



*“Um, I don’t like books,’ I said, innocent of the effect those words would have on a person who had devoted her entire adult life to book husbandry.”*

# There’s a Book Looking for You!

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I was nearly eight years old the first time I walked into a library. Our elementary school did not issue library cards to students until the third grade. My hazy memories of those first school years incline me to believe that we were indeed a rather feral horde.

As for the public library? Most children preferred to build forts, climb trees, and explore abandoned houses to being cooped up in the tyranny of buildings of any fashion—with two significant exceptions: the odd child who liked being in the public library, and the child who was sent to the library by exhausted or indifferent caretakers, in need of free babysitting.

My sister joined the latter group the day she dropped me off at the Maude M. Burris Public Library on her way to ballet practice. It was a sweltering summer afternoon that bordered on the malarial, and the heat had rendered us sticky and ill-tempered.

“How come I gotta go in there?” I grouched.

“There’s air conditioning,” she coaxed.

A bead of sweat trickled down my temple. Air conditioning? Now that might be a modern amenity worth investigating. But then what? “What am I supposed to do for a *whole hour*?”

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“Read a book,” my sister said with irritation. She was an avid reader and could not fathom why I refused to raise the literary bar any higher than my beloved Aquaman comic books. Also, she was late for practice, so she opened the door and gave

me a firm nudge. "Go. And stay out of trouble. You mess around in there, and that library lady will pinch your head off." With that, she whipped around and dashed away, leaving me on my own, but not alone, strictly speaking.

"And who might this be?" The voice was warm and heavy with Southern inflection. The stacks of books to my left and right were packed so tightly that they allowed only a narrow corridor between them. At the end of this passage stood a continent of a desk, and looming behind it, a mountain of a woman: the head pincher, I surmised. She spoke again, this time with more insistence and less warmth. "Come closer, please." Her eyes widened expectantly.

When I was a child, if adults called to you, you ignored them at your peril. "You must be new to this library," she paused and waggled her fingers impatiently for me to draw closer. "You'll need a library card."

"A lib—?"

"A library card," she repeated, "You cannot check out a book without a library card." She shook her head at the general denseness of children. It was at that moment that I realized what she was saying. Check out a book? Was she kidding?

"Um, I don't like books," I said, innocent of the effect those words would have on a person who had devoted her entire adult life to book husbandry.

Her face fell like warm bread dough, and her eyes narrowed to pale blue slits. "Don't like books? *I see.*"

"I mean—"

"Don't interrupt. I shall tell you why you do not like books, young Miss."

Her voice was a raspy whisper as she leaned toward me, fingers splayed out on her desk. "You do not like books...because *IT* hasn't found you yet."

I let her words sink in.

"Some-something's looking for me?" I felt a tingle at the base of my skull.

She shuffled papers from one hemisphere of her desk to another, in a way that even a child could see no purpose served other than to give the illusion of industry. "There is a book looking for every child," she declared.

"Is it here?" My voice rose an octave on the word "here."

"That's the problem, of course. *One never knows.* But my best bet would be the Children's Room." Then she turned her eyes upward, and even I understood that I had been dismissed.

I found the Children's Room in the rear of the building—it was small, but beautiful, in that way that old libraries are beautiful. The shelves were full of brightly colored books; in the window seat were needlepoint pillows that depicted scenes from old fairy tales, and the walls—oh my, the walls! All four walls comprised a brilliant mural of book characters.

I circled the room, entranced, letting my fingers trail along the spines of the books that lined the bottom third of those walls when—

Thunk! A book fell at my feet.

Fell? Or had it...jumped?

I jerked back and stared for a moment before lowering myself to the floor for a closer look.

"Are you looking for me?"

Mercifully, there was no answer. The title was too enigmatic to offer any real clues to the story, so I opened the book and read the first sentence aloud: "Where's Papa going with that ax?"

*Well, well, this was promising.* Children are, after all, bloodthirsty little creatures. I dropped to the floor and crossed my legs. There I remained, ignoring the numbness in my toes and the ache in my backside, until my sister came to fetch me.

"Whoa! You're reading a book?" she cried. I made a face and tried to wave her off, but she was resolute; we had to go home. Supper was waiting.

"I gotta finish this book," I insisted.

"You can take it home, *boba.*" She poked me with her shoe. "It's a library."

The explanation that this was a *lending* library—a bookstore with a time limit, if you will—was a striking revelation. I would have to approach the head librarian again, however. I made my way back to the main hall, slid the book onto the edge of the desk, and waited. She glanced down at it and frowned. "How old are you?"

"I'm almost eight years old," I said, my fingers itching to get hold of that book again.

"That makes you seven." Then she sighed and said, "I don't believe you're ready for this book."

I froze. "I'm—I'm feeling really ready for that book," I said with all the firmness I could rally. Head pincher or no head pincher I simply must, *must*—I thought—get my hands on that book again. It was my first experience with book lust.

She stared at me with marked disapproval.

And, in a flash of inspiration, I knew how to convince her. "That book was looking for me."

She made a little strangled sound that was followed by a good deal of coughing. "Oh, my," she said, at last. "Very well then. It's yours until the seventeenth." She stamped my card with a little more force than I thought was called for, and added, "But—mind—you'll be sorry."

It took me weeks to finish that book.

When I turned the last tragic page, I knew I needed to see the librarian again without delay.

"Well?" was all she said, as I stood before her with the book clasped to my small chest.

"Charlotte is dead." It was an accusation.

"I tried to warn you." The words were prickly, but the tone kind.

"Please, could you..." I paused, and this time the words flew from my lips like swallows from the Presbyterian Church steeple at dusk. "Please, could you give me another one!"

The smile spread slowly, until it reached her eyes. Then she stood and walked around the desk.

"I have a better book for you than *Charlotte's Web*," she said, and took my hand.

A better book than *Charlotte's Web*? That was impossible, and I told her as much.

"Ah. That's because you haven't read *Anne of Green Gables*." She paused and looked at me with a face full of mischief, and added, "It's about a cranky old woman and an impudent little girl...you're going to love it."

For over twenty years, **Carmen Agra Deedy** has been traveling the world, writing, and telling stories to adults and children. Born in Havana, Cuba, she came to the U.S. in 1964 and grew up in Decatur, Georgia, where she lives today. She is the author of many popular picture books, including *The New York Times* bestseller *14 Cows for America* (Peachtree 2009), *Martina the Beautiful Cockroach* (Peachtree 2008, also available in Spanish), and *The Library Dragon* (Peachtree 1994). *The Cheshire Cheese Cat* (Peachtree 2011) is her first chapter book. A familiar voice on NPR's *Weekend All Things Considered*, she compiled an audio collection of her stories, *Growing Up Cuban in Decatur, Georgia* (Peachtree 2004), which won a *Parents' Choice Gold Award* and was named *Best Audiobook—Storytelling* by *Publishers Weekly*. The author has told stories to hundreds of thousands of schoolchildren. They remain her favorite audience.



AASL is excited to have award-winning author, Carmen Agra Deedy, headline the AASL Awards Luncheon! The event takes place on June 25 at the 2012 ALA Annual Conference in Anaheim, CA and highlights best practices in school library programming. Visit AASL's Awards Program site <[www.ala.org/aasl/awardsprogram](http://www.ala.org/aasl/awardsprogram)> for more information.

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