The Algorithm Thinks I'm Better than I am

On Soft-girls, picnics, and the public library

Zoe

Jun 20, 2025

Hi there,

As we know by now, the algorithm decides our personalities, not us. My algorithm has pegged me as a soft girl who likes being outside, picnics, and the public library.

Interestingly, that is not how I see myself. I mean, I love being outside and I love the idea of picnics even if I never have the creativity or will power to actually commit to having one. The public library however, is a more fickle friend for me.

On one hand, I love reading and books. On particularly hot or rainy or Saturday days growing up, my parents would take my sister and I to Barnes & Nobles and let us roam around for hours, picking out books to read in the cafe with our favorite sweet treats. In elementary school, I sought refuge in the school library rather than go out to recess.

However, the public library was never one of my favorite places. Perhaps it is because the public library in my city growing up was under renovation so we only had those sad satellite ones. Also I hate the smell of used books. Present tense. I can hear you shaking your fists at me. I don’t care. I think they smell like puke. Maybe one of the books I came across as a kid had actually been puked in and put back and I just have a negative association. Whatever the reason—this is my truth.

For all of these reasons, I have never really been a public library girl.

An image added by stallboerger on Jul 04, 2023. May present: building, urban design, art, font, rectangle.

Before I go any further — lets do the housekeeping.

First, if you are not already a subscriber and you resonate with any of the following descriptors, consider joining the cooperative: (1) Early-career professional; (2) Feminist; (3) Do-gooder; (4) Former Gifted Kid; (5) Overachiever; or (6) Capitalism-hater.

Second, if you like what I am saying and it makes you think of someone in your family/office/friend group, send it their way.

Share Femme Futures Cooperative

Third, I say some personal and vulnerable shit every week. Say some vulnerable shit back. It’s called a community.

Leave a comment

Okay — back to it.

As I entered my adulthood, the public library occasionally crossed my radar. I had a roommate whose mom was a librarian. I live in a city with one of the best Library Science programs in the nation. Also, apparently in some towns you can rent power tools from your library. My library has seed libraries and 3D printers. And do not let me understate this one: if you have a library card, you have access to Libby (if you know you know).

I have a library card because I wanted Libby and because the algorithm that may know me better than I know myself, includes the public library, despite my reluctance. The algorithm wants me to face my fears and become a library-going woman. If I want to be anything like the soft-girls on substack, I need to join them in advocating for the use of your local library. I can’t very well do that if I don’t use my own public library.

Cut to the other day. I needed to get out of my house for a couple of hours and randomly thought of the library. I think this was likely spurred by my boyfriend’s grandma who had a stack of books on her kitchen. So off I went to the library on a mission mostly for A/C and a place to set up my laptop.

At this point, we need background and framing. Growing up, my parents drilled it into me that I should always be making the most of the resources available to me. This was a big deal in high school when I was struggling in my math and physics classes. My parent’s pushing me to go to office hours and to ask for extra homework rather than cry at our kitchen counter resulted in my poor high school physics teacher having my name burned into his mind for time in memorial. [Mr. McWilliams, thank you and I am so so sorry.] In college, they pushed me to take the classes that would be good for me, but would be hard for me as well. It was because of this that I took Econ 101—eventually I would get a minor in economics that Freshman Zoe never would have seen coming. They said that I would regret not taking advantage of these resources when I had them and they were right.

As a working adult, I kept receiving this message. A particularly memorable moment was when I went out for lunch with a couple of my mentors at work. I was struggling with my boss and feeling like I was stuck in a hard situation. They commiserated and lamented that there was not much that I could do in this situation, but they also said “drain this place for all it’s worth”. So I try to be good. I max out my 401k match and I take the professional development courses.

But still, in the back of my mind, there is one of my most underutilized resources: the public library.

CALL FOR PROPOSALS

Hi there! Remember a while back when I shared this letter from my friend? I would love to keep the From a Friend series going.

If you want to challenge yourself to write a letter to the Femme Futures community, please reach out to me. I am happy to be sent completed works or to help you brainstorm a piece.

There are no age/gender/occupation restrictions.

Looking forward to hearing from you!

<3 Zoe

There I was on a hot summer day, sitting in the air conditioned library and still having no idea how to take advantage of this resource. So I did what any reasonable person of my generation would do. I asked ChatGPT.

ChatGPT definitely does not fit into the soft-girl who picnics and goes to the library aesthetic, so my first question was as esoteric as I could make it. I recalled weeks previously when my boyfriend and I had been on an existential spiral about what we liked doing as kids. During that spiral, I remembered that I had loved math when I was little. I used to make my dad write word problems for me in a composition notebook. Then I hit third grade and math became about speed and repetition and I quickly started to hate it.

My boyfriend, an engineer, was bereft at this revelation. He told me that maybe I would like math books—ones that were more about math as art and theory rather than as do-it-as-fast-as-you-can times tables.

So I asked ChatGPT: “I want recommendations for math theory books for an adult who stopped taking math after high school” and it told me to check out a couple titles and gave me the Dewey codes for them.

Feeling more bold, I asked: “I am currently at my public library in [my city]. What are some tips for taking advantage of this resource?”. ChatGPT complimented me on this question (thank you, robot gods, for the praise) and then gave me a comprehensive overview of how best to take advantage of my particular library given my current interest in math for adults.

“What about more general advice? The math thing is kind of a whim at the moment,” I told it. And it generated for me even more tools to take advantage of this resource.

Awesome.

I closed my laptop, packed up my things, and went to section 510—where the math books live. I flipped through a few and found one of the ones that ChatGPT recommended. I pulled it from the shelf, determined to make myself love math again. Emboldened, I continued to wander through Adult Nonfiction and came across a couple of other interesting looking books that I added to my stack.

I made my way downstairs to Adult Fiction and was reminded of the summer reading challenges of my childhood. After looking at the displays in the fiction area, I started to roam the stacks.

This is where things took a turn. Overwhelmed by the number of books and reminded of my distaste for the smell of used books, I wasn’t looking thoroughly. The stacks felt cramped and I wondered why I had bothered in this area at all—I do use Libby profusely, at any rate. I didn’t manage to find any books that looked good enough to even pull from the shelves. I was struck by decision paralysis and the fear of choosing the wrong thing.

To make matters worse, I remembered that the last time I had tried to come to this library, I went to check out at the front desk and they looked at me like I was crazy. There were self-check kiosks. Luckily, I remembered that this time and made my way to a kiosk where pure magic happens. When you place your books on the scale, it magically knows exactly which books are in your pile and adds them to the list for you to check out.

I walked out with my books and felt… excited. Despite the stress and the unfamiliarity of the environment. Despite needing to ask ChatGPT for help. I felt how I remember feeling as a kid leaving the book fair with a stack of books. I had done it! I had taken advantage of my resources! I could do it again! Maybe I could become a library-going woman.

The point of the story is a reminder to use your resources. It is also a reminder that fear and mental blocks are obstacles that we can overcome. You are evolving as a human and this is part of your evolution.

It is also a reminder that ChatGPT can be used for good.

I hope you all have a lovely weekend.

Best,

Zoe