

Against the Grain

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Booklover – Life

Donna Jacobs

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to death.” As the poet **Heine** remarked presciently “There where one burns books, one in the end burns men.”

In the aftermath of the **LAPL** fire the community pulled together to rebuild an even larger and better facility. As one librarian put it “...the fire was a saving grace. People rallied around the library and they realized how much they loved it and wanted to save it.” The **LAPL** had fallen on hard times by 1986 when the fire took it down. Downtown Los Angeles, where the library was located, had been hollowed out by residents moving to the suburbs and companies relocating to the malls. What had been left was a neglected structure and a library searching for its mission. The homeless population had boomed in the downtown area and the library struggled to work with the city and human service agencies to help them survive the harsh environment. Much of **Orlean’s** book tells the story of how the library responded to this complete change in its clientele.

Immediately after the fire, librarians and city agencies and corporations worked together to salvage as many books from the fire as they could. Los Angeles is home to many fish processing plants and their warehouses became vital temporary storage where books could be kept at below freezing temperatures until they could be rehabilitated. After several months, strategies were put in place for mass dehydration by vacuum drying and dehumidifying. In the end nearly 700,000 books went through this process. It was the largest book drying project in history. Los Angeles was the home to many aerospace companies who pitched in their vacuum chambers for the project.

The **LAPL** finally reopened in 1993 and celebrated their success with a float in the Rose Parade that featured a book worm reading a newspaper with the headline “Central Library Reopens October 3, 1993.” The library is now a central cultural institution in the reborn downtown of Los Angeles. Architects were able to restore the central core designed by **Goodhue** and expand the building and its gardens. The new library now has state of the art fire doors, fire alarms, and fire suppressant technology.

I think most readers and especially librarians will find the details in this book to be fascinating and possibly newsworthy, but in the end the author tried to tell too much and in so doing lost the thread of her story. **Susan Orlean** is to be commended for bringing to light many details surrounding the fire that engulfed the **LAPL**, details that may have been ignored up until now. She also provides an important admonition to libraries on how to safeguard their collections in our country where there are more than 200 library fires a year. 🐾

Booklover — Life

Column Editor: **Donna Jacobs** (Retired, Medical University of South Carolina, Charleston, SC 29425) <donna.jacobs55@gmail.com>

What is in store for life in 2019? Always an interesting question to ponder. In the short story *The Call of Life* **Knut Pedersen Hamsun’s** lead character ponders many questions about the life of a woman he meets while taking an evening stroll along Vestervold Street in Copenhagen. Each musing leads to an interesting twist. We learn the woman’s name is Ellen; we learn that she is young; we learn personal details about Ellen; and we learn that her husband, who is many years her senior, has just passed away. We learn this fact after the main character spends an intimate night with Ellen in her home and the next morning observes a corpse lain out in the adjoining room to the one where he is making use of a wash stand. “I sat for a long time and pondered.”

Knut Pedersen Hamsun was awarded the 1920 **Nobel Prize in Literature** for his monumental work, *Growth of the Soil*. <https://www.nobel-prize.org/prizes/literature/1920/summary/> Each Nobel

is featured on this website, some with more information than others. **Knud Pedersen** — he wrote under several pen names — was born in Lom, Norway in 1859. His early life was full of struggles and he worked at a wide variety of jobs. From sheriff’s assistant to elementary school teacher to store clerk to odd jobs throughout America, **Hamsun** would try anything for a dollar. It was while apprenticing with a ropemaker at the age of 17 that he began to write. He successfully published his first book in 1890 using his experiences and struggles with all of his odd jobs to guide the narrative.

Although **Hamsun** was awarded the **Nobel** for *Growth of the Soil*, the 1890 semiautobiographical work *Hunger* is considered by many to be **Hamsun’s** real claim to literary fame.

The writing of **Hamsun** influenced **Isaac Bashevis Singer**, who also won a **Nobel Prize in Literature** in 1978. This influence developed into **Singer** not only translating many of **Hamsun’s** works but also calling **Hamsun** “the father of the modern school of literature in his every aspect — his subjectiveness, his fragmentariness, his use of flashbacks, his lyricism. The whole modern school of fiction in the twentieth century stems from **Hamsun**.” (A quote attributed to **Singer’s** introduction in a 1967 translated version of *Hunger*.)

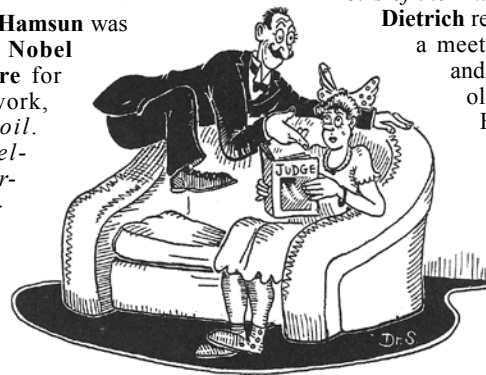
Like many authors, **Hamsun** had strong political leanings. He was a strong advocate for Germany, the German culture, Nazi ideology and eulogized **Hitler** after his death. In **Otto Dietrich’s** memoir *The Hitler I Knew: Memoirs of the Third Reich’s Press Chief*,

Dietrich relates an anecdote about

a meeting between **Hamsun** and **Hitler**. **Hamsun** was old and hard of hearing. He interrupted **Hitler** many times in their conversation where **Hamsun** was critiquing the behavior of the German government toward the Norwegians. **Dietrich** states that the **Führer** was in a fury for several days after the exchange.

When the wars shifted the political wind, these political positions created difficulties for him. His books were burned. He was subjected to a psychiatric exam to determine if his mental state was stable to stand a trial for treason. He was found to be impaired and the treason charges were dropped. Then in 1949 **Hamsun** wrote his final book — maybe as a testament to an improved mental facility.

Now life is calling me back to *The Riddle of the Labyrinth: The Quest to Crack an Ancient Code* by **Margalit Fox**, the story of the three people involved with the discovery and subsequent decoding of Linear B. 🐾



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