



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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*“I don’t know which is
more discouraging,
literature or chickens.”*

-E.B. White, 1899-1985,
“Letter to James Thurber.”
From a plaque on Library
Way, New York City

On a recent trip to New York City I discovered, right around the corner from our hotel, a street called Library Way. This street, which is actually a two-block section of East 41st Street, between Fifth Avenue and Park Avenue, was officially dedicated as Library Way on May 27, 2004.

On this two-block stretch are ninety-six bronze plaques, each embedded in the sidewalk and inscribed with a design and a quote from an author or poet. New York City artist Gregg LeFevre did the beautifully designed and appropriate artwork on each plaque, and the design won an Excellence in Design Award from the New York City Arts Commission. The plaques lead to and from the New York Public Library’s Humanities and Social Services Library, home to some 15 million items.

According to the Grand Central Partnership (GCP) website, Library Way was a joint project of the “New York Public

Library, the property owners and commercial tenants along 41st Avenue, library organizations and the New York City Department of Transportation” (www.grandcentralpartnership.org). The Grand Central Partnership, by the way, was established in the 1980’s by mid-Manhattan property owners and businesses to improve the area around Grand Central Terminal.

Walking down the street and reading each plaque was a great experience. At first, I thought there were only a few, but as I kept walking I discovered they kept going on and on. It was fascinating to see which writers were chosen, and I found out later that a panel of literary experts and librarians was convened to choose the quotations, which cover a range of sentiments and styles.

I found an excerpt from one of my favorite Yeats poems there, “When You Are Old,” which begins: “When you are old and grey and full of sleep, /

And nodding by the fire, take
down this book,/ And slowly
read, and dream of the soft
look/ Your eyes had once, and
of their shadows deep;...”

There is also the second stanza of a Dylan Thomas (1914-1953) poem, “In My Craft or Sullen Art”, and it goes like this: “Not for the proud man apart/ From the raging moon I write/ On these spindthrift pages/ Nor for the towering dead/ With their nightingales and psalms/ But for the lovers, their arms/ Round the griefs of the ages,/ Who pay no praise or wages/ Nor heed my craft or art.”

There are quotes, too, like this one: “The knowledge of different literatures frees one from the tyranny of a few,” Jose Marti, 1853-1895, from “On Oscar Wilde;” and this one: “The universe is made of stories not of atoms,” Muriel Rukeyser, 1913-1980, from “The Speed of Darkness.”

On this same street there in my life. I will miss her. is also the “Library Hotel.” Each of the guestroom floors is dedicated to a Dewey Decimal system category, like social sciences, literature or religion. The shelves in the rooms are stocked with books and art that is appropriate to its Dewey number and the lobby, which is the only part I saw, is lined with shelves of beautiful books. There is also a Reading Room, Poetry Garden with Terrace and Writer’s Den with Terrace.

If you are interested in libraries and books, this area is a great place to visit. It would be difficult not to come away with a feeling of appreciation for the steadfast contributions of books and literature to our lives.

I’d like to end this column by dedicating it to Veva Winkelstein, who died unexpectedly this past week. She was a faithful reader, and a warm and supportive presence