Take it as read: your library is not an imminent threat to life as we know it

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Communal tables in cafes are far more menacing given the possibility of unwanted booty shake.



The Last Word ... John Birmingham

'SELFISH & stupid, shortsighted & sad.'' But mostly selfish according to Neil Gaiman, the indie supergeek author for indie supergeeks. No, he wasn't trash-talking the decision to remove my favourite dish, the Kentucky fried duck, from the menu at Public. For ever. Because people were eating too much Kentucky fried duck. But that's the level of selfish and stupid, shortsighted and sad you're looking at when you look at fellow scribbler Terry Deary on public libraries.

Deary is the author of the hugely successful ''horrible histories'' children's book series. Think of history as being less about long lists of forgettable dates and deadly dull kings, and more about a long, slo-mo YouTube vid of exploding clown bottoms and puppies in super hero capes, and you'll understand the appeal. But you'll pay for it. Oh how you'll pay when Terry is done with you and your thieving local librarian, should they have the damned impertinence to lend you his book. Yes! Lend it to you! Rather than smacking you upside the head for the full retail price.

''Books aren't public property, and writers aren't Enid Blyton, middle-class women indulging in a pleasant little hobby,'' old Tel complained last week. ''They've got to make a living. Authors, booksellers and publishers need to eat.''

Terry is perhaps the only author to complain about people reading his books - which isn't a thousand miles removed from turning off the Kentucky fried duck tap because, you know, too much Kentucky fried duck. Tel, who hasn't gone short of a feed for a while, had to absorb some ferocious counter-snark from Gaiman, who also pointed out that libraries don't starve authors, ''they make readers''.

Joanne Harris, author of *Chocolat*, won the internet, however, for tweeting: ''Library-denigrators, pay heed: suggesting that the internet is a viable substitute for libraries is like saying porn could replace your wife.''

Lost in all the Sturm und Derp was the original purpose of libraries, to raise up those from the lowest of circumstances. If Deary had a point, this was it. He simply didn't think there were enough poor, unlettered Cockney chimney sweeps in need of a read these days to justify the business model.

But he's wrong, of course. While international super authors can afford to commission bespoke, hand-tooled copies of their favourite toilet browsers to peruse at leisure in a gold-plated throne room, many, many people can't. Providing a safe, quiet space for some kid whose parents can't afford or don't even care that much for books isn't robbing the likes of Terry Deary, it's laying a small foundation stone to underpin the civilisation in which he lives and lives well.

Better then to look elsewhere for imminent threats to life as we know it. Communal tables might be a place to start. Perfectly fine in libraries, of course, but in cafes and restaurants these things are getting out of hand. Why, I was just writing the previous entry when my batphone buzzed with an urgent message from an informant in Sydney who'd been forced to share a table with a couple of loud gay chaps who all but ruined the dignity and repose of his bowl of bircher and perusal of *The Economist*by bitching loudly, as only loud gay chaps can, across the soaked oats about the utterly hideous travails of flying business class on some A380 to London. ''Apparently,'' B learned, at great volume, ''some business-class tickets entitle you to a complete 'pod' for yourself, whereas others are not much better than premium economy.'' Yikes!

Having exhausted that first-world problem, the table invaders moved on to viciously nit-picking ''the postmodern sound effects used on the American podcast Radiolab''. All while the table's original occupant tried in vain to concentrate on digesting a large, difficult article about Warren Buffet's gobbling up the world's supply of Heinz Baked Beans for $28 billion. Gah! Perhaps, B asked, we need to introduce a school ethics class: ''Do you have to share your table?'' Having once been subjected to a banshee child who leapt atop my own table to drop pants and booty shake a demonstrably unwiped bottom in my face I can but answer: ''Not just 'no', but 'Hell No! You do not have to share!'''

Of course, if either of us had been lucky enough to be breaking our fast in Seattle at All City Coffee, we might have called upon the Bitter Barista to intervene on our behalf. Or we might have until he was sacked this week for dissing the customers, the cafe, his boss, and existence itself. Not to their face, like a normal barista, but on his blog, like the rest of us. Mister Barista, outed as 30-year-old Matt Watson, a philosophy graduate who moved to Seattle to ''follow a girl'' and was only pulling coffees to pay the rent while he pursued ''a career as a hip-hop artist under the moniker 'Spekulation' '', demolished every preconception you ever had about embittered java monkeys with tectonic plates on their shoulders who … Oh, wait.

Anyway, they sacked him for being snarky after the fact, and getting caught out as the author of zen koans like: ''Instead of buying your kid rice-milk-hot-chocolate, just punch them in the back of the head & tell them life is full of disappointments,'' and, ''What a coincidence! You have a gluten allergy, and I don't care that you have a gluten allergy!''

Watson now has no job, but a new book deal.

No word yet on when you'll be able to get it at the local library.