

Mayor Suggests Fine-Free Libraries So 'Everyone Can Afford to Check Out a Book'

Early this spring I experienced something that has probably only happened to me once before: I had an overdue library book.

Given that I was the girl in college who felt frantically behind on her homework if she wasn't a week ahead in her assignments, this was a bit distressing. But, I gritted my teeth and realized I would just have to return it late and pay that fine.

I put the book in the library dropbox the next day... but it wasn't until several months later that I actually walked through the doors and forked out a quarter to pay my fine. Frankly, I was busy and swinging by the library was low on my priority list. But that fine did weigh on me a bit and I was happy when I finally wiped my account clean.

This incident, although small, came to mind after hearing about a new policy being proposed for the public libraries of St. Paul, Minnesota. That policy would put an end to late fees on library books. As the *Star Tribune* [explains](#), St. Paul mayor Melvin Carter "wants to forgive more than \$2.5 million in accumulated fees" for the sake of equal opportunity:

"'[This policy] will unlock the doors to our libraries, so that we can truly say that everyone in our community is welcome at the St. Paul Public Library and that everyone in our community can afford to check out a book from the St. Paul Public Library...'"

Those encouraging this policy suggest that the move allows

offenders to return to the library and read, rather than scaring them away for good, particularly those whose finances hinder the payment of major fines. [Limited research](#) on the effectiveness of the policy also suggests that more materials are likely to return to the library under the system of no fines.

As someone whose library fine (albeit miniscule) hung over her head for several months, I can understand the support for the policy. After all, who hasn't had an emergency or slip of the mind that's prevented a book from being returned at the appropriate time?

On the other hand, I can't help but feel slightly troubled by Mayor Carter's rationale for the policy. The fact is, the issue of library fines does not prohibit a certain race, class, or gender from visiting the library. Anyone is welcome to do so – even if they have a fine hanging over their head. This is the whole point of libraries. They level the playing field and make books available and affordable to all with only one stipulation: responsibility.

Andrew Carnegie – practically the patron saint of the American library – would likely have agreed with this latter point. In his famous essay, [The Gospel of Wealth](#), Carnegie writes the following:

*“Neither the individual nor the race is improved by almsgiving. Those worthy of assistance, except in rare cases, seldom require assistance. ... **He is the only true reformer who is as careful and as anxious not to aid the unworthy as he is to aid the worthy, and, perhaps, even more so, for in almsgiving more injury is probably done by rewarding vice than by relieving virtue.**”*

The idea of offering library books fine-free sounds like a great and compassionate way to help those who face inequality in a number of ways. But based on Carnegie's insight, could

such “compassion” cause more hurt than help?

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[Image Credit: U.S. Air Force photo/Staff Sgt. Torey Griffith, Public Domain]