Lowell Milken Center for Unsung Heroes
ARTEFFECT

Impact Statement

Aviana Cai, Grade 11
The Library Prometheus, 2026
Acrylic on canvas, 20 x 16 inches
Mercer Island High School, Mercer Island, Washington, USA
Unsung Hero: Lutie Stearns

A book can travel farther than the person who writes it. It can cross generations, reach someone it was never written for, and open a door for a person who may have never had the chance to walk through one before. Lutie Stearns understood this long before books could be accessed instantly with a click.

Born in 1866, she became a librarian, teacher, reformer, and one of the most important early advocates for making books accessible to everyone. Through her work establishing traveling libraries across Wisconsin, she brought books to rural communities, schools, farms, and people who otherwise might never have had access to them. Although her name is not widely known today, Stearn's belief that knowledge should belong to everyone continues to influence the way we think about libraries and access to information. That belief is what made me choose her as my unsung hero.

While researching different figures for this project, I found myself drawn to Lutie Stearns because her mission felt surprisingly familiar to me. As a novelist myself, I understand the strange power of creating a story and then imagining it reaching someone you may never meet. I have published my own books partly for that reason: to give more people the opportunity to discover a story within its pages. Learning about Stearns made me realize that this desire to make literature accessible is not new. More than a century ago, she was already fighting for the same principle in a completely different world. Lutie Stearns began her career as a teacher before working at the Milwaukee Public Library, where she eventually became superintendent of circulation. In 1895, she helped establish the Wisconsin Free Library Commission alongside Frank A. Hutchins and Senator James H. Stout. She became the Commission's first paid staff member in 1897 and spent nearly two decades traveling throughout Wisconsin to expand access to books and libraries.

Her most remarkable contribution was the traveling library, a vessel used to carry a literary flame to the farthest corners of the state. At a time when many rural communities had no permanent library, Stearns helped create a system in which collections of books could be packed into specially constructed cases and transported from place to place. In 1903, the Commission established a Department of Traveling Libraries with Stearns as

its head. Like a Prometheus to the children of the frontier, she personally braved the elements to deliver this light. She traveled by train, wagon, stagecoach, and winter sleighs, wrapping herself in heavy bearskins to endure sub-zero temperatures just to ensure that rural youth could warm their minds by the glow of a story.

What makes this especially powerful to me is the simplicity of her goal: she simply wanted books to be available to ordinary people. She achieved her objective: Her work helped bring library services to rural communities and contributed to the growth of hundreds of libraries across Wisconsin. By 1922, Wisconsin had 211 free libraries containing more than 1.6 million volumes, a dramatic increase from the 28 free libraries reported in 1896.

To me, Lutie Stearns represents the journey of a book itself. In my artwork, I portrayed Stearns holding books that radiate an intense, fiery light. This book-fire symbolizes the Promethean gift of knowledge. Surrounded by pages that appear to be spreading outward in different directions, the embers turn into peace doves, traveling across the composition toward children who previously had no access to reading. The books almost become fragments of light themselves, symbolizing the ideas and brilliant possibilities carried within them.

Today for most of us in the United States, accessing a book can take seconds. But for Stearns, bringing that same opportunity to a child meant hours of grueling travel through blinding snowstorms. Yet, she carried that flame willingly, ensuring that the fire of literacy would catch, burn bright, and never be extinguished in the hearts of the children she served. To many, she was the Prometheus of libraries and knowledge.

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