

# Carla Hayden Thinks Libraries Are a Key to Freedom

Interview by Ana Marie Cox

**Most librarians of Congress haven't actually previously been librarians. What's the best preparation for this role?** There have been two other librarians of the 14 total — we've had historians, we've had lawyers — but the main theme has been an interest in ideas and knowledge and a belief in that. That's what prepares you — to have an open mind, to want to expand other people's interest in history and knowledge. Each librarian has been almost perfect for the time that they served. I just hope that I can keep that momentum going.

**Well, it's funny that you mention that each librarian appointed seems to have turned out, in retrospect, perfect for the time, because you're a very particular librarian. You're the first woman and the first African-American named to the role, and some people have called you a radical librarian.** We librarians love that. That's against our stereotype.

**Maybe I'm a romantic, but I do think of librarians as inherently radical. There's something political about access to information.** And it has been throughout history. Frederick Douglass said, "Once you learn to read, you will be forever free." If you can absorb information yourself and make your own decisions, that's a freedom. And for so many times in history, being able to read and access information has been part of it, especially in my case, with African-Americans.

**In the past, you've taken what some people would consider political positions.**



**Age:** 64

**Occupation:**  
Librarian

**Hometown:**  
Chicago

Hayden is the 14th librarian of Congress. She also served as chief executive of the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore and president of the American Library Association.

**Her Top 5 Favorite Places to Read:**

1. In a comfortable chair
2. On the beach
3. By a fireplace
4. Under a hair dryer
5. On a train

**You previously served as the head of the Baltimore public library, and one of the most notable things you did was to keep a branch in the middle of the conflict open during the protests over Freddie Gray's death.** It was a haven. People could get online; they could apply for jobs. By the end of the week, we were the food center, because there weren't places open.

**When you were president of the American Library Association, you battled Attorney General John Ashcroft over the Patriot Act because it, among other things, gave the Justice Department and the F.B.I. the power to access library user records. Do you think you'll do any civil-libertarian activism in your current position?** In being elected to head the A.L.A., I became the face of the association. Now I'm basically the face of the Library of Congress, and I have enough to do here.

**People may not know that the Library of Congress has that name because it was actually created for the use of members of Congress, who aren't always known for basing their opinions on facts.** Yes, we have the Congressional Research Service, which is like the Special Forces of analysts. They serve Congress and the staff to help give them unbiased, nonpartisan information. Just like when people go into their school or public library and have information professionals to help them, their legislative body has people just like that to help inform Congress. We don't let our own opinion influence the patron's research.

**Do you think libraries can help in this epidemic of fake news and lack of trust in the media?** I think the good thing about the discussion is that there's a discussion about what's fake and what's real. There's an awareness that there is such a thing. Librarians have been pounding on this issue in a different way for a while — that just having computer literacy is great, but as information professionals, we're always looking at what's the most authoritative source for the information and teaching information literacy. It's great to have all this stuff, but you need to teach how to use the library in schools. They need to be teaching information literacy as soon as the kid can push a button.

**It seems as if you might need to teach information literacy to members of Congress.** If they start as children, I think there's hope. ♦