

OPINION | NATE COULTER: Essential books

Borrowed, owned, new or used by Nate Coulter Special to the Democrat-Gazette | February 1, 2023 at 4:05 a.m.

Ginger Beck is passionate about books. She enjoys checking out books from the public library, but also wants to own some books for her personal collection and for her students to use. In a recent column in this space, she highlighted the benefits of a quality used bookstore for someone who likes to read and acquire books while on a tight budget. She praised the Central Arkansas Library System's used bookstore, the Galleries & Bookstore at Library Square, and lamented its closure during our coming remodel of the Main Library.

Of course, sharing the opportunity for folks to enjoy books without having to purchase them is at the root of the justification for the public library. Because the library circulates a large, diverse collection of titles, we can all afford to read books we do not own. One reason I like working at the library is knowing I'm surrounded by books: thousands of stories under one roof, even though I won't ever read anything but a tiny fraction of them.

Still, Ms. Beck's point is well taken. Children and adults like to own books for sharing or returning to frequently, like a familiar friend or place. When the Galleries & Bookstore closes, she will lose a treasured resource for building her home library.

Building one's own library at home is a worthy project that I understand and wholeheartedly support. So as the executive director of CALS, I thought I'd explain the rationale behind the library's difficult decision regarding the Galleries & Bookstore.

The Main Library, CALS' downtown library and central office, will be closing this fall to undergo a \$20 million much-needed renovation. This is a sobering undertaking, in part because it calls for unattainable knowledge about the future. What will the central public library in the state's largest city need to house over the next 20-30 years to serve the most people with core literacy and education resources and services? Contemplating that is humbling but essential as we plan.

One thing I know for sure is that many hundreds of people every day visit the Main Library. During the closure of the building, CALS has a duty to continue to offer as much of the core library services as we can. Ms. Beck writes movingly of the value of resources such as books and newspapers and magazines. The Main Library itself is a resource, convenient for downtown workers and residents, students who walk from nearby schools, the unsheltered population who depend on the library as a safe space, and countless others within Central Arkansas. It would not be responsible to the community for us to shutter the building and cease all the activities that currently go on here.

With this reality in mind, we reviewed spaces available on our downtown campus that would not be affected by construction. We decided that the beautiful 15,000-square-foot space inside the Roberts Library that currently houses the Galleries & Bookstore and offices will become the place where patrons are able to stop by and pick up holds, use public computers, and access meeting rooms.

Closing the Galleries & Bookstore is understandably disappointing for many artists, authors, and patrons like Ms. Beck. I too shop at the Galleries & Bookstore and will sorely miss the space in its current form. But by utilizing that space for essential library services in the short term, we have an opportunity to enhance our downtown library in the long term.

We're hopeful that when the Main Library reopens in 2025, we'll be able to assist more people with our meal service, study areas, play areas, programming, classes, and all our other free community resources, including the sale of used books, which will almost certainly continue to happen onsite somewhere at Main after the renovation.

Ms. Beck bemoans the rise of phones and social media replacing books for younger generations. I hope it will be good news to her that thanks to the generosity of taxpayers who approved a millage rate increase in 2021, the library is spending more money than ever on books for all ages. "When we lose our resources, we weaken our minds," she writes.

At CALS, the resource of books will remain plentiful.

Love of bookstores is a different (if related) kind of love as love of the public library. I get that, and it's the reason we have longstanding partnerships with some of the bookstores in this community and work with them to offer programs, such as the annual Six Bridges Book Festival.

However, Ms. Beck's heartfelt expression of love for her books is a powerful reason for CALS to reopen its own used bookstore, either in the newly renovated Main Library or elsewhere at Library Square, after the remodel. In the meantime, CALS will continue to accept book donations from community members and sell those books at a deep discount through the popular Friends of CALS Used Book Sale. The next Friends of CALS Used Book Sale will be held in the basement of Main on March 9-11. Later in 2023, after the Main Library closes for remodeling, these book sales will continue to happen at another location to be announced in the near future.

I hope that Ms. Beck will continue shopping for used books at this new location, not least because the proceeds of all purchases support library programs. I also hope she and many other patrons will share their vision of what the remodeled Main Library should include. If you are reading this now, we want to hear from you. Email me at ncoulter@cals.org. Call me at (501) 918-3033. Let's work together on improving our library.

Nate Coulter is executive director of the Central Arkansas Library System.