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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations -- Old

Bob Nardini
Coutts Information Services, bnardini@couttsinfo.com

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University. I look at our long run of the Yale Review and pull a dusty volume off the shelf, the one that contains issues from 1942-1943, the one closest to the month and year in which I was born. I recognize Dorothy Canfield’s name and I even knew her short story, “The Knothole.” In the Autumn 1942 issue, Eudora Welty’s “Asphodel” appears. If I went through the other issues, I would find countless other stories and essays that would resonate some 66 years after their initial appearance. What is going to happen to all of those treasure troves of fact and fiction when we get rid of our bound journals as we must? They are not being consulted and we need to make room for additional study space. Perhaps I will request the two volumes that cover 1943, each one of which would provide a change of pace when I simply want a piece of good writing to accompany the smell and sound of a soft rain somewhere in rural Oregon. And those who contributed to the Yale Review will not have done so in vain.

There is the history section taunting me and my ignorance of the past. The science section is even more scornful of me, someone who, in high school, walked out of chemistry on the first day and signed up for Latin as an easy out. I could go on but you get the point. There are more than 100,000 volumes sitting on our shelves ready to share the learning, wisdom, and imagination of thousands of writers — scholars, poets, novelists, humorists. Where do I begin? Never mind, I have my own sub-set at home that I have selected to last me through retirement. And I won’t even get through them because there are those other books that I have yet to buy or borrow.

If I want to blitz my friends and family with a thought or a fact about my life that I think they might be interested in, I post it on Facebook. That does not make me a blogger. If I posted something once or more a day, however, I would be suspect.

I would rather write letters and postcards and send them to friends and family. Each post card message is written especially for the recipient. Even when writing about the same, I try to vary the wording for my own sake if nothing else. If I used up my time blogging, I might not be able to write my forty or so postcards a month to readers important to me and who really care.

So if you are not a blogger but have considered entering the fray, consider instead just picking up pen and paper and writing a personal note to someone you love or whose friendship you treasure? Studies show that as we get older, we live longer, more satisfying lives when we have friends with whom we can share the good along with the pain. You won’t regret it.

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Column Editor: Bob Nardini (Group Director, Client Integration and Head Bibliographer, Coutts Information Services) <bnardini@couttsinfo.com>

Information Resources, which until recently was Collection Management, and for years before that was Collection Development, once librarians reworked a duty that had mainly consisted of taking order cards from professors when they got around to submitting them, used to center on new books.

That was when new books were so important that most libraries made sure they were the first thing you saw when walking in the front door. In the back, a lot of librarians spent good long careers choosing the latest books to fill their library’s showpiece New Book Shelf, or running the approval plan that re-stocked it every week.

Lately, though, things have changed. Somehow the idea of new got old.

Like so many other troubles, maybe it began with journals. Once they became impossibly expensive, the new journals were nothing but a headache, a series of headaches really. You couldn’t find them in the OPAC. Then it was one serials review after another. Meanwhile, do we sign on to the Big Deal or not? Then someone invented JSTOR and Project MUSE. These were exciting projects. We were getting somewhere.

Serials were fun again. Old serials, that is.

Then libraries re-discovered their special collections. Not that they’d forgotten them exactly, but they’d kind of let it go. Today’s other TSA routines used to be applying to use the relics kept under lock and key in wood-paneled rooms that had the only decent tables and chairs — often unoccupied — in the entire library. Leave everything you have with me, please. Here’s your pencil. By the way, we close at 4:30. See you Monday morning.

But digitization workshops and the Web turned that around and libraries figured out that they could put themselves on the map by mounting online displays of, well, their maps, not to mention their old letters, diaries, manuscripts, music, records, books, whatever.

With new books, you weren’t allowed to do that and nobody would have tried in any case. Until Google.

As usual, Google changed everything. They went public in 2004, came away with a billion dollars or so, and set out to spend the cash. Within a few months they’d launched Google Print, which by now as Google Book Search, a project the company charmingly refers to as still in “beta,” has digitized some seven million books, is on course to digitize all the rest ever printed, and in the course of that to upend every last corner of the book world.

New books are there, yes, but anyone who cared to could have found them anyway, on Amazon, at Barnes & Noble, on publisher sites, and other places. All they’d find though is what the publishers served up to entice a reader to buy the book. Maybe an excerpt. A chapter, even. The jacket. The price. Some blurbs. Not much more.

Most by far of those seven Google million books, though, are old. People’s attitude toward old books has always landed, usually, somewhere between uninterest and disdain. In The Devil’s Dictionary, in fact, Ambrose Bierce’s definition for the word “old” was: “In that stage of usefulness which is not inconsistent with general inefficiency, as an old man. Discredited by lapse of time and offensive to the popular taste, as an old book.”

Suddenly the joke is on Bierce, though, because today all the action is in old books. Google’s $125 million settlement and 134-page agreement with the Author’s Guild and Association of American Publishers was mostly about old books, the ones out-of-print but still in copyright, rights largely abandoned by authors and publishers until Google in effect decided to republish them. Now everyone is reevaluating the worth of old books whose fate
Building Library Collections in the 21st Century — If I Were Reborn as a Librarian Today

Column Editor: Arlene Sievers-Hill <axs23@case.edu> <arlenesievers7@hotmail.com>

Those of us who are acquisitions and collection development librarians of a certain age have had to learn many new things in our professional careers. To begin with, everything that we now know about computers, most of it at least, was learned after and outside of library school. Some began, as I did, in nearly total precomputer librarian-ship. I actually learned elementary computer programming at Indiana University as part of the MLS curriculum. I had just completed my BA and I was fortunate to have Alan Pratt as an instructor in Introduction to Data Processing at IU as I began my MLS education. I learned important concepts that I find useful to this day. Older librarians, including some directors were in my class because they were getting their PhDs and this was the new thing and required for them to lead their libraries back home to be libraries of the future. I was actually born as an MLS degree librarian in August 1973. I went directly from my undergraduate degree to library school. I’m not as old as you might think.

Most of us have now worked with personal computers or Macs for decades as well as all of the basic and not so basic software that they run. We have been on the front lines of helping create, beta testing, and adopting early library systems and several generations of systems after them. We welcomed the library systems that automated many functions of acquisitions and serial control. We have bought and used numerous commercial databases, and created them ourselves. There are new things, materials and concepts coming along all the time. We strive to keep up with them.

As acquisitions librarians we have had to learn a lot more business and economics than was once the case. Buying books was once a gentlemanly pursuit. I happened to get the opportunity to work for a subscription service in Europe and one in the U.S., so I can claim real world business experience which at one time just didn’t happen. Working for serials businesses and learning the basic concepts of business was better education for what I do.