delves into the heart of why Americans love their libraries. The book traces the history of the public library, featuring records and testimonies from as early as 1850. Rather than analyzing the words of library founders and managers, Wiegand listens to the voices of everyday patrons who cherished libraries. Drawing on newspaper articles, memoirs, and biographies, *Part of Our Lives* paints a clear and engaging picture of Americans who value libraries not only as civic institutions, but also as public places that promote and maintain community. Whether as a public space, a place for accessing information, or a home for reading material that helps patrons make sense of the world around them, the public library has a rich history of meaning for millions of Americans. From colonial times through the recent technological revolution, libraries have continuously adapted to better serve the needs of their communities. Wiegand demonstrates that, although cultural authorities (including some librarians) have often disparaged reading books considered not "serious," the commonplace reading materials users obtained from public libraries have had a transformative effect for many, including people such as Ronald Reagan, Bill Moyers, Edgwin Danticat, Philip Roth, Toni Morrison, Sonia Sotomayor, and Oprah Winfrey. A bold challenge to conventional thinking about the American public library, *Part of Our Lives* is an insightful look into of America's most beloved cultural institutions.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 344 pages

Publisher: Oxford University Press; 1 edition (October 12, 2015)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0190248009

ISBN-13: 978-0190248000

Product Dimensions: 10.1 x 0.9 x 7.1 inches

Shipping Weight: 2 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.6 out of 5 stars 7 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #450,282 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #205 in Books > Textbooks >

Humanities > Library & Information Science #391 inÂ Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Social Sciences > Library & Information Science > General #3694 inÂ Books > Textbooks > Humanities > History > United States

## Customer Reviews

"Wayne Wiegand, a distinguished academic, has entered the arena with a narrative covering almost three centuries which neatly complements his previous books...This book presents a fascinating snapshot of social history in local communities, well compiled, and with a thoughtful commentary."--Library & Information History

"For impatient readers, I will cut right to the chase: this is a landmark book. Wayne A. Wiegand, if there was any doubt, is a fine historian. He is also a fine scholar and has a supple grasp of contemporary theory. This book blends both but is overwhelmingly straight-on history done chronologically, extraordinarily well documented and imaginatively researched...a fresh look at what is known and a fresh look at what has been overlooked...It is an excellent history that should be read throughout the profession and beyond."--The Library Quarterly

"To say that this is a powerful book is an understatement: the author intersperses statistics with hundreds of personal stories, weaving a narrative that is both scholarly and down-to-earth at the same time, illustrating how changes and directions within public libraries were influenced by the challenges of the time while still affecting the lives of their patrons one person at a time...really enjoyed reading this book and highly recommend it as a "feel-good" book full of stories and statistics related to how the American public library has made a mark on the lives and communities it has served during the last two hundred years."--Brad Eden, Journal of American Culture

"This is a must-have book for all public, library-school, and college libraries and one that should be read by all librarians."--starred review, Booklist

"Millions of us have come through public library doors to find purpose, shelter, story, a sense of belonging, and much, much else. As Part of Our Lives reminds us, this legacy deserves the investment of hard work and imagination that will be required to keep the doors open." --Los Angeles Review of Books

"In seeking the patron's perspective, Wiegand finds that the library's role in popularizing reading and providing community spaces is just as crucial to the people the library serves."--Publishers Weekly "[C]ompelling and oftentimes amusing read..."--Library Journal

"Readers interested in public libraries, but also American economic, political and social history will find this book fascinating."--Billings Gazette

"Wiegand is as much a historian of reading as he is of libraries and librarianship. This means he is in a position to mount a strong defense of the value of leisure reading--its power to inform, bond, and enlighten, as much as entertain--on the context of the public library, past and

present." --Alistair Black, Graduate School of Library and Information Science, University of Illinois

"This lively and engaging book explores Americans' love affair with their local libraries. Brimming with fascinating detail and vivid comments from ordinary library patrons, Wiegand's account shows how this key public institution has captivated those it sought to serve for more than 150 years by enabling them to find information they needed, a quiet yet social place for reflection and reading material to fill enjoyable leisure. Part of Our Lives should be read by everyone who remembers the thrill of getting that first library card, feeling spellbound during story hour, or the satisfaction of finding the perfect book." --Janice Radway, Professor of American Studies, School of Communication, Northwestern University

"Authored by one of the titans of American library history, this volume is a celebration of the transformative role public libraries have played in US society since the second half of the 19th century...A good read for anyone, librarian or not."--CHOICE

"I finished Part of Our Lives appreciating its readability and the ground-level perspective it provided readers A Part of Our Lives expands one's contextual understanding of libraries Anyone teaching a course in United States history or the history of American education would benefit from what Wiegand has to offer because of the connection between schools and libraries in society."--History of Education Quarterly

"With most histories over the decades emanating largely from practitioners and educators in the library field, a persistent criticism has been researchers' reluctance to engage more fully with the literature and methodologies of wider history and other disciplines. There are exceptions to this pattern, however; and Wayne Wiegand is categorically one of them. His work has embraced the 'new history' of recent decades, including the use of critical cultural theory, especially that relating to place and community. For good reason, Wiegand is regarded as the 'Dean of American library history studies'."--Social History

Wayne A. Wiegand is F. William Summers Professor Emeritus of Library and Information Studies at Florida State University and former director of the Florida Book Awards. Often referred to as the "Dean of American library historians," he is the author of more than one hundred articles and numerous award-winning books, including *An Active Instrument for Propaganda: American Public Libraries During World War I* and *Irrepressible Reformer: A Biography of Melvil Dewey*. In 2008-9, he was a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellow to support his research on the American Public Library. He now lives in the California Bay area.

Society does not value its public libraries in the same way as it used to; the library is being forced to change and seeks to remain relevant in today's different world. Yet a good library, staffed

by knowledgeable librarians, can still be important and they can still be part of our lives. They are just serving us in a different way than before. This book argues that the average American has not fallen out of love with the library and that they are managing to survive; two out of three Americans are members of public libraries and visit them at least once a year. Of course, user patterns have changed. How many children would go to the public library to conduct homework research, for example, yet this was a staple part of school-life for this reviewer! So the book's author doesn't wear his rose-tinted spectacles at times to examine why Americans have loved their public libraries, as viewed by "regular folk" through newspaper articles, memoirs, biographies and other sources. Views, or expert testimony, from politicians or library professionals have been eschewed. The voice of the user is being allowed to shine, aided at times, it must be said, by a slightly confrontational, argumentative tone. The author's passion shines through, that much is clear. As you may hope for in a book about libraries, the organisation is excellent with a detailed index and you are positively encouraged to check out other sources of information through the extensive bibliography at the back. All in all, an interesting, sensitive, thought provoking read about a very important institution that, even today, can have its place. You don't have to have experienced an American library to enjoy this book. You just have to be curious: you get a mix of many different subjects all in one not-so-little book.

I really looked forward to reading this book. Unfortunately, it arrived in an unreadable state: pages uncut. I contacted the seller but never heard from h/her. A waste of money. Be careful, potential buyers.

Part of Our Lives is a fascinating and passionate treatise on the history, culture and contribution of American public libraries by Wayne A. Wiegand. With a focus on the perspective of 'library in the life of a user' Wiegand explores the important role libraries play in the life of individuals: as distributors of information and education, as a source of fiction that entertains and enlightens, and as social community spaces, debunking the notion that libraries are, or have ever been, simply 'warehouses for books'. Tracing the evolution of public library services, from Benjamin Franklin's Library Company of Philadelphia established in 1732, through to the 17,219 modern public library systems more than 93 million Americans utilised in 2012, Wiegand draws on official and anecdotal sources to illustrate the value of libraries that statistics don't always reflect. In addition Wiegand examines issues such as access, censorship, and technology and the sway of factors such as gender, race, class, politics, and religion, that have shaped, and continue to affect modern library services. Though primarily

a professional text, *Part of Our Lives* is an accessible read, I'd recommend it to bibliophiles, social historians and anyone who treasures their library card.

For many people, having a library card is an essential part of being a citizen. Being able to check out books independently as a child is a rite of passage that marks the coming of age. Wayne Wiegand, sometimes referred to as the "Dean of library historians," addresses both the political and social significance of public libraries in his recent book, *Part of our Lives: A People's History of the American Public Library*. While the subtitle indicates this is a people's history, this is a volume more suitable for the scholar than the average reader. Wiegand's prose is clear but dense. At times the pace bogs down in details and dates. This is a history of the people's use of the public library rather than a history written primarily for the people that use it.

**Summary**The book moves through the history of public libraries in the United States in ten chapters. Wiegand begins with the various forms of libraries, most of which were not free and available to citizens, during the colonial through early American era. He then transitions through consecutive periods in library history. In 1854 the first public library opened in Boston, then in 1876 the country celebrated its centennial. Wiegand marks the 1893 Chicago World Fair as a significant event, then he identifies the US entry into World War I. These divisions form reasonable points of demarcation for Wiegand's history, though they are not necessarily intuitive. Wiegand uses a mixed methods approach to present the history of public libraries. He combines an amazing depth of anecdotal research with seemingly comprehensive statistical data to put forward a detailed picture of who has used the library and for what reason. Wiegand's purpose in writing the book was to show how the library and social change have been related. The book is thorough and informative; it paints a clear picture of how public libraries have changed with American society throughout history.

**Analysis**Throughout the volume Wiegand is critical of historical librarians for their handling of socially radical issues. It seems that he thinks that public libraries should be leading cultural change instead of responding to it. (Something government entities rarely, if ever, do.) However, at the same time, he critiques librarians for attempting to be cultural leaders through selecting some literature over others. Attempts to encourage higher rates non-fiction reading are frowned on, though Wiegand approves of attempts to liberalize sexual mores. The reluctance to accept the role of a public institution as reactive instead of cutting edge institution is consistent throughout. Wiegand addresses it toward the end of the volume, but his analysis of the reality of a publicly funded institution as lagging culture comes too late and does not reflect a fully-considered analysis of the history of the history he is recounting. A major theme in this

work is the balance between selection and censorship by librarians. Wiegand documents the tension between attempts to meet the demands for decency and the free exploration of ideas. While there were certainly abuses, Wiegand seems to come down to heavily on those that were responding to the (at the time) reasonable demands from library patrons for some items to be kept out of reach of children. Still, his point about the lengths some librarians went to keep the wrong books out of certain hands is well-taken. There is a difference between taking measures to ensure age appropriate materials are available and blocking access to challenging ideas. At the same time, Wiegand seems to accept the restriction of Little Sambo while criticizing the censoring of sexually explicit books; it seems like the definition of censoring depends on whether the content meets contemporary societal standards. Wiegand's ideological musings could have been better developed and his perspective reflects a significant bias. His development, exploration, and explanation of the history itself, however, is phenomenal. This is an outstanding piece of historical writing. Wiegand demonstrates an understanding of the subject matter that is the result of a lifetime of study. From that perspective this is a masterpiece that deserves to be read and should be a landmark work on this subject for years to come. I certainly have a greater appreciation of the public library system as a result of reading the volume. Note: A gratis review copy was provided by the publisher with no expectation of a positive review. A version of this review was previously published at [www.EthicsAndCulture.com](http://www.EthicsAndCulture.com)

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