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Book Reviews — Monographic Musings

Column Editor: Debbie Vaughn (Reference Librarian, College of Charleston) <vaugnhn@cofc.edu>

Column Editor’s Note: The Charleston Conference brings together the different spheres of libraries, publishers, and vendors; for the past 25 years, the business and educational/public service ends of the library spectrum have united to discuss pressing issues from their points of view. Similarly, Jeannette Woodward’s Creating the Customer-Driven Library also brings together the almost-separate worlds of libraries and bookstores, the former with a mission to educate and serve and the latter with a mission to sell. Her book couldn’t come in a more timely fashion. During the mid-to-late 1990s, several pieces in the library body of literature focused on the similarities and differences between these two venues. In the past five years or so, though, it seems that the attention has turned to exploring libraries, Amazon.com, and Google. It remains, though that people do not visit bookstores simply to buy books; comfortable reading chairs and cafes are commonplace in both chain and independent venues. Likewise, library patrons often demand customer-is-always-right treatment, and more and more libraries — without exception, the College of Charleston Addleston Library — are being outfitted with the same comfortable reading chairs and cafes. The debate over whether or not libraries should imitate bookstores has not been resolved. Woodward’s work reminds us that we need to continue to evaluate bookstores’ successes and determine the appropriate cues to take from them. Happy reading, everyone! — DV


Reviewed by Debbie Vaughn (Reference Librarian, College of Charleston) <vaugnhn@cofc.edu>

When I was in library school at the University of South Carolina, my favorite professor, Dr. Charles Curran, assigned a handful of readings on the topic of libraries and “mega” bookstores. At the time, I was an employee of

<http://www.against-the-grain.com>
a national bookstore chain, and I welcomed the possibility of libraries and bookstores learning from one another about everything from customer service to special programming. After all, I gathered a wealth of information in my graduate classes and served me well beyond the bookstore cash register, and I learned invaluable skills in the retail world that prepared me for the reference desk. As I have progressed in my library career, though, I find myself riding the fence concerning the practicality of libraries’ emulation of bookstores. I tend to agree with American Libraries editor Leonard Kniffel that, for better or worse, “libraries aren’t bookstores, and patrons aren’t customers.” I, however, continue to believe that there is much to be learned from bookstores, especially in the area of ambiance.

Library-vs.-bookstore ambiance is just one of the many topics that Jeannette Woodward examines in her book Creating the Customer-Driven Library: Building on the Bookstore Model. This should be required reading for those who work in public or academic libraries. Woodward has worked in both, and her knowledge of each sector adds immense value to her writing. While the book promotes librarians’ adoption of certain bookstore characteristics, Woodward by no means advocates libraries’ complete embrace of bookstore behavior in its entirety. After all, there are fundamental differences in the primary purpose of each entity, to which she devotes an entire chapter. Woodward’s work is up to her claim: she “consider[s] ways in which the bookstore model can be adapted to the library’s needs without abandoning any of the ideals that brought us to the library profession” (20).

Creating the Customer-Driven Library is divided into 16 chapters and includes a separate introduction and conclusion. Citations to works cited are listed at the end of each chapter, and there is a rather extensive, ten-page index. Topics are regarded from the vantage point of both libraries and bookstores, and coverage includes customers/patrons, technology, goals and priorities, atmosphere, signage, and linking to the library’s mission and marketing and publicity. Woodward’s writing style is practical and straightforward, and the book is quite enjoyable. Photographs of bookstores—supposedly tasteful and cozy—and scattered throughout, though photos of libraries that have successfully built upon the bookstore model are missing.

I must admit that I find a few of Woodward’s points to be disjointed. For example, she dedicates a good deal of page real estate, complete with screen shots, to the illustration of Amazon.com’s book database; her idea is that library OPACs should follow suit. Woodward argues that being able to preview actual book pages and “customers who bought this book also bought...” lists would benefit library patrons. Amazon.com, though, does not offer brick-and-mortar retail outlets. Customers cannot browse through books on an Amazon.com shelf as they can at a library; they cannot fold materials in their hands and leaf through pages. Amazon.com has no choice but to offer the ability to browse book content online, because it is the only way it can offer customers the ability to preview its wares. The benefit of a library or even a Barnes and Noble bookstore is that people are not limited to virtual interaction—they can visit a real place and interact with books, periodicals, and even humans. Saying that library catalogs should be more like Amazon.com’s database leaves out the physicality and human touch that libraries and “real” bookstores provide.

With that said, though, even disagreeing with some of Woodward’s thoughts helped me tremendously by resuscitating a topic that I thoroughly enjoyed studying in library school. Our profession is amazing; there are multitudes of ever-evolving facets to which we can turn our attention. Because of this, it can be easy to ignore seemingly-secondary details, such as signage and comfy seating, when there are so many other issues that require our consideration. It has been a few years since the professional literature actively discussed the cues that libraries can take from bookstores. I hope that Creating the Customer-Driven Library revives the discussion.

Endnotes

ATG Special Report — In Indian Territory

by Gene Waddell (College Archivist, College of Charleston) <waddell@cofc.edu>

To determine what was characteristic of any culture that is no longer intact, there is no substitute for examining every type of evidence, but one type is especially valuable and has been neglected: Conclusions about cultures that are themselves primary sources of information are among the most valuable statements ever made about the ways of life of independent groups including Native Americans. Indian territory belonged to Indians, and as long as they were independent, they lived as they thought best. This article is about primary sources of information recorded by travelers who visited Indian territory rather than about the secondary accounts of anthropologists who visited reservations.

Early travelers who took the trouble to record their observations were usually intelligent and conscientious, but the traveler who visited a group of Indians only once did not know how typical the incidents were that he recorded. When evaluating travel accounts, it is important to distinguish between casual observations and well-informed conclusions. Casual travelers were often more likely to notice anything unusual and their observations were often recorded immediately, but they are more likely to exaggerate and to misinterpret. Conclusions by the best informed travelers are more reliable than eye-witness accounts by travelers who did not know Indian languages, but they need to be supplemented by every available primary source.

The following accounts are by explorers who made the earliest contacts with Indians and by later travelers who lived among Indians long enough to be able to summarize their customs accurately. The later traveler often knew more, but arrived after significant cultural changes had appeared. Even so, the best summaries and later accounts are often more inclusive and accurate than poorly documented explorations. Any primary source is of greater value than anthropological writings that are distorted by theory.

All of the following accounts of Indians are worth reading fully, but since some sections were written separately, they can be used separately as an introduction to a way of life or for comparison with another group. The dates given are the years represented by the travelers rather than dates of publication. The accounts discussed relate primarily to the Southeast and the Northwest, but what is significant about them has wider application.

Garcilaso de la Vega’s history of the De Soto Expedition, 1539-1543

Garcilaso’s history is one of the four principal accounts of the expedition of Hernando de Soto, and it is by far the most comprehensive history of the expedition. It was based on at least three eye-witness accounts by members of the expedition, and it was vividly and intelligently written by an author who was half-Indian and half-Spanish and who tried to be fair to both sides.

De Soto traveled from the west coast of Florida to South Carolina, crossed the Appalachian Mountains, and got as far as the Mississippi River before being killed. Members of his expedition tried to reach Mexico by land, failing to do so, they returned to the Mississippi and constructed ships that enabled them to sail to Mexico. Only a small portion of the approximately 700 Spaniards who went on the expedition survived, and four of them left narratives that largely substantiate what Garcilaso’s informants told him. The value of his history is independently confirmed by other types of information including enlistment lists and a list of the survivors of the expedition.

The great value of all of the accounts of this expedition and particularly of Garcilaso’s is that they record the first contact of Europeans with tribes throughout the Southeast. No comparable accounts exist for most tribes of the interior of the region until more than a half-century later, and in the meanwhile, disease caused such loss of population that many tribes had to combine

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