

# SPEAKS VOLUMES

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THE MAGAZINE OF THE LEEDS LIBRARY

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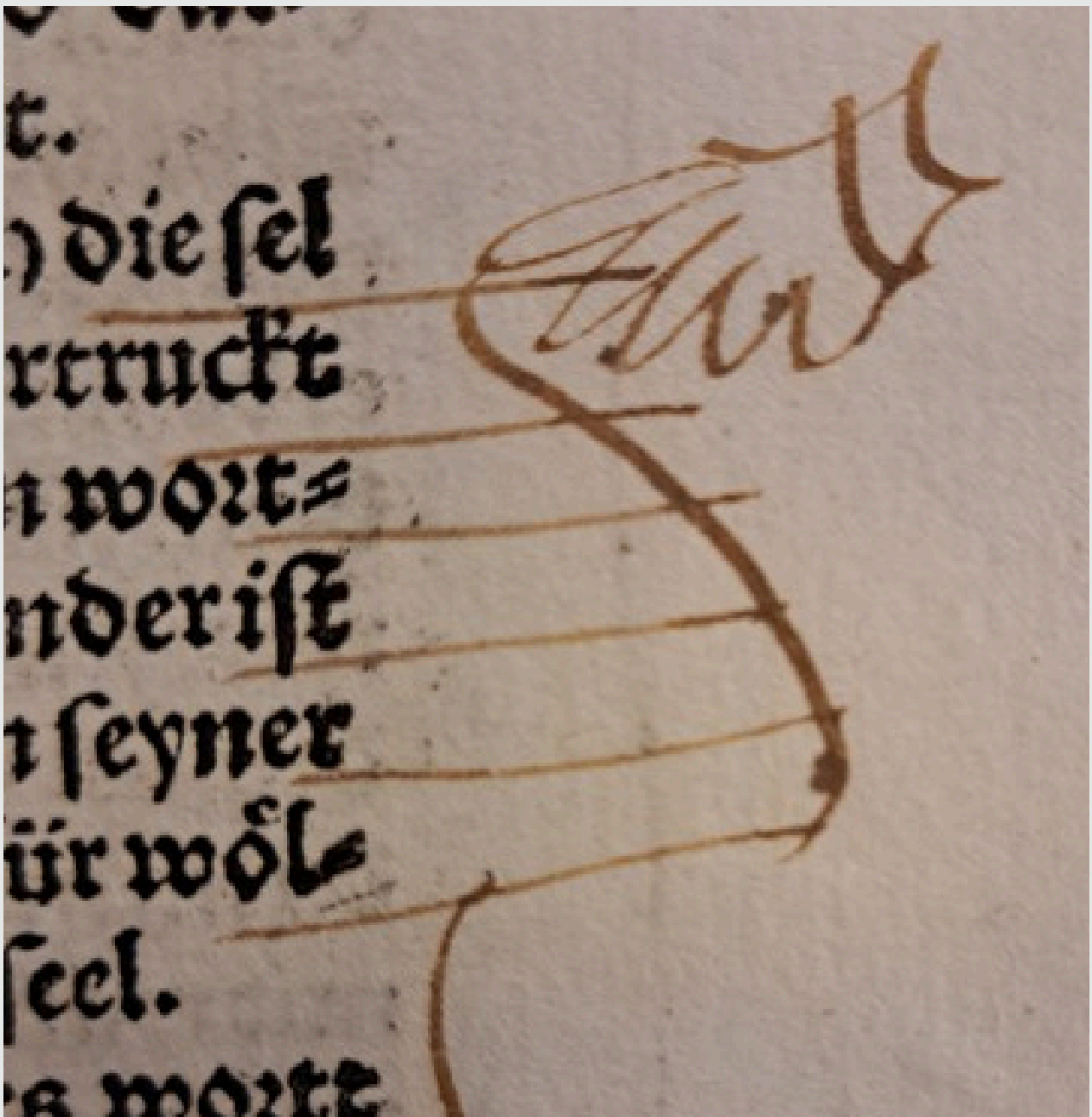
*"In Leeds, where one would least expect it, there is a very good public library."*

James Boswell, 1779

ON THE TRAIL OF  
MANDEVILLE

LEEDS400:  
WHAT'S YOUR  
FAVOURITE BOOK?

LIGHTS...CAMERA...  
GHOST!



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# GETTING THE MOST FROM YOUR MEMBERSHIP

*Let's all club together*

As a member of The Leeds Library, you have the opportunity to join one of our clubs. Meeting regularly at the library, we have not one but three book clubs; and with film, craft, and writing groups proving popular, there are plenty of ways to socialise with your fellow members. If you are interested in joining, send an email to [enquiries@theleedslibrary.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@theleedslibrary.org.uk); or ask at the counter. Full details of club dates can be found on our website: [theleedslibrary.org.uk/members-area/members-clubs-the-leeds-library/](http://theleedslibrary.org.uk/members-area/members-clubs-the-leeds-library/)

## **Monday Evening Book Club**

**The second Monday of  
every month  
6pm - 7pm**

## **Tuesday Morning Book Club**

**The first Tuesday of every  
month  
10:30am - 12pm**

## **Film Club**

**Twice a month  
Wednesday (6pm)  
Saturday (3pm)**

## **Craft Club**

**The second Monday of  
every month  
5pm - 7pm**

## **Book Chat**

**The first Friday of  
every month  
11am - 1pm (ish)**

## **Silent Book Club**

**The last Thursday of every  
month  
5:30-6:30pm**

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# Exclusive member offer

## Refer-a-friend

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15 months for 12

Love the library? Share its magic.

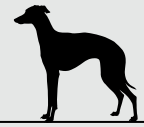
Refer someone who signs up and you will both receive 3 months of free membership.

You don't need to wait until your membership is up for renewal.

All you need to do is email our Membership Officer Aidan with the details of the person you would like to refer.

His email address is  
[thackraya@theleedslibrary.org.uk](mailto:thackraya@theleedslibrary.org.uk)

T&Cs apply



## FROM THE CEO

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Dear members

I hope you have all been keeping warm and dry - surely this rain will stop soon?? Speaking of which, the weather exhibition in the foyer has gone down well with members and visitors. Thank you to Helen for producing this. The next exhibition is on education and is starting in a couple of weeks.

So far this year we have held two successful new members evenings, a volunteer thank you, five tours, four talks, three film clubs, three craft clubs, four book clubs, two book chats and a belated (and only mildly raucous) staff Christmas party. The week commencing 12 January saw a new record for memberships, with 16 individual members and 4 taster members signing up.

We have two new student research-based projects starting in the next couple of weeks: one with Leeds Beckett on the periodicals collection to align with the 400th anniversary of the Leeds Charter, and one with Leeds Uni to create new resources for school visits. The last Leeds Beckett project on Black British Culture should be completed at the end of this month.

You may have seen on our social media that we have launched a paranormal venue hire offer, and have already received a large number of enquiries about it. This is in response to multiple enquiries, and as the events will take place after hours, will not disrupt the member offer. The offer has been developed by the staff, including our resident paranormal specialist Anna. The events will be carefully managed to ensure that the Library and its collections are treated with the utmost respect - just as you treat them.

Finally, please get those nominations in for your favourite book to celebrate 400 years of the Leeds Charter (see next page).



A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink.

NINA COREY  
CEO

# Leeds celebrates its Royal City Charter (1626-2026)

## *Callout for your favourite books*

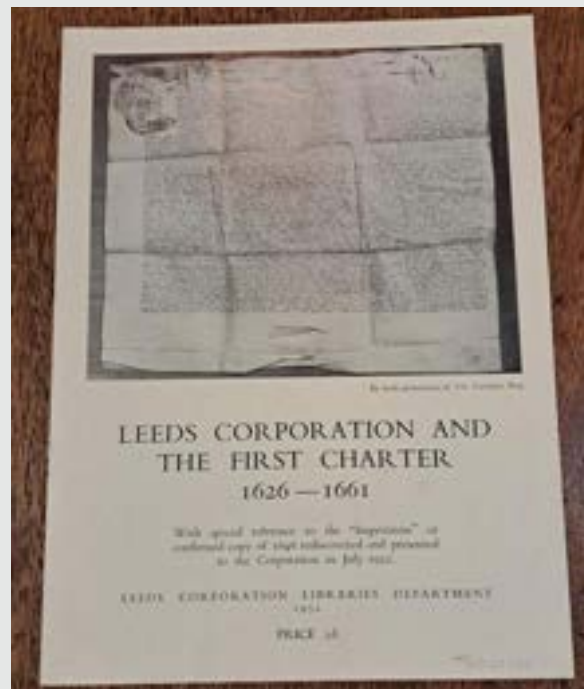
Four centuries have passed since King Charles I officially recognised the city of Leeds as a “free borough” and a “body corporate and politic” and awarded it a Royal City Charter - the first step towards self-government in the town.

Officially awarded on 13 July 1626, the Library, along with other groups and organisations across the city, are marking the anniversary.

As our Members are at the heart of everything we do, we thought we would ask you to nominate your favourite 400 books. They do not have to be in stock (although, that would be preferable!) but we need to be able to obtain them to put them on display.

Please send us your favourite book (Title and author please) using the link or QR code below (or ask for a paper form at the counter) and we will pick the 400 most popular titles, and let you know what they are later in 2026.

<https://forms.office.com/e/G634kJJbf4>



50% member discount  
available!

## The Boardroom

£100 inc. VAT per hour

Wifi

43" smart TV

Lift access

Accessible doors

Accessible toilets on same floor

Capacity: 12

## Event Space

£150 inc. VAT per hour

Wifi

Projector, screen & lectern

Lift access

Accessible doors

Accessible toilets on same floor

Capacity: 90 (audience-style)

Additional charges apply outside library opening hours

## The Old Office

Prices on request

A heritage space

Private room

Wifi

Meeting table

Capacity: 10

## Reading Room

£250 inc. VAT per hour

A heritage space

Private room

Wifi

Meeting tables

Capacity: 30

## The New Room

£300 inc. VAT per hour

A heritage space

Private room

Wifi

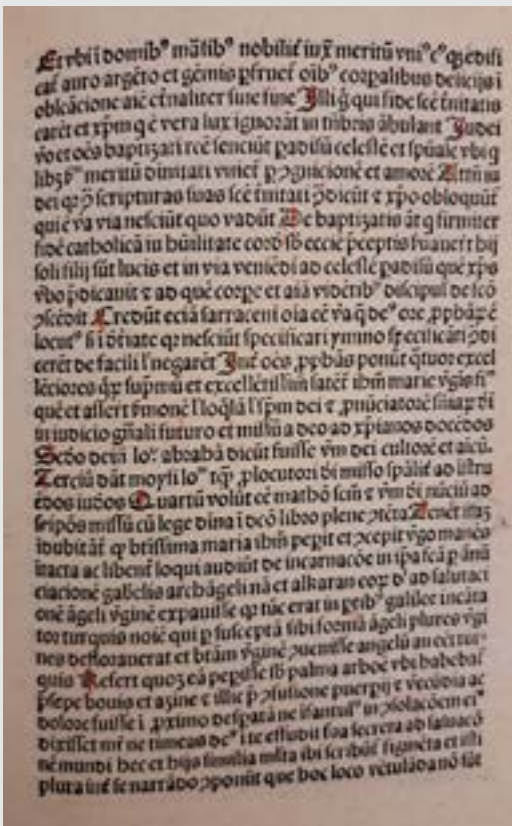
Meeting tables

Capacity: 90 (audience style)

# FOLLOWING MANDEVILLE THROUGH THE SHELVES

*Member Geoff Humble maps a journey through the shelves inspired by our oldest book...*

Members may be aware that our Library's oldest book is a 1483 Latin print of John Mandeville's *Travels* (*Itinerarius in partes Ierosolimitanas*), a spectacular fourteenth-century work of description and anecdote touching on Europe, the Middle East and the vast imperial Mongol territories of Inner and East Asia. Members may not know, however, that our library shelves can also offer a grand tour of the world and times behind these stories.



What follows is an eccentric library tour focused on travel through and events in the vast territories associated with the Chinggisid Mongol Empire carved out by Temujin - who ruled 1206-1227 as Chinggis, or more famously Genghis Khan - and expanded into the fourteenth century by his descendants.

Alongside the empire we'll pick out volumes relating to our travellers' Medieval European context, strange and magical things from across the medieval world, and later travels across Asia. Find a comfy place to use as a base (I favour the window seats in the gallery), criss-cross centuries and continents, and travel our lovely library, in weird and wonderful company.

### Main Room

The Main Room is a spectacle in itself, with its high ceiling and sun-shaped gaslights. Ask at the desk here if you would like to visit the Librarian's Office for the start of our tour.

### Librarian's Office

Mandeville's *Travels* await you here, in their fifteenth-century printed form, with printed Latin text, red ink highlights and beautiful binding. Among many other treasures, the office also holds Favier's *Peking* (240.5), a very substantial nineteenth-century French history of China's present-day capital Beijing. A series of lively illustrations introduce key historical figures, from Mongol emperors to medieval European missionaries.

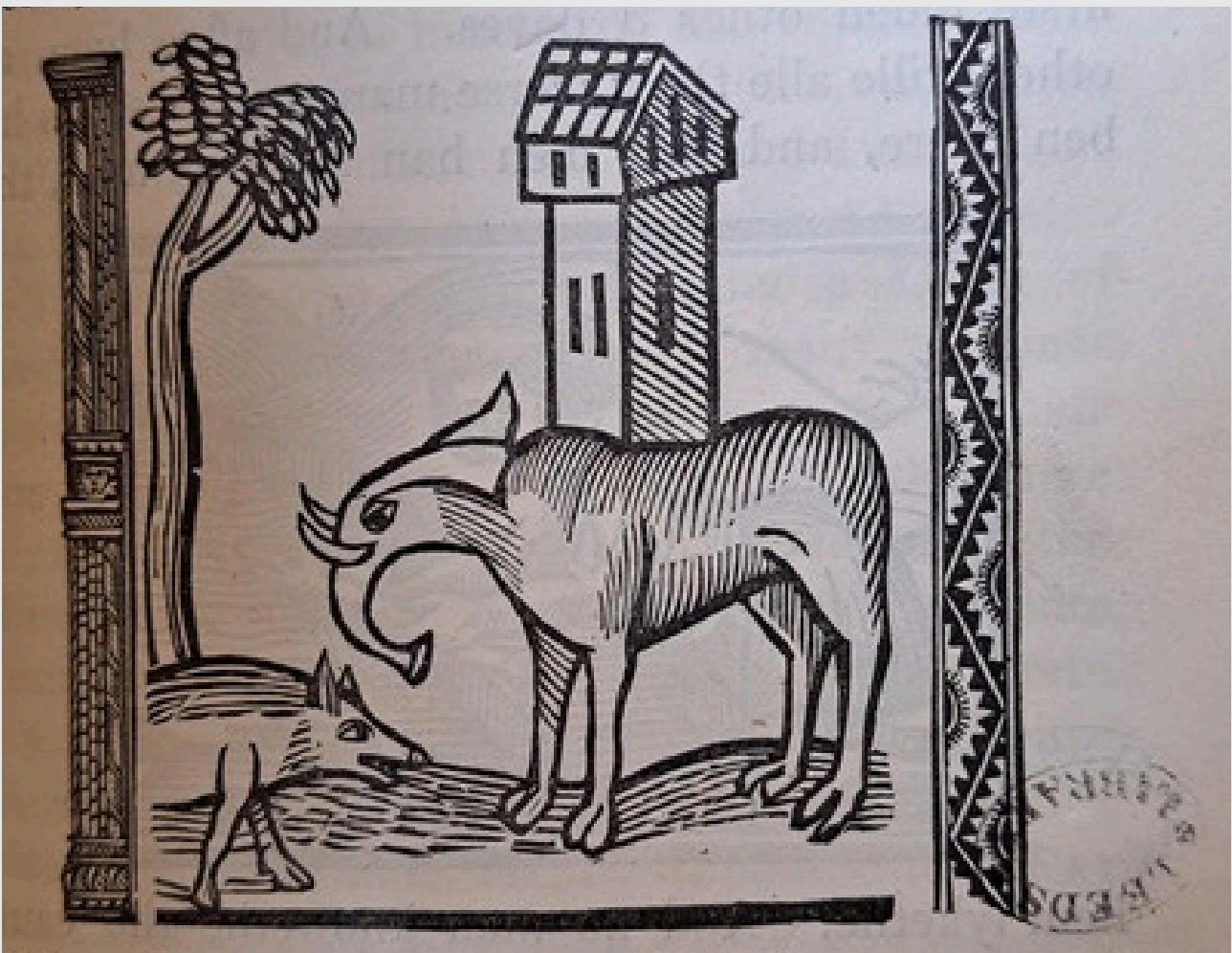


### New Room

Leaving the office you find yourself in the long New Room with its lantern roof and criss-cross galleries. Mandeville's *Travels* themselves are represented here in an accessible translation (*The Book of Marvels and Travels*, D/915 MAN). Giles Milton's highly entertaining *The Riddle and the Knight* (D/910.92 MAN) makes an ambitious attempt to trace Mandeville and visit places described in the work; does he leave you convinced that John existed, travelled to the Holy Land and left traces in St Alban's?

Malcolm Letts' *Sir John Mandeville: The Man and His Book* (D/915 MAN) takes a more straightforwardly historical approach and analyses the work and its context (it also has great illustrations). Viewing Mandeville from a very different direction, the slim volume of poetry by Matthew Francis (*Mandeville*, D/821 FRA) shines bright spotlights on many aspects of the *Travels* and the picaresque encounters within its pages.

The New Room's history section provides a wide range of insights and glimpses into the worlds of Marco Polo and Mandeville. I've picked out a few volumes, starting with Bergreen's *Marco Polo: From Venice to Xanadu* (D/915 POL), which takes readers across medieval Eurasia and explores the imperial Mongol context of the Polos' travel and trade. Igor De Rachewiltz, *Papal Envoys to the Great Khans* (D/915 DER) provides a well-informed but readable account of European contacts with the rulers of the Mongol empire. Timothy May's recent monograph *The Mongol Empire*, (D/950 MAY) provides a highly readable summary of the empire's rise, rule and context.



John Man's dramatic biography *Kublai Khan: From Xanadu to Superpower* (D/951.02 KHA) introduces Khubilai Khan (r. 1260-1294), a grandson of Chinggis Khan and a figure of many contradictory aspects, bridging Eurasian steppe and East Asian intellectual cultures while simultaneously launching enormous expeditions across the eastern world from Japan to Java.

Peter Jackson's *From Genghis Khan to Tamerlane* (D/950 JAC) is perhaps heavier going for the casual reader, but shows how the disintegration of one empire in the middle of Eurasia set the scene for the rise of Timur (1336-1405), also known as 'Timur the Lame', Marlowe's 'Tamburlaine the Great' (Marlowe, C. (1826) *The works of Christopher Marlowe*, 3 vol. London: William Pickering. 216.4 New Room Lower. Jack Weatherford's *The Secret History of the Mongol Queens* (D/950 WEA) relates the dramatic and rarely told tales of the Chinggisid women, from Temujin's mother Ho'elun to the famous wrestler Khutulun and beyond.

Though carefully retaining their links to the steppe, the Mongols in East Asia maintained relationships with a range of artists and engaged with the culture and religious practices of their subjects.

Hearn's *Splendors of Imperial China: Treasures from the National Palace Museum, Taipei* (DQ/708.951 HEA) reproduces some of the glories of Song and Mongol-Yuan art; these are the treasures that would have surrounded the court. Schoeser, *Silk* (DQ746.6 SCH) shows us some of the fabrics entangled in worldwide medieval trade and cultural contact.

Have a look at the large-format wonders in the corridor on the way to the Thoresby Room; Blunt's *The Golden Road to Samarkand* (DQ/958 BLU) provides many pictures to accompany our travels through medieval Eurasia. Marshall's *Storm From the East: From Genghis Khan to Khubilai Khan* (DQ/951 MAR) is a generously illustrated history of the Mongol empire.

Next we'll climb the stairs to explore the New Room gallery.



### New Room Gallery

The New Room gallery collections include a substantial section on magic, strange customs, and weird tales, alongside archaeology, classics and a host of other subjects. Brooke's 1910 edition of *The Works of Christopher Marlowe* (216.4) provides our 'Tamburlaine The Great', as mentioned above. Arnold's translation of *The Gulistan of Sa'di* (217.1) brings readers into the rich gardens of thirteenth-century Iran. Thompson's *Semitic Magic: Its Origins and Development* (266.5) also caught my eye, with its wide-ranging enquiry into occult practices and beliefs in the Middle East and beyond. More directly related to our traveller, Van Millingen's *Byzantine Constantinople: The Walls of the City and Adjoining Historical Sites* (257.3) is a substantial illustrated work reconstructing a city featuring prominently in Mandeville's work. Arthur Waley's translation of the *Analects of Confucius* (279.6) provides a glimpse into a key cultural force in East Asia (readers might want to skip the eighty-odd pages of dense introduction with this one!).

Next we'll head down, via a lot of stairs, to the warren of tunnel-like rooms that make up the Library's basement. First, though, we'll make a quick stop at the desk in the main room - please sign yourself in beforehand.



## Basement

Among the ranks of moving shelves you can bring the early decades of Mongol empire to life through Conn Iggulden's action-packed novels, *Wolf of the Plains*, *Lords of the Bow* and *Empire of Silver* (I\*). Exploring further, Dorothy Dunnett's Niccolò series (starting with *Niccolò Rising*, D\*) take readers on a journey through fifteenth-century Europe and into Ottoman Western Eurasia, via Crimean trade networks in the former Golden Horde Mongol territories. Take time to explore the basement (to make all those stairs worthwhile) and don't forget to sign out again at the main desk.

## Main Room

Up near the ceiling, to the left of the main desk, is Browne's *A History of Persian Literature Under Tartar Dominion (A.D. 1265-1502)* (2.1); this volume, though perhaps tough going for many readers, has the delight of reproducing Persian texts in Arabic script, which makes some of us very happy. Gosden's *The History of Magic (D/133.4 GOS)* takes the reader through weird traditions across the world, and Lawrence-Mathers' *The Magic Books: A History of Enchantment in 20 Medieval Manuscripts (D/133.4 LAW, currently in recent non-fiction)* anchors these in beautiful works from the courts of Europe.

Sergei Bodrov's 2008 film *Mongol* (LDVD) provides a dramatic portrait of the rise of Temujin (Chinggis Qan / Genghis Khan); you get to work on your Mongolian language skills, too, although there are subtitles! If you're still curious about the languages of Eastern Eurasia, Lindqvist's *China: Empire of Living Symbols (D411 LIN)* is a fascinating introduction to Chinese language and culture.

## Main Room Gallery

A slim 19th-century volume (*The Voiage and Travaile of Sir John Maundevile, Kt., 228.5*) is an obvious starting point among the many venerable works of intrepid travel and adventure up here. Before Mandeville, the most famous medieval traveller is probably Marco Polo, who served Khubilai Khan in Yuan China. A two-volume translation of Polo and Rustichello's celebrated account, Yule's *The book of Ser Marco Polo, the Venetian, Concerning the Kingdoms and Marvels of the East* (two volumes, 234.5) is thoroughly documented, with maps and all sorts of documentary appendices. Among the many later travellers inspired by Polo, Dalrymple Bruce's *In the Footsteps of Marco Polo* (228.2) traces a journey from Shimla in imperial India to Beijing, with photographs and plenty of peril.

Paper fragments found in the desiccated ruins of postal stations and monasteries in China's far western Xinjiang Province have become key sources for historians' understanding of trade, government and daily life in the Mongol Empire. Aurel Stein gathered - or stole? - many of these, and his travels can be traced in *On Ancient Central-Asian Tracks* (229.3).

## Smoke Room

The Smoke Room, once smoke-wreathed and reserved for men, is still an atmospheric space, mostly - these days - due to its contents. If audiobooks are your thing, Sebag-Montefiore's *Jerusalem* and Michael Palin's *Himalaya* can take you far from any drizzly Leeds evening. Beyond the audiobooks ranged over the fireplace, the Smoke Room's many venerable tomes include a comprehensive tour of Britain and its history, alongside grand volumes of the theology of Thomas Aquinas and others.

From here we wobble down the spiral staircase to the Main Room and through into the library's lovely new extension, starting in the Event Space.



## Event Space

Check out the beautiful large-format hardbacks here - Michelle Brown's *The Luttrell Psalter: A Facsimile* (DQ/745.6 LUT) is a gorgeous reproduction of a truly lavish fourteenth-century manuscript with many scenes of rural life in England. In a somewhat different vein, but also visually delightful, Brookes' *The Dancing Plague* (COM/B) brings a strange tale of early sixteenth-century Strasbourg to immediate and beautiful life. Over in the travel section, the Dorling Kindersley *Eyewitness Jerusalem and the Holy Land* (TRA JER) and Wood's *Blue Guide: China* (TRA CHN) might help plan your own adventures in Mandeville's footsteps.

## **Boardroom**

Upstairs from the Event Space, the Boardroom provides some rare glimpses into life in the medieval Middle East. We start with Maxwell and Wannell's *Persian Poems: By 20 Poets Over 1,000 Years* (ABC/891 MAX), which includes verse by Rumi, active in the thirteenth century, and Hafiz, writing in the fourteenth. Bartlett, *The Assassins: The Story of Islam's Secret Sect* (LNC/297.8 BAR) tells the dramatic story of the Nizari fidai, who combined refined mysticism with a ferocious reputation until their Iranian mountain fortresses were stormed by Mongol armies in the 1250s.

Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: the Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza* (volume V, LNC/909 GOI) opens up a unique archive of daily life in Cairo. Bareket, *Fustat on the Nile: the Jewish Elite in Medieval Egypt* (LNC/962 BAR), likewise draws on this remarkable archive.

## **Robinson Room**

Just next to the Boardroom is the comfortable peace of the Robinson Room, with its window seats and views across Commercial Street. Settle into an armchair and let *The Water Margin: Outlaws of the Marsh* (CLF) transport you to a medieval China of injustice, rebellion and heroic action. A masterpiece of early Chinese fiction, this is attributed to Shi Nai'an, who lived across the late Yuan and early Ming eras of the fourteenth century. A little closer to home, Eco's *The Name of the Rose* takes readers to early fourteenth-century Italy and another great library (almost as good as ours). Hesse's *Siddhartha* brings us to the origin of Buddhism, another great faith and major influence on medieval Eurasia. I'm sure you can find more exotic lives and places in the fiction here.

Now we've visited almost all the rooms in our lovely library, and reached the end of this short tour. I'm sure you can find your own way from and make your own discoveries along the miles of shelves.

# LIGHTS...CAMERA...CUE GHOST!

Becky Simon, Freelance Writer and member of Oakwood Film Academy, *chats to David Donaldson about bringing the library's ghost story to the screen.*

What inspired you to write Ghost in The Library?

Roger and Gillian McNally, members of The Leeds Library learned more about the story during a ghost walk led by Matthew Bellwood. Roger was inspired to make a drama documentary about the ghost, because it is interesting local history. We started writing the story of the 1884 encounter between Head Librarian, John MacAlister and the ghost of Vincent Thomas Sternberg.

We found the first (anonymised) account in The Journal of the Society for Psychological Research 1889. It was publicly retold and illustrated in The Strand Magazine of 1908 which had a huge public circulation, but it didn't name the people involved. Roger and I were discussing this, and had an idea. Arthur Conan Doyle was deeply interested in psychological matters and became a member of the Society in 1883. He had written prolifically for The Strand since 1891.



Could he come and investigate The Leeds Library ghost? There is an interesting tension, between McAllister, who apparently doesn't want his encounter known, and Conan Doyle who desperately wanted to prove there is life after death.

**Did you have an outside eye on the script?**

Paul Harker, is a mentor at Oakwood Film Academy. He's an award-winning scriptwriter. Somebody experienced like Paul giving feedback on your work makes you question, why does that scene exist? Does the arc of the story work? Is it driving the narrative forward? In a book, you might write lots of descriptive detail but in film, the action is telling the story. Dialogue needs to be there for a reason. That's what we've learned, everything has to matter.

**How did you decide who was going to take on what crew roles?**

On our previous co-written project *Man at The Clock*, I had a first attempt at Directing and Roger at being Director of Photography and lead Editor. That worked well so we reprised those roles.

Our photography mentor, Tony O'Reilly, is a hugely experienced professional filmmaker and graphic designer. We'll be mulling over how to frame a shot and Tony would say "have you thought about doing it like this?" And of course, we haven't! It's terrific to receive such expert guidance.

At Oakwood Film Academy, there's a lot of talent. We had a list of jobs that needed to get done and said to Academy members, is anyone willing to have a go at sound or props, etc? We don't press people to do stuff. We want people to enjoy themselves and feel they've got a proper role in the film.

**What about casting?**

We published a 'Mandy' advert and quite a lot of people responded. We are very fortunate to have Julia Rayner, a very experienced film actress, as a member at the Academy. I sort of took a deep breath and said "would you like to be Jean Conan Doyle?" When she said yes, I thought wow, you don't often get an actress who's been a main player in an Oscar winning film volunteering to play at our level of short-filmmaking. We are blessed to have her insight.

I thought Matthew Bellwood would make a good John MacAlister; he actually looks like him! I asked him and he wasn't really sure but said he would give it a go, and was excellent.

**It's a period piece, was there a lot required in terms of design?**

Yes, we might have been put off writing a period piece if we'd thought about what was required, especially when you're representing real people. We were thrilled to be put in touch with Alice Sage at Leeds University. Alice was able to borrow period costumes from their collection and to 'hire' Uniform from a specialist theatrical costumier at Manchester.

In terms of props, we sourced a replica Colt 'coat' revolver and painted it to look like it was old instead of shiny and new. For the letter that is opened by Arthur Conan Doyle, Alice created six envelopes, hand painted the stamps and postmarks and hand wrote the letter inside. Arthur Conan Doyle had a Parker Big Red fountain pen. Originals from 1920s are pretty tatty now and cost about £400, so we found a replica and used that in the film. It's not central to the plot, but it's all about the realism.

What we achieved with minor rearrangement of The Library, and in post-production, to take it back to 1884; and the costumes, props and makeup were exceptional for a production at our scale.





### **What benefits or challenges came up when filming at The Leeds Library?**

The library is a wonderful building, very atmospheric. We met with Ian Harker, Communications Officer, and he was very supportive.

By a happy coincidence, the new part of the library, includes a large meeting room and kitchen. We were able to use these new areas as our green room, where people could get made up and fed.

The Library has been modernised over the years. There are fire exit signs, emergency lighting, etc. The Assistant Librarians kindly moved stuff around for us. They removed modern books and filled shelves that were going to be in-shot with older books. And The Library generously allowed us to feature one of their most valuable books, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* First Edition, in the plot.

What is next for the project?

Editing is the next big thing, data wrangling four terabytes of video, and deciding which is the best take and where do we want the cuts to be. Then we will add 'foley', background sounds such as horses in the street and the chiming of the Town Hall clock, and music. I'm hoping to have a cast and crew screening in early July after which we'll fine-tune the edit. We'd also like to hold the Premiere at The Leeds Library, possibly in October.

**Oakwood Film Academy is a community initiative based in Leeds, providing a creative space to learn and share filmmaking skills.**

**<https://oakwoodfilmacademy.org/>**

# ‘YOU MAKE ME SMILE WITH MY HEART’

*Ian Dawson tries answering the Library’s devilish question - What’s your favourite book?*

What’s your favourite book?

What a question! I know The Leeds Library is many things - a haven of peace and ‘book-bathing’, an atmospheric and historic site, an opportunity for friendly conversation, a purveyor of tea in comfortably battered mugs, one of the great libraries of the UK - but I hadn’t realised it was also capable of setting its members sadistically mind-bending, fiendishly difficult questions such as ‘what is your favourite book?’



When I first saw this question I had two reactions. The first was to scream THIS IS IMPOSSIBLE!!!

The second was to thank heavens the Library staff didn't set my A level or Finals papers. I would never have passed.

So I decided I couldn't do this, no chance, absolutely not possible. But, as the days passed, the question stubbornly lingered. I jotted down ideas, a short list developed - a short-ish list, no more than fifty titles, honest. For heaven's sake, I couldn't even decide which Wodehouse, let alone compare Wodehouse with other authors. And I'm no literary critic. I know about teaching, late medieval history, hitting balls with a variety of differently-shaped sticks - I've scarcely read any 'classics' - one Austen, the Barchester novels, that's it. No, definitely an impossible question - for me, anyway.

So, how did I stumble my way to my answer? To amend the greatest song lyric ever written (Rodgers and Hart's My Funny Valentine) all I had to do was choose the book that 'makes me smile with my heart'. I stopped thinking and hoppity-skipped in a random manner towards my choice. What follows is an unreliable record of that skippety-hopping.

I started with childhood favourites - the first books I chose for myself and, sixty-plus years on, still re-read - still holding my breath as Rosemary Sutcliff sends Marcus and Esca racing for the safety of the Wall, The Eagle of the Ninth tucked in a saddle-bag, and still shivering with excitement as Philip D'Aubigny, Ronald Welch's Knight Crusader, arrives at the joust at Cardiff castle. And there's Monica Edwards' The Outsider and Fire in the Punchbowl. I envied the friendships in those books and the burgeoning boy-girl relationships of the gentlest, hand-holding kind.

And I do like whodunits/mysteries - but much as I love Donna Leon's Brunetti novels (why can't more authors give their detectives such normal personalities and families?) I love Kerry Greenwood's books even more, especially those featuring Phryne Fisher, lady detective, in 1920s Melbourne. They're vigorously, humorously written and get longer and better across the series as she develops her characters and the relationships amongst them - they're a family and a team - and these are books with a heart and awareness of the degrading effects of poverty, thanks to Ms Greenwood's parallel career as a legal aid lawyer. And she drops in references to Chaucer and Shakespeare or echoes of Wodehouse without stopping to explain the references - talk about wearing her learning lightly. But which book? There's over twenty, the last to be published early in 2026 after Ms Greenwood's death last year - Dead Man's Chest, Unnatural Habits? I don't know!!!!

There's a thread emerging – people, relationships, empathy, do I like the characters, happy endings.

So, hippety-skip to my Wodehouse heresy – no Jeeves, no Wooster. I prefer Wodehouse's love-stories, maybe Leave it to Psmith, featuring the ever-loquacious but beautifully-spoken Psmith and one of Wodehouse's strongest heroines, Eve Halliday, not to mention The Efficient Baxter, a set of lemon-coloured pyjamas and a fusilade of flower pots. But there's also Something Fishy and Money in the Bank, featuring the determined Benedick sisters and their deeply forgetful uncle, Viscount Uffenham, and Damsel in Distress with another sparky heroine, Maud Marsh.



Barbara Flynn filming for one of the 'Beiderbecke' series in Seacroft, 1980s

Happy endings, relationships, people – sounds like *Pride and Prejudice* is a candidate but P&P introduces another criterion – how a book links to my life. I read P&P in 1974 while teaching in Aswan, one of only two native English speakers south of Luxor, 200 miles to the north – so when I think of the Bennet sisters I think of my tumbledown flat overlooking the Nile – no roof (it rained just half an hour that year), a Coca Cola tin semi-functioning as a shower, en suite geckos and cockroaches, a water buffalo meandering past, a small herd of goats instead of a Hoover.

That personal link is there too in J L Carr's sublime *A Month in the Country*, which I re-read every year, beautiful, elegiac, the sense of a life torn apart by war being slowly restored in parallel with the revealing of that haunting medieval wall-painting. The link is the Middle Ages, the period where my historical heart lies. And there's other things about J L Carr that appeal – schoolteacher, historian, cricketer, writer ... almost like looking in a mirror!

Hop, skip – cricket? No, no cricket books in my list. I enjoy those about cricket as social history but not enough for this select list. Maybe if someone had written a book about my one appearance as an opening bat at Headingley but, as I scored 0, that book hasn't appeared. Hmmmph.

And anyway, I need space for a late medieval book or ten. And the Library has two options that very definitely makes my heart smile – the facsimile of the 14th century Luttrell Psalter is wondrous and there's the five volumes of the 18th century edition of 15th century Paston Letters. I didn't know we had them and I cried with joy when I found them in a dark corner of the basement – it was like meeting the Pastons themselves. Who could resist Margery Paston's postscript to her husband John: I pray you if you tarry long at London that it will please you to send for me for I think it long since I lay in your arms.

Medieval history books by historians? Mark Ormrod's biography of Edward III is wonderful and Mark was such a good, helpful man as well as a great medievalist. Or there's Christine Carpenter's *The Wars of the Roses*, jammed full of ideas and intellectual challenges, pulling together her own work and that of her research students and revolutionising understandings of the 15th century.

Or, skip, hop, guilty thought, what about my own books? Those of us who've had the good fortune to find our way into print have an additional problem – which of our own books do we like best? The first one? The one written in collaboration with my wife? The one that was most fun and creative to write? The best-selling – no, not that one, too workmanlike. This is an even more impossible question, like being asked to choose our favourite child.

Does Chaucer count, or Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*, especially the hilarious Tale of Sir Gareth – or Shakespeare who I learned to love at A level. My own context is important again – after five years as a single-sex grammar school we suddenly had girls in our classes for A level thanks to going comprehensive – and we studied, very appropriately, *The Tempest* – 'Oh, brave new world that hath such people in't'. They were two good years!

Which reminds me – early in my A levels I walked into a Liverpool bookshop and picked up Josephine Tey's *The Daughter of Time* about Richard III and the Princes in the Tower – which turned out to be the most significant book in my life because it led, slowly and intricately, to meeting my wife at university [a cricketing medievalist (me) and a hockey international studying engineering (her) – we're still puzzled too!]. But its significance doesn't make it a favourite – I now know that historically it's nonsense and that who killed the Princes is nowhere near the most interesting question to ask about Richard III.

So ... what is my favourite book? It has to have characters I like (though it's OK if someone nasty is bumped off in the first chapter), I want to follow their relationships, I want to care about what happens to them, I want vigorous writing and sparky and unexpected vocabulary and conversation, I want to laugh and I want a link to the context of my own life, maybe to remember that first reading, a connecting link across the years. I don't want intensity or real violence, mental or physical.

And so, ladies and gentlemen, I give you the book that always make me smile with my heart – Alan Plater's *Beiderbecke* Trilogy.

Yes, I know I'm cheating – it is actually three books but they were all published in one book as well as individually – *The Beiderbecke Affair*, *The Beiderbecke Tapes* and *The Beiderbecke Connection*.

Alan Plater – playwright, scriptwriter, novelist – all the verve, vocabulary and love of language you'll find in Wodehouse BUT – think Wodehouse with a northern accent, Big Al instead of Jeeves, Charlie the singing grave digger instead of Gussie Fink-Nottle, a gentle principled socialism instead of Wodehouse's moral vacuum, 3B at San Quentin High instead of the playing fields of Eton, Trevor's little yellow van instead of a sports car – and, of course, this is Alan Plater so there's every variety of jazz – 'hot, cool and what time does the tune start?' in the words of Jill Swinburne, English teacher, Conservation candidate, all-purpose heroine and, briefly, football referee.

I love the gentle humour and the gentle people, the philosophy, the empathy (like Kerry Greenwood) for those not born with a silver spoon or any spoon come to that, the plots that amble eccentrically to happy conclusions, the arrival of 'first-born' – and they're SET IN LEEDS, just as the Yorkshire Television series which foreshadowed the books was FILMED IN LEEDS.

Those three Beiderbecke TV series are an inseparably huge part of my enjoyment. They starred James Bolam and Barbara Flynn (be still, my beating heart) as 'probationary cohabs', woodwork teacher Trevor Chaplin and English teacher Jill Swinburne. And the personal links are so strong - when we first watched and read 'Beiderbecke' we too were in our 30's, I was a teacher, my first school in Wakefield, the head and the students resembling all too closely San Quentin High, we had our own 'first-born'. And we recognised so many places in the programmes - the school they filmed at was one I visited to see trainees teaching, the headworks at Swinsty reservoir masqueraded as the Lancashire border, there's the ring road at Horsforth and many other Leeds streets and buildings, the Sherratt and Hughes bookshop round the corner from the Library, and, most personally, the Safeways car park at Oakwood where, on Saturday 3rd March 1984, my wife pushed and shoved an overladen shopping trolley back to the car, determined to show our baby that it was high time he put in an appearance. He did. Next morning.

On second thoughts - What's your favourite book? - what a great question!



# SUN TANKING

*Patrick Lodge on Peter Spafford's new collection of poetry. (Yaffle, 2025)*

*D/821 SPA*

Another excellent production from Yaffle Press which allows the multi-talented Peter Spafford – musician, director, writer and luminary of Chapel FM – to delight with his sharp observations and unremitting focus on the small and large things that matter most in life. The title poem could act as a summary of the whole collection – a hymn to the odd moments of light and joy that must be seized and valued; ‘Patch of dazzle on a brick wall / slant through bedroom window. / Warmth of a hand on your back. // Take it while you can.’ It is this precise observation and ability to draw out any transcendence which marks this collection. It is not suffused with an empty Panglossian optimism but with a balanced experience of all that life can throw at a person and a willingness to embrace it and be surprised by it. Robert Frost, in an interview with the ‘Paris Review’, once explained his approach to ensuring a poem had life as ‘no surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader’ and Spafford is able to be surprised by the unremarkable, the everyday aspect of everyday experience and to communicate its import with a lightness of touch that maintains its cutting edge.

The somewhat Tennysonian, ‘Yard arm’, perfectly expresses a sense of loss and regret while allowing an element of playfulness to manifest: ‘If only we could take them back, the dead, / on limited release, for an hour or two, / withdraw them like library books, returned when due’. Spafford is also able to joke at his expense while simultaneously surprising the reader. In ‘The other’ a trumpet is brought to the lips but the expected flawless solo is undercut as ‘...sound slides / languid into the street // from the other trumpeter at Number 41 / who I never met.’. While dealing with serious themes, Spafford does not abandon humour while delivering the telling line in a bittersweet manner. A man who rocks up at a cricket match and loudly supports a player he mistakes for his son ends up thrashing about on the grass as ‘...on cue, his chair, like balsa, / snaps beneath him’. The poignancy of this vignette cleverly and ambiguously magnified when the narrator notes ‘And I too have turned from the man / who is not my dad’.( ‘The wrong boy’).



The excellent seven-part poem 'For James' is a masterpiece of restrained yet fulsome emotion. Simon Armitage once wrote that 'poetry is the art of absence' and Spafford's sparsity of language suggests he appreciates the grace and movement of poems depends less on their over-elaboration and more on the poet's ability to leave out all except the absolutely necessary to move the poem and the reader.

It is unclear what is the significance of 'Quotidian (8.10. 24.2.24)' - probably there is none and that is the point - but the writing brings out the importance of precision, of craft when the poet is for a moment at the centre of a life going on all around, 'Everything / and nothing / going on'. This is crafted, scant writing that says enough and, in that, says all there is to say.

This collection ranges over a wide subject matter - bathing in the Wharfe, graffiti in Roundhay Park, Putin shopping in Leeds, Tarzan working at home, brass rubbing, knife blocks - but always there is Spafford rejoicing in the quotidian and drawing out its importance with a felicity of expression. Thus, in 'Tashkent' it is not the exotic which stamps the passport but '...a pincer of light, / this prickle of strangeness'. Spafford insists that 'I will keep on jingling the small change of hope / in my pocket' ('Irony(March 24th 2022)') and all one can say is keep on keeping on! This an excellent and accessible collection which will delight any reader.



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Simon Armitage was born and lives in West Yorkshire. He is a poet, playwright and novelist and writes for radio, television, film and stage. He published his first collection *Zoom!* in 1989 with several full-length collections in the years since. In 2007 he published his translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. His latest collection *Sandlettie Light Vessel Automatic* (2019) is a collection of some of the hundreds of poems that he has written for various projects, commissions, collaborations and events. In 2015, he was elected Oxford Professor of Poetry and in 2017 he was appointed Professor of Poetry at the University of Leeds. In 2018 he was awarded the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry and in 2019 he was named UK Poet Laureate.

## **Caryl Phillips**

Caryl Phillips was born in St.Kitts and came to Britain at the age of four months. He grew up in Leeds, and studied English Literature at Oxford University. He is an award winning novelist, playwright and essayist and has written for film, theatre, radio and television. His novel *Crossing the River* was shortlisted for the 1993 Booker Prize. *A Distant Shore* was longlisted for the 2003 Booker Prize, and won the 2004 Commonwealth Writers Prize. He has worked as an academic at numerous institutions including Amherst College, Barnard College, and Yale University, where he has held the position of Professor of English since 2005.



## **Nima Poovaya-Smith OBE**

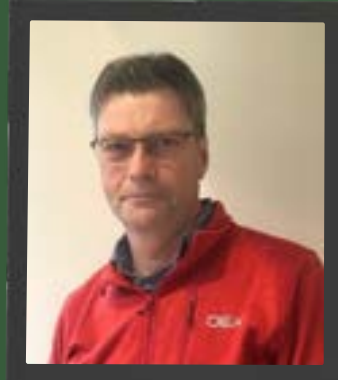


Nima Poovaya-Smith is a curator, speaker and writer. She was the founder Director of *Alchemy Anew*. Previous posts have included Head of Special Projects, National Media Museum, Director of Arts, Arts Council Yorkshire and Senior Curator, Bradford Museums and Galleries. She has contributed to numerous international and national publications including books and journals on subjects ranging from contemporary art, Indian jewellery, textiles, and curatorial and audience engagement practice. She is Senior Visiting Fellow at the Department of Fine Arts, Art History and Cultural Studies at the University of Leeds, and a Trustee of Harewood House Trust.

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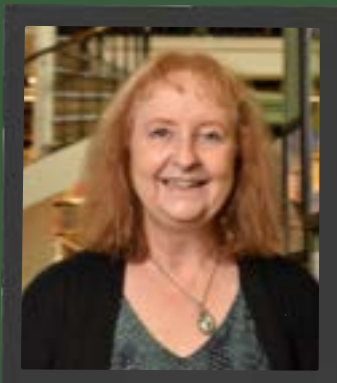
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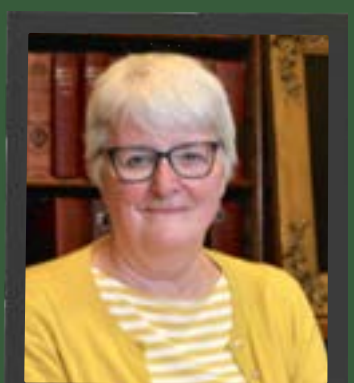
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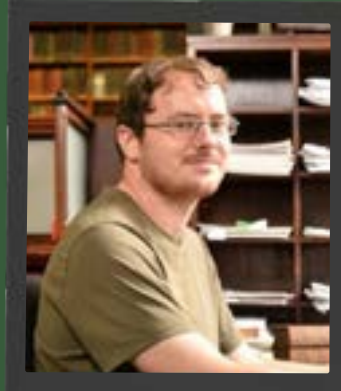


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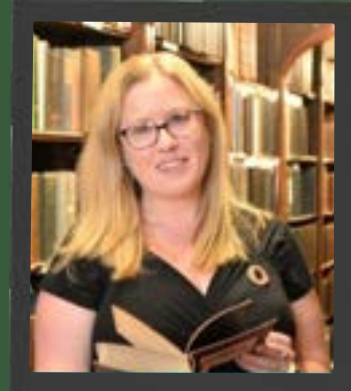
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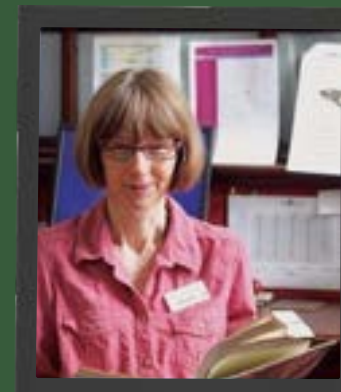
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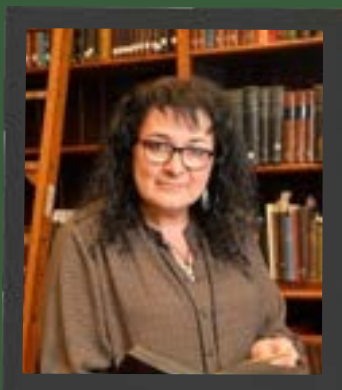
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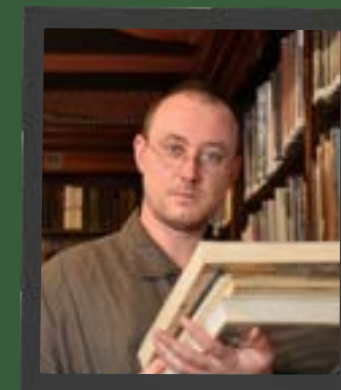
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