

November 2013

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Recommended Citation

Kraft, Ned (1997) "Adventures in Librarianship-Brute Force Librarian," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 9: Iss. 6, Article 37.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.2900>

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Adventures in Librarianship

Brute Force Librarian

by **Ned Kraft** (Smithsonian Institution Libraries) <nkraft@sil.si.edu>

Last week I found myself waiting at the loading dock of the National Museum of Natural History for one of our big shipments to arrive from India. The truck, finally turned the corner into our lot and backed up to the dock. I greeted Gregor, the large Russian who works for Metro trucking charged with hauling our crates from Port Elizabeth, New Jersey, to Washington. He crushed my hand in greeting.

“Oh my Gud,” Gregor said, “tirty-seex crates dis time!”

He worked the forklift like a master builder, nudging-shifting-pushing-pulling-balancing until the three pallets, each with twelve cryptically-marked crates, were pulled clear from the crowded hold of his truck. He dripped in the Washington heat and I felt a bit guilty for not doing more than raising and lowering the hydraulic platform and keeping mail carts out of his way. Gregor stopped for a moment to mop his brow. “What you got dis time?”

“Cephalopods,” I told him, “Seven hundred copies of a book about cephalopods.”

“Is dat right?” he frowned knowingly, though I’m not at all sure he knew what cephalopods were. I’m not at all sure I would have known if I hadn’t spent the last four years nursing this book along, ushering the text back and forth between translator, general editor, scientific editor, and publisher. But Gregor has always seemed an educated man, an educated man in a rough business, perhaps because it paid well, or because his English wasn’t yet good enough to get him a cushier job.

“Yeah, it’s a translation from the French. Prince Albert of Monaco went on these sort of oceanographic expeditions and published a series of books on his findings. Pretty important stuff. We just translated and published the four parts on cephalopods in two volumes. Took about four years.”

Gregor shook his head and smiled. “Dat is reelly great. Cephalopods!” A drop of sweat swung on the tip of his nose. “Huh! Dat is reelly some-tink!” And I could tell he was actually thrilled. He worked with renewed energy moving the pallets of crates inside where they became my responsibility. He was genuinely pleased to have played a minor role in what certainly sounded like an important scientific enterprise. But it was always like that with him. Six months earlier he had delivered *Wild Reindeer*, another translation, four-hundred copies, and was equally pleased. “Vild Ren-deer!” he’d said. “Dat’s reelly some-tink!”

Gregor crushed my hand again before he left and I told him we’d be meeting again in another six months when *Marine Bivalves* was due to arrive.

The Smithsonian Institution Libraries began translating and publishing important scientific works in 1960 using PL-480 funds, foreign currency held by the federal government that was to be spent through contracts in the countries of origin. Over the years we’ve had Israeli, Polish, and Pakistani contracts, using their currency to make previously untranslated scientific work available in English worldwide. Our last bit of foreign currency is Indian rupees. During that time, responsibility for the Trans-

lations Program has migrated from office to office, finally settling on my desk in the Library Acquisitions Department.

Knowing not a lick of Russian or German, and only enough French to order a decent meal and to know when a French vendor is telling us a book is out-of-print, my job is to keep the program moving, coordinate it, get the bills paid, get the manuscript from one player to the next, get the final product to DC and distributed free of charge to libraries and research institutions around the world. I do this on top of my normal acquisitions duties.

Facing thirty-six crates on three pallets, I called in two helpers from my department and we began the messy work of cracking open the crates, sorting the books, and sending them on their way. About half-way through the mountain of crates, I noticed that we had attracted spectators. Curators, scientists, and secretaries paused in passing to watch these obviously white-collar office workers splintering crates with crowbars and hammers, sweating through and smudging their good white shirts, pushing trucks of books toward the mail room, boxing others for different destinations. It was, I must admit, a curious sight. I paused to mop my brow, as the Russian trucker had, and said loud enough for the crowd to hear me, “Library work!” shaking my head in feigned disbelief.

For most librarians, and it’s no less true for me, much of our work becomes routine, not very exciting. How often can a reference librarian be asked the directions to the restroom before becoming a bit dulled? How many records can a cataloger export before that digital magic loses its charm? How many committee meetings can a department head sit through before the urge to doze becomes irresistible?

But we live for those moments when the unusual comes along, when there’s a problem to solve and all our experience and knowledge is suddenly vital. And we live for those moments when through the eyes of an outsider — a patron, a new acquaintance, a Russian truck driver — we are reminded how important our mission is, that we are here to make knowledge available, that we represent great authors, scientists, thinkers, great ideas. We are reminded that even the sound of the word “cephalopod” can evoke an exotic, fascinating, even noble world where people strive to do great, slightly mysterious things. We are roused from the routine to recall that we, librarians, have a hand in those great things. 🐙

