

## The Bookshop, Dujiangyan Zhongshuge

I'm drowning.

Overstimulated.

Overwhelmed.

Too much choice.

Too much colour.

Too much silent noise.

It's delicious.

The smell of fresh print.

The variety.

The ease of access.

The timeless invitation to browse.

The absence of mind-distracting music.

It's lonely.

Mega-mall in tome.

No assistant.

No warm passing of the day over a till.

No curator to explain creator.

Coldly neat and efficient.

It's so clever.

Mirror and marble.

Ancient and modern.

Draughtsman and dam.

Playwright and paper.

Water conservation and written conversation.

## The Book Shop

Jane had read about the shop. It was unique in its shape, styling and design, she must see it.

She hesitated at the doorway. It looked enormous in the photograph, but surely this frontage belonged to a much smaller place.

Hoping she was in the right place, Jane stepped inside and was immediately overwhelmed with the shapes, colours and vastness of the contents.

As she hesitated, a voice called out, "It's OK, come in and browse. We have a great selection. Any help, just call,"

Taking her first tentative step, Jane realised that the floor was not as slippery as it appeared. She was rather glad that she was wearing trousers and not displaying her underwear in the reflection, and doubly glad when she saw infinite copies of herself in the mirrored ceiling. Imagine pictures of your knickers going back and forth to eternity; a totally new definition of upskirting.

She walked forwards and under the first archway and round the pillar, touching the book spines as she went. So many stories; millions of words. The myriad colours dazzled. Were the books selected for colourful covers or was it happenstance, a joyful accident?

The further she quested, the less answers she had.

Reaching the mirrored outer wall gave a clue, an inkling perhaps, about the trickery in the design; the reflections a profusion of many, many book racks in many niches.

Jane decided to climb the spiral staircase to check if there really was a second floor. She trailed her hand against the central pillar. As she rose higher, they were not books but the appearance of books. She smiled as she began to grasp the many facets of the complexity of the design; a truly wonderful trompe l'oeil.

As she continued her exploration Jane came upon a cosy corner. Amongst small biscuit packs on a side table, a card was propped up reading, "Eat me" whilst its counterpart within the tea and coffee station read "Drink me".

Against the velvet covered armchairs a notice read, "Please feel free to select one of our volumes and settle in for a good read."

"What a good idea," she thought.

She'd hardly looked at the stock, having been entranced and beguiled by the structure.

I wonder,” she mused, “how many there are here that I have not read?”

On finding her favourite section, the answer was a resounding, “Yes” One volume caught her eye,

“I don’t know how you came here, you’re a bit old, but I’ve always wanted to read you. I’ll give you a try.” And settling into the deep, warmly enveloping armchair, she relaxed and started to read.

A young woman in a shabby long frock and ink smeared pinafore passed by muttering *“Christmas is not Christmas without presents.”*

She was followed by a pigtailed Chinese gentleman resplendent with black silken gown, leather belt and highly ornate sword.

*“Appear weak when you are strong and strong when you are weak.”* He asserted.

A small slim lady soon followed. She was dressed in a fine muslin empire line dress and ribbon trimmed bonnet.

*“It is a truth universally known that a young man in receipt of a fortune must be in need of a wife.”* Was her contribution.

A small, dirty, pitiful young boy held his bowl in front of him, *“Please sir, I want some more,”* he pleaded.

A fat pink pig pompously announced, *“Four legs good, two legs bad.”*

As he turned towards her, his face became larger and nearer until it was close up to her face. “Sorry, madam,” it mouthed, “time to go, we’re closing now.”

Startled, Jane shifted in her seat and her book fell to the floor: **The Big Sleep.**

Pat Buckley 2024

The Bookshop near Chengdu, Sichuan Province, China

At face value it's a magical place, entirely filled with knowledge,  
So full you can feel it, smell every word on every page,  
slice great lumps of wisdom off to satisfy any literary appetite.

Every answer to every question might be here on these shelves  
Or almost visible, hanging in the still air that hardly circulates  
Among the walls and walls and walls of words,  
The arches and inverted arches, curves and corridors,  
where bright lights illuminate the colours of every cover.

You might want to stay here and touch the magic, fingertip to a million spines  
Breathe in every emotion, every paragraph, every poem, fiction and fact

But it might not be what it seems.  
It might be a shop of illusions.  
The Highest selves might not be shelves at all,  
Just pictures, put there to fool you.

And just beyond your reach, beyond that stretch of fingertip,  
Are the books they banned, and the books they'll burn.

The only touchable information there might be the Party Line,  
The teachings and meditations, histories wiped and histories re-written,  
The books of Re-education and words of Indoctrination..

The book of rules that must not be broken.

## The Book Worm

You won't see me, but you can feel me.

I'm that urge that makes you pick up the book on the pile; even though you've got three of four piles of tbr shelves.

Obviously, in the dramatically new Zhongshuge Bookshop, they did their best to eradicate any kind of pests.

Pests? A bookworm a pest? Are they mad?

So, at first, I had to be selective and sneaky, only descending upon particular customers.

The ones, with the look. The hypnotised, fixated look.

Ask any bookshop owner, they'll recognise it. That's why they have those heaps of books as soon as you get into the shop, tempting the poor hopeless readers to succumb.

In Zhongshuge Bookshop – no book piles! Instead, mirrors, lights and reflections which dazzled and confused me. People were equally bemused, unable to touch or browse. Where were the author's smiling faces? The cryptic titles hinting at untold mysteries, devilish murders in print designed both to attract and horrify the prospective buyer.

How could I do my work? Where were the lingerers?

How could I delve into their unconsciousness? Help them? Coax them? Spur them on? So that they left the shop with a bulging bag of promised romantic bliss; a packed bag of horrors, mysteries and secrets that would enthrall them for hours and hours and ruin their sleep!

Of course, the Zhongshuge Bookshop soon discovered their mistake. Yes, the shop was amazing. Based on the prehistoric patterns of an ancient irrigation system.

It was a marvel of modernity and antiquity!

And people came to marvel! In their hundreds and thousands. They marvelled and admired.

But they didn't buy!

And after a while the state that had allowed the shop to be developed and encouraged the futuristic and ancient design noticed that the books they wanted people to buy and read, were not being bought.

Of course, I knew why! If they'd asked me, I would have told them straight away.

But they didn't. So, the shop continued to be a wondrous failure. Stunningly wonderful, but without a soul. I mean everyone knows that a bookshop needs its own resident bookworm.

But it took a very brave, possibly foolhardy shop manager to suggest to the powers on high that they needed to encourage me and my friends to return.

A few shelves were dotted around the edges of the mirrored roundel. Carefully disguised, unobtrusive alcoves to showcase books and pamphlets. The architect Li Xiang was not impressed. He had designed perfection, a marvel of alignment and misrepresentation so that a prospective book buyer would be overwhelmed and bedazzled as they entered the shop.

But how could I work my magic in little, gloomy alcoves? The dense blackness discouraged the browsers to lift their eyes. My magic works when the readers lift their eyes and suddenly see, see the possibility of .. yes, magic!

That possible wondrous romance!

That inscrutable Japanese cat story that will take them into a different world; The everyday story of people getting older written by a grumpy, unattractive American lady.

The shop visitors were so beguiled and bedazzled that they forgot to buy books! Particularly the books they were supposed to buy, that the Great Leader had "encouraged" everyone to buy.

Suddenly, I was needed.

The circular staircase carefully wound its way round the column of books; facing outwards! People could see the covers, the titles, those invitations to the hidden world within.

And I could work my special charm, just suggest, nudge, encourage that browser to, yes, pick up the book. Look at the back cover.

Open the book, read the first paragraph and decide.

Yes, I'll take the book home. With the bookworm snuggled down inside the covers.

Maxine Patterson 2024

## The Library

My name is Timothy Jones, and I confess that I feel guilty - because I don't feel guilty! Doesn't make sense, does it?

I should feel guilty because I ruined my brother's big moment; but I don't give a dam, and I haven't lost a single night's sleep over it.

But I feel guilty because I should feel guilty.

I was five years old when my brother Jonathan was born. I remember mum and dad bringing him home from the hospital when he was just one day old and I was captivated and promised him that I would be the best big brother ever.

Now I can't stand him. So, what went wrong?

Mum said "Jim love, look at Johnny - Johnny is crawling so much earlier than Tim".

Mum said "Jim love, look at Johnny - Johnny is walking so much earlier than Tim".

Mum said "Jim love, listen to Johnny talk so much earlier than Tim.

By the time Johnny started school he could read simple words, knew all his letters and numbers and could count to ten.

Mum said, "Jim love, he is so bright, much brighter than Tim".

Johnny earned a place at the local grammar school - Straight As of course. Then off to university to study architecture. He achieved a First - of course he did.

And so, it went on. Successful in everything he touched.

Mum said, "Jim, Johnny is so bright, nothing like Tim at all".

As the years passed, I hated the comparisons. They made me look stupid, while Johnny lapped up every compliment and started to believe he was better than sliced bread.

I loved to read and would write short stories and poetry, but to Johnny I was a nerdy bookworm. He even started addressing me as bookworm. I retaliated, but mum said I had to be kind to my brother, after all he was only trying to be funny.

It wasn't funny to me!

At sixteen I declared I wanted to be a writer. Mum, dad and Johnny thought that was hilarious - "You a writer. Don't be bloody daft. Writing is for clever people not for the likes of you".

I never said another word and I kept my ambitions to myself.

I studied; Library Science at the University of Sheffield (Distance Learning) followed by Creative Writing, again distance learning. I also had a couple of short stories published and had won several writing competitions. I saved every penny because I was planning on getting away from this toxic environment; to eventually make my living as a writer.

Johnny got a job working for one of the biggest architecture companies in Europe based in the City. It wasn't long before the accolades started to roll in. His big break came when he was asked to create and submit a plan for the rejuvenation of an old warehouse. The Council wanted to bring the town centre into the 21st century and wanted an Arts and Library centre.

I had to admit what he designed was truly inspirational. Using the building's original features the library was a beautiful space. High ceilings, folly like columns rising from the ground to reach for the sky. Staircases meandering upwards to reach cosy seating areas where a person could get lost in their books. A space fitted with state-of-the-art computers for people to research and reach out to the world. A children's area fitted with highly coloured table and chairs to stimulate their desire to learn and a cosy area for people to congregate for book readings and meet their favourite authors face to face.

A place for 80,000 books - for me: a place of worship!

Also, the library held a cafe, a small restaurant and an art centre where people could create their own perfect masterpiece but all that meant nothing to me it was the library that held my attention.

Towards the end of the project just months before the official opening, Johnny called me. "Hey, bookworm I think I have the perfect job for you. The library committee are looking for staff and with your penchant for having a nose in a book I recommended you."

I was shocked that he even thought of me. "What sort of job?" I asked.

"Not sure, the personnel manager was a bit vague, but block interviews are being held on Friday. If you're interested, I'll arrange a time for you. That, OK?".

I wasn't sure but out of curiosity I agreed and went to the interview.

Apparently, the job was for a cleaner. I was polite but left the interview fuming. Did he really think that was all I was good for. I went straight from the interview to his office to let him know just what I think of him.

His door was open, and I heard him laughing. He was on a conference call with his mates. "Yep. He went for the interview and got the job. Got to laugh 'a wannah be writer working as a cleaner at a library. Yeh! I know Tim, Tim nice but dim". More laughter.

I left, without him knowing I had been outside the door. And planned my revenge.

The day of the official opening ceremony I was giddy with nerves. Should I be doing this? The mayor and his wife were in attendance, along with the Head of the Council and other leading dignitaries together with the local press.

Everything was going well, people helping themselves to buffet and drinks table. Everyone congratulating themselves on a job well done. My parents were there as well.

Oh, this was going to be good.

I made my way to the supply cupboard located just outside the library, emptied the cardboard box and kept the door slightly ajar. I made my way back to the library and joined my brother and parents who were speaking to my boss, Martin Smith.

Martin looked at me "I'm sorry to learn that you're leaving but with your qualifications I'm not surprised. I'm more surprised you took the job in the first place."

"Actually, I really ought to apologise" I said. "Taking the job knowing it would only be for a couple of months was kind of shitty. But I love books and the chance of working at a place as splendid as this - Well I couldn't resist."

"No harm done lad and good luck with your new job. I hope everything works out for you".

"Thank you." I turned to see my family gawk at me. "New job. What new job?" asked Johnny.

"Oh, didn't I say, I accepted a job and as a Librarian and Research Assistant at Plymouth University." smirking wildly.

Then the screams began.

Mice! Lots of mice! Mice in a library! Oh, dear me! I really wanted to laugh.

Utter pandemonium! Mice running all over the food and drink table

(I hadn't fed them for a couple of days).

People shouting, crashing into table and chairs, glasses falling from open hands. Food flying everywhere with mice rushing to gorge themselves silly.

The local press having a field day taking pictures and filming the chaos that was all around them.

I made my way home to pack the last of my things. I was leaving that afternoon.

I heard the door crash open "BOOKWORM you there? I'm going to bloody kill you. You ruined my opening ceremony. BOOKWORM get here".

Sauntering to the kitchen, there stood three people who should have stood at my side and encouraged me in my efforts to achieve my goals. "Sorry did you call? Do you want something?".

"It was you, wasn't it? You who brought those bloody mice into the library. You who wanted to wreck the ceremony. Well, it bloody well worked. The opening to the public has to be delayed because they have to deal with the infestation and the publicity alone"....

"But Johnny how could it be me? After all, what was it that you said? 'Ah yes, Tim. Tim nice but dim!' Bye see you around some time".

I walked out of the door never to go back. Oh as an aside - no mice were hurt in the writing of this silly story.

Diane Marsh 2024

## Dujigyan Zhongshuge Bookshop

The cylindrical tower dominates, circular racks and shelves blanket every wall appearing to graduate upwards and outwards, mirrors and reflections deceiving the eyes. Optical illusions that bemuse and beguile the brain.

Elliptical soaring arches frame the bookcase tower, creating gateways to knowledge and power, wealth and opulence hinted at.

Shelves upon shelves, circular racks and shelves, blanketing every wall. Books for ever, spines upright collated together to create the ornate patterning of the tower. Shelves, inner subdued lighting, a pinkish hue, warm and welcoming, whilst the outer shelves become spaceships rims of white with neat black lines.

Twisting staircases that loop and turn to infinity; staircases twisting and turning, leading to untold treasures within each cover. Patterns that confuse deliberately making the eye mis see. Arched balconies, openings that hint at treasures, contained within closed covers.

Just one person: slim, attractive of course. This is a shop. Selling illusions.

Futuristic architecture and styling: yet older than modern man. Knowledge becomes magic, available, on display, yet the mind must consider, really see it, value it, believe in it.

Maxine Patterson 2024

I'd heard about the new library so, while I was backpacking around that part of China, I decided to check it out for myself. Sadly, about halfway from my hostel to the library, it started raining. It didn't so much rain, as, come down in lumps resulting in my new pink pullover stretching almost to my knees and some of the pink dye running off and staining my trousers. 'Chinese quality' I thought, but didn't dare say it.

I managed to negotiate the automatic revolving door that, inscrutably, couldn't make up its mind which way to revolve, nor if it wanted to revolve at all. I was certainly not in the best of moods as I dripped towards the queue for the librarian's desk on black polished floor tiles, made lethally slippery by my dripping.

Chinese efficiency now reared its head in the form of one lady wielding a mop and bucket and another placing a circular bright yellow 'Danger, Wet Floor' sign around my legs. At least that's what I think it said, me not being able to read Chinese.

As I moved along in the queue my two cleaners, I decided I'd call them 'Wishy' and 'Washy' moved with me. Whilst waiting in line to see the bejewelled lady behind the desk I was able to convince myself that everything that could go wrong with the day had, indeed, already gone wrong. I based this supposition on the fact that I couldn't think that anything could go wrong in a library.

As I approached the librarian's desk, I became aware that, very faintly, I could hear singing which I thought was odd in a library. The more attentively I listened. the more I thought heard, but then it faded away.

When it was my turn, the librarian looked at me as if I'd been through a car wash but without a car.

"Good afternoon" I said. "Do you have any books about arches?"

In perfect English she said "Probably, but you have to be more specific".

Because I was cold, wet and angry bought on by the fussy attentions of Wishy and Washy, I became abrupt. "You know" I said, becoming a bit flustered, "ARCHES" I thought it might help if I shouted.

"No need to shout!" she said. "Only capitalists shout. Let me check the computer."

After tapping away for a few moments, she proudly announced "We have lots of books. It's actually pretty much what you'd expect, this being a library, and all. To narrow it down you have to choose from.

Archbishops, Archcriminals, Archery, Architecture, Arches, Archaeology, Archives...."

"Whoa" I shouted. Did I hear you say 'Arches'? Where can I find books on arches please"

Checking the computer screen again the librarian said "They're near Aarch arch"

"OK", I said, "but what is it, and where is it?"

"The Chinese architects used the ancient art of Feng Shui to design this library in such a way that the arches and staircases engender a sense of tranquillity. It is pure

coincidence that the number of arches in the library matches the number of letters in your pathetically alphabet. For fun, we librarians allocated an English letter to each arch so we now have an Aarch, a Barch, a Carch and so on all the way through to Zarch, Books on Arches are in Aarch whereas books about walking the Great Wall of China are in March and books about trees are in Larch. Little Chinese jokes”.

Now, thoroughly confused, I asked the librarian for directions to Aarch.

“It’s easy”, she said. Waving a heavily ringed finger at some random place over my left shoulder she said, “Just go through that arch”.

Looking in the direction the librarian had indicated, I saw a stairway leading to an arch through which I could see more arches.

“Which arch is that?” I said, “Carch, or maybe it’s Narch? How do I get to Aarch?”

“Oh” said the librarian. “The designers didn’t put English letters on the arches, they thought that giving them a capitalist identity would stain their natural beauty. You’ll find it, just keep looking for books on arches and you’ll be near the Aarch arch”.

On hearing this baffling explanation, I started to feel faint but then the singing I thought I’d heard earlier became louder. Someone, probably someone, as lost as I was, was singing:

“Underneath the arches,  
We dream our dreams away,  
Underneath the arches,  
We’ve no idea which way”.

George Clarke

## Let's Save The Library

Luckily, I can see Christy up ahead waiting at the bus stop. "Oh you decided to come Christy"

"Well of course Agatha, Mother would be so proud of us, she practically lived in the Murder Mystery section, I wouldn't want to let her down."

"She's been dead twenty years Christy; anyway, why didn't you answer any of my text messages?" I asked, in my best big sister why am I annoyed, voice.

"My mobile was flat, I forgot to plug it in last night"

"You must try to remember, keep it charged up so we can get in touch, it is the twenty first century, you know!"

"Oh, Agatha the way you're talking, you wouldn't think you would be bothered about saving a library. A 'Modern Milly' like you and all your technology, you'd be using one of those computer books by now"

"A tablet, I have one of those but it's not the same as a book. When you open a book you feel the quality of the paper, enjoy the size of the print, the smell of the pages, knowing if its brand new or well read, every book is different."

"Hmm preaching to the converted, anyway I have never been to this library, what is it like?"

"Well, I had a photograph they used it as a writing prompt at our U3A group, I've lost it but I can describe it, I've got it written in my note book somewhere"

"Oh, here we go" says Christy rolling her eyes.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Oh, just you and your creativity, I bet it's got a sweeping spiral staircase and towering arches shrouded in thousands of colourful books, looking like the inside of a marbled cathedral."

"You've read it, haven't you?"

"No, I'm just guessing. Look here comes the bus at last. I am freezing"

Dan Brown the bus driver jumps out of his seat to help Christy get on with her zimmer frame.

“I’ll manage” I say even though the step up is higher than the normal service buses. I can’t let my sister know that I am getting a bit wobbly on my old legs.

“Hello” I shout, “We’ve made it!” I look around the bus of familiar faces. I can see they have all come prepared with their woolly scarves and bobble hats. What a rabble. I can see Emily Pankhurst at the back giving out bells and whistles and posters to everyone.

As we arrive at the library I can see curtains twitching, people inside eagerly awaiting our battle bus of protestors.

“Here they come,” I hear Jack (Anory), the organiser shouting, “It’s Age UK they’ve got a bus up.” He is smiling from ear to ear as we approach with our banners.

“It’s the u3a” I whisper to him as I pass.

“Oh well, them as well, GREAT!!”

There are plenty of seats once we are inside and lots of other people from the community have turned up to support the cause. The organisers have put on a large white clothed table at the front of the hall, stocked up with all manner of delights like a wedding banquet, -so obviously not that short of money I think to myself. Why would they be wanting to close it?

The discussion begins, with the town Mayor making an opening speech; followed by other councillors of no particular importance; to me that is, keeping my thoughts to myself; although they are obviously very influential in their own communities. The debate rolls on about the lack of use, opening a small more manageable library in the back of the leisure centre, which itself needs money to keep it opened for the community.

It seems the fate of the library building is already sealed but what a pity. Can’t we save it?

“We will sum up after a short break, please help yourselves to refreshments, it’s a thank you for your support”, announces Jack.

As Franz Schubert’s “Strachen” played gently over the sound system the room calmed and everyone tucked into their fare, much appreciated on this bitter cold day.

Around the room pockets of conversation begged the question what can we do to reverse the decision on closure and save this magnificent historic building from ruin?

We must go into the schools and teach the younger generation the value of books, reading, learning and community.

“Yes community” could be heard echoing around the room. Christy stood up to speak out. “People are important, remember the origin of the library and what it stands for and point to the positives, warm spaces, saving energy, looking after the poorest, recycling, sharing, WE MUST save our library!”

A cheer of heartwarming support filled the room, and yes, as my face flushed with pride for my sister, I think Mother would be proud too.

“We have an important announcement to make,” The Mayor stands up and taps a silver spoon on the side of his teacup to draw attention.

“Well, this guy ‘Lord of the Rings’ we call him, Mr Money Man, a not-so-secret millionaire, has offered to put all of the money in, for all the maintenance so the building can remain open.

If the community can come together, as we have proved here today and bring ideas to see that it gets used more efficiently and fully. If we can get groups in, schools, the u3a oh and Age UK and all the charity groups we can get, to share the building and make sure it is well used in the future.”

Wow! What a result! Cheers of pride and joy and chants of hope filled the air.

As we leave Santa Claus has arrived to set up for the carol service to be held later. He displays his sacks of presents to give out to all the children and shakes hands with well-wishers leaving the hall.

B Redd. Dec 2024