

2011

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Recommended Citation

McKinzie, Steve (2011) "590: Local Notes -- The Secret Life of Walter Mitty at the Reference Desk," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 23: Iss. 1, Article 31.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.5754>

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590: Local Notes — The Secret Life of Walter Mitty at the Reference Desk

*With Special Thanks to James Thurber*¹

by **Steve McKinzie** (Library Director, Corriher-Linn-Black Library, Catawba College, Salisbury, NC 28144; Phone: 704-637-4449) <smckinzi@catawba.edu>

Column Editor's Note: *The characters and incidents (although borrowed from James Thurber) are fictitious and not intended to bear a resemblance to any persons now living or dead. — SM*

An eerie silence fell over the committee after the provost concluded his budget analysis. Most of the high-level university administrators wore an expression of intense concentration that masked a weary complacency. The university librarian broke the silence unexpectedly.

"Look, it's time," he said, "We clarified some things here. Your budget is insufficient. It just won't do."

He looked at the provost with cold, grey eyes. A rakish smile spread across his face. "Either you are going to fund the library in the way that it needs to be funded, or we'll get somebody who can. I am tired of these half-baked measures, sir — these pious platitudes." Mitty surveyed the table of fellow administrators. They stared at him in disbelief.

The provost glanced at his colleagues, looking for support. "You can't be serious, Mr. Mitty. You are not really suggesting that we..."

"Hold it," interrupted Mitty. "I am not finished." The Provost wore a blank expression.

"You know," Mitty went on, "it's like this. You, sir, have a problem. You think the University is about committee assignments, grant proposals, and *U.S. News and Report Ratings*. Well, you've got it all wrong. This university isn't really about any of those things. It is about people. That's right — people and their ultimate quest for knowledge — undergraduates struggling to make sense out of their lives, graduate students with a thirst for learning, faculty opening up new avenues for research and examining time-honored conclusions of the past."

Mitty glanced around the room. "Yeah, what I am talking about is the real people of this university and their collaborative search for truth — the growing information needs of a burgeoning learning community." Mitty was now looking directly at the provost. "And yes," he went on his voice rising with emphasis, "Mr. Provost, someone has to stand up and fight for the interests of these students and faculty — to fight for their rights to information. Someone has to care about the people and their information needs."

He paused, and an awkward silence enveloped the room. Mitty was standing down the Provost. More than that, he was telling him off. None of them could bring themselves to speak. Mitty was grinning again. "Well," he said, "I have articulated a strong case for adequate library funding. Now, what are you going to do about it?"

"Sir, can you help me?" A voice came from far away. Mitty looked up from his computer screen. "Sir, can you help me?" The voice repeated. A freshman was standing at the reference desk looking directly at Mitty. "I need to find the bathroom in this building." Mitty pointed to a sign near the bank of computers adjacent to the reference area.

"There," he said. The student looked up and headed toward the restrooms. Mitty couldn't help but wonder. Why were they always finding it difficult to locate restrooms? We had signage, didn't we? Hadn't we spent a bundle on it? Can't they read? He stared at the back of the student walking away.

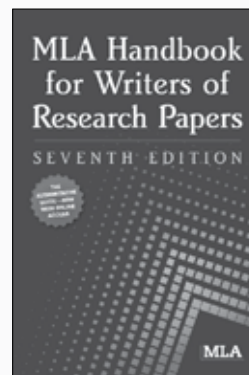
The plane had been late. He tipped the cab driver generously and stepped into the hotel lobby. Several people seemed to turn his way as

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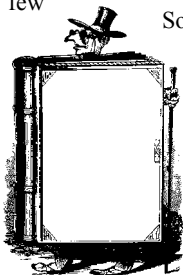
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he asked the concierge for directions. “Is that him — the keynote speaker?” he overheard someone saying.

“Yes, that’s him,” came the reply. I recognize him from the Web photo.”

“Oh, there you are, Walter,” a voice greeted him as he stepped into the ballroom. “I’m so glad that you’re here. You had us a bit worried, you know, you’re up in a few minutes.”

Mitty looked around the room. Yes, there was Jenkins, his old rival at *American Libraries*, eyeing with a studied indifference, and he caught sight of Andrea Pritchard from Princeton on his left. She looked up and gave him a wave. She and Mitty had been close



friends at Harvard’s Frye Institute, but he knew some of what he had to say today in his address wouldn’t go over well with her and the old guard she represented. His plan for common ground between publishers and librarians would anger both, and his bold strategies to capture a new generation of users would trouble the traditionalist, but no matter. There was nothing he could do about that, he thought. They had to hear the truth. No matter what they would say later.

Somewhere a voice brought him around. Someone was speaking to him. “Hey, like the printer’s not working or something. I mean, like I can’t get to — well, like it doesn’t work at all. I mean the thing won’t print.” An undergraduate stood in front of the reference desk, eyed Mitty good-naturedly, and smiled. He wore a Budweiser shirt and a pair of cut-off Levis.

Mitty glanced over at the printer. He got up and faced the machine cautiously.

“Oh, yes, the printer,” he said. “Well, the folks at circulation would probably know what to do. Did you check with them?”

He hated printers. Why couldn’t the things work for more than a couple of print jobs? They were so blasted frustrating — running out of toner — jamming when you least expected. “Confound the whole lot of them,” he muttered.

Just then, a student came over from circulation to look at the printer. “Oh,” he said, “not a problem. We can fix it.” Mitty felt a measure of relief.

“Well, er, thanks,” he mumbled and walked carefully back to the reference desk. 🐼

Endnote

1. **James Thurber** (1894-1961) a noted American humorist, cartoonist, and short-story writer who frequently wrote for *The New Yorker*.

And They Were There — Reports of Meetings

30th Annual Charleston Conference — Issues in Book and Serial Acquisition, “Anything Goes!” Francis Marion Hotel, Embassy Suites Historic District, Holiday Inn Historic District, and Adlestone Library, College of Charleston, Charleston, SC, November 3-6, 2010

Charleston Conference Reports compiled by: **Ramune K. Kubilius** (Collection Development / Special Projects Librarian, Northwestern University, Galter Health Sciences Library) <r-kubilius@northwestern.edu>

Column Editor’s Note: Thank you to all of the **2010 Charleston Conference** attendees who agreed to write short reports that highlighted sessions they attended. All attempts were made to provide a broad coverage of sessions, and notes are included in the reports to reflect changes in the session titles or presenters that were not printed in the conference’s final program. Slides and handouts from many **2010 Charleston Conference** presentations can be found online at <http://www.slideshare.net/event/2010-charleston-conference>, and the **Charleston Conference Proceedings** will be published sometime in Fall 2011. In this issue of **ATG** you will find the first installment of reports, and keep reading as we continue to publish all the reports in upcoming issues throughout the year. — **RKK**

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 3, 2010 PRECONFERENCES

Lost in the Forest of License Negotiations??? *Your Glowing Breadcrumbs at XXX Charleston Conference* — Presented by **Anjana Bhatt** (Florida Gulf Coast University)

Reported by: **Angela Dresselhaus** (Utah State University) <angela.dresselhaus@usu.edu>

Bhatt presented an excellent full day preconference session on license negotiations. Prior to the session she requested that each participant submit a questionnaire designed to gather information on the level of expertise and responsibilities in the group. Participants were also asked to evaluate their license negotiation workflow and bring questions and suggestions to the group meeting in Charleston. Results from the questionnaire indicated that many people had concerns about various aspects of licensing, including



granting indemnity, post cancellation access, and uncertainty about handling legal documents without proper legal training.

The questionnaire results provided the jumping off point for the next section on license and copyright issues. Licenses are important as a means to balance the rights and responsibilities of both the vendor and the library/customer. **Ms. Bhatt** instructed the group to become familiar with U.S. copyright laws and CONTU guidelines for applying the principles to license negotiations, especially regarding issues related to Interlibrary Loan and class packs. While librarians should become familiar with U.S. copyright laws, we were cautioned to avoid license agreements that require the library to become “Copyright Police.”

The preconference was wrapped up with discussion on the various pricing models and general negotiation tips. The final 20 minutes were dedicated to answering questions from the group and a brief discussion on the use of QR codes in libraries.

The Radically Different Future of Collection Development — Presented by **Rick Anderson** (University of Utah); **Dan Hazen** (Harvard University); **Greg Raschke** (North Carolina State University); **Ivy Anderson** (California Digital Library); **Judy Luther** (Informed Strategies)

Reported by: **Jennifer Smathers** (The College at Brockport, State University of New York, Drake Memorial Library) <jsmather@brockport.edu>

This pre-conference was split between formal presentations, group discussions and group reporting. The presenters set the stage and got attendees’ creative juices going regarding the possible, most likely, and radical futures of Collection Development.

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