REINVENTING THE
PEOPLE’S LIBRARY

Greg Gaut
East Side Freedom Library ($15)

Reinventing the People’s Library

Before our current myopic era, the public library was a politically uncontested space. Republicans and Democrats seemed almost equally devoted to the importance of the institution (even if conservatives were known to curse the egalitarian murals on some library walls). Things have, of course, changed. Calls have been heard to junk these presumably outdated sites, to let developers use the space for some “better” economic purpose, on the added premise that the public now using them is socially marginal, i.e. poor.

Reinventing the People’s Library uses history against these destructive impulses. This little volume begins with the mini-saga of the East Side Freedom Library, its publisher, as much social institution as book source. But most of the pages here are used for the bigger story, one that recounts the role of libraries in the history of Minneapolis and St. Paul in Minnesota.

It is an intriguing story, arguably more interesting than its counterpart in cities with less rambunctious protest and left-of-center mobilizations. But it is also a story with public institutions in debt, morally speaking, to some of the notorious characters of the nineteenth century—characters such as James J. Hill, one of the ruthless Gilded Age railroad barons, and industrialist Andrew Carnegie.

Grinding the faces of the poor was a road to riches and power, then as now, but at least these barons put large chunks of ill-gotten gain to good use. The library boards of early generations persisted in requests for funding, aided by support from the other end of the social spectrum, the library toward oblivion, not once but several times. In the latest near-closing, St. Paul put the building up for sale, with the proviso that it had been designated not only a local landmark but also placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Who would step in?

A pair of Macalester College professors—Peter Rachleff and Beth Cleary—at or near their own retirement, accepted the challenge. They had a strong social purpose: to build bridges between the varied racial and ethnic communities. Thus the East Side Freedom Library took shape. A “beehive of daily activity and scheduled events, many geared toward the creation and sharing of stories” seems a fair summary of the larger, ongoing effort. Hurrah for the history of libraries, and for the future of this one in particular.

—Paul Buhle

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