
OVER MY SHOULDER

Tom Parker Bowles, whose most recent book, *Full English: A Journey Through the British and Their Food*, was published earlier this year, discusses how he uses the Library for his research



What are you working on at the moment? Are you using any books from the London Library in your research?

At the moment, I'm rather relieved to have no book deadlines hanging over me, but I'll still be using the Library for my journalistic work. I've a piece on English food to write for *GQ* magazine, where I'm a contributing editor, and another on the beauty of old cookery books, for a new magazine called *Fire and Knives*. That lack of pressure also means I can spend more time wandering, rather aimlessly, among the stacks. This is the one form of prevarication and dawdling that can actually help my work – many and bounteous are the books I've stumbled across randomly in the course of my stack-based, time-wasting wanders.

How frequently do you use the Library?

When writing a new book, up to three times a week. Less so in those blissful months of freedom with no book looming on the horizon.

What distracts you from your work?

Anything and everything ... the internet, the view from my window, the need for a wander, cutting my nails. I'm a skilled and seasoned time-waster.

How do you use the Library? Do you study books there or take them home

and what is your routine when you visit the Library?

I try to go in with a plan, knowing the books I want. But I do tend to get distracted as I wander up and down the stacks, and often spend half a day browsing books with no relevance to the job in hand. Still, it's a very civilised way to spend a morning. I tend to take books home to read them there. When I read in those leather chairs, I usually fall asleep. Again, hugely enjoyable but not so good when there's a deadline hanging over me.

‘How can anyone pass a section named “Clowns” and not pause for a moment?’

Do you have any favourite parts of the Library that you tend to go to?

The stacks. There's something very sexy about libraries, especially the London Library. All that enforced silence and slightly embarrassed encounters between the shelves.

Do you generally use books on your particular subject from the Library? Or do you also explore other subject

areas and borrow books just for pleasure?

I borrow for both work and pleasure and am always wandering off target. Also, how can anyone pass a section named 'Clowns' and not pause for a moment? It's a battle to keep my mind on the job in hand.

What do you think is special about the Library? What does it mean to you?

It's a unique institution, with a stunning collection of books. I love the calm that radiates from every stack and alcove. Also, you're treated like a grown-up, allowed to browse and take home a huge number of books. As much as I adore and respect the British Library, I always feel rather like a naughty child, glared at and chastised for blowing my nose, or chewing my pencil.

Do you think there is a typical London Library person? Are you that person?

That's the joy of the London Library. There is no 'typical' member. All life is here.

Is there a Library neighbour you dread? Grunters, coughers? (No names!)

I don't mind the occasional mutter or snort. But heavy snorers are a bore.

Has the London Library had any particular influence on your work?

Not directly, but I couldn't imagine writing a book without it.