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Letter from Oklahoma: Bookish or Boorish?

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Letter from Oklahoma



Bookish or Boorish?

by Tom Leonhardt (University of Oklahoma) <tom@libadm.lib.uoknor.edu>

"The ordinary young man who is knowledgeable about books and reasonably intelligent will get a Ph.D. in English and become a college teacher. If he is just bookish and not interested in the content of books, he can become a professional librarian — a profession which, even though it pays poorly, is at least thought to be a profession with a steady salary." ("The Bookshop in America," by Edward Shils (professor of sociology and social thought, University of Chicago) in *Daedalus*, Winter 1963, p.99.)

What is wrong and what is right about that statement, forgetting that Professor Shils apparently knows no bookish young women or young women knowledgeable about books, even at the University of Chicago with its halls of learning and its vast library. It was, after all, 1963, and not yet common to acknowledge the intellectual pursuits of women. He may have been using the masculine as all-inclusive, too, but be that as it may, let us move on from the gender issue and pretend that he referred to young men and young women. Now what is wrong and what is right about the statement?

Were not librarians then reasonably intelligent and were they not knowledgeable about books? Lawrence Clark Powell's name comes instantly to mind. But then, he had a Ph.D., in English, and would not fit Prof. Shils's definition of the professional librarian.

One thing Prof. Shils got right, even if some current librarians are still agonizing over their status. He says that librarianship is a profession that, while paying poorly, pays steadily. Like the Rock of Gibraltar! What an image.

But what of this bookishness without being interested in the contents of books? Let's return to Lawrence Clark Powell. Powell is intelligent, bookish, an English Ph.D., he has written books, and he hangs out with authors — Henry Miller, for heaven's sake, was one of his buddies. I am proud that he is a librarian and one of the best ever, but he is an exception nowadays, not so much in his younger days as you might imagine, despite his friendship with notable and noted authors of his day. Booksellers and librarians used to be bookish AND they knew the insides of books as well as the outsides.

Are the librarians of today bookish without being interested in the contents of books? Judging from the current state of librarianship, especially academic librarianship, I would say that there is evidence to support this proposition.

During a recent ALA Annual Conference, I was lured to yet another program that failed to provide even one paper that matched the title of the program. I should know better by now but having been on a campaign to revive the phrase, "Garbage In — Garbage Out" when talking about the Internet, I was suckered by the program title. I like to take people and things at face value and save my cynicism for television journalism.

But I digress. I was lamenting the false advertising of an ALA program. I understand how difficult it is to get speakers, especially those who will draw a big audience and not expect \$50,000 per talk, but you can't expect the Queen of the Internet to speak about books in the stacks. We should not expect bookishness in people so totally engrossed in the Internet much less expect them to be knowledgeable about the contents of books, "good scholarly and scientific books and worthwhile literary works," to quote Prof. Shils again.

(His essay is quite good, actually, despite his besmirching the honor of all of those librarians, past, present, and future, who read good books.)

Stacks? What stacks? The closest any speaker got to books in the stacks was in references to all of those library catalogs on the Internet. But that instant access to all of those electronic catalogs is fool's gold. The real gold must be examined closely to be mined, refined, and hammered into something useful — another piece of gold or silver.

Lawrence Clark Powell, in *The Little Package* (Cleveland and New York: 1964), says that: "The public expects two things of a librarian: that he be bookish and that he be cordial. Call me simple if you will, but I believe that any worker in a library, regardless of rank, who is not both bookish and cordial is in the wrong work. And by "bookish," I mean informed about the contents of whatever library he works in."

This Powell quote is from the chapter called "What's Wrong With Librarians?" "In my fight against non-bookism in library work and with unsocial scientists, I have rallied many librarians and laymen to the cause, in a revival of reading. Sick of jargon, and of surveys which spin out what we already know, of so-called human engineering and the decision-making process, of the flight into techniques of those unbelievers who will do everything to a book but read it, these lonely librarians and readers have rallied to the old-fashioned gospel that books are basic, books are best, books are to be read and shared, world without end."

Amen! And another amen was heard yesterday in a symposium at the University of Oklahoma, honoring the investiture of its 13th president, David Boren. The symposium was on "The Future of American Politics" and featured Paul Tsongas, Jack Valenti, and David Gergen. Mr. Gergen, toward the end of the program and in answer to a question from a student in the audience, implored him and all the other students to use their college years for extended reading of books that are not assigned or required or expected of them. It was clear from listening to these three men that their native intelligence has been used to acquire wisdom through reading tempered by life. Intelligence alone will only allow one to survive

as a crafty animal of the wild survives.

Walt Crawford and Michael German have written a book that echoes some of Lawrence Clark Powell's concerns, a book that

examines our (librarians) apparent inability to defend ourselves against the disciples of Bill Gates, Internet royalty, and philistines who lack even the minimal intellect and attention span necessary to read *USA Today*. The book is *Future Libraries: Dreams, Madness, Reality* (Chicago: ALA, 1995, \$25 pbk., ISBN 0-8389-0647-8) and should be required reading for all practicing librarians, library educators, and library school students. There is a lot of talk about this book but it deserves to be read and then discussed and not discussed on the basis of what you think it is about and what you think of the authors. You can't trust the reviews already out, either, because the reviewers have either tried to pillory the authors or are (mis)reading the book out of context and without familiarity of other words dealing with broader issues, most notably, *The Myth of the Electronic Library*, by William Birdsall.

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Crawford and Gorman go beyond my own concerns that we not forget the riches in our stacks and that we make the distinction between information and knowledge although those are among their concerns. The authors can speak for themselves, and quite eloquently, but I feel sure that the main purpose of their book was to quiet the shrill, hysterical voices that think that change is precipitous and an all or nothing proposition, and that our salvation, as the New Millennium approaches, is to become totally electronic, whether it makes sense or not. But that is not even part of the debate, at least not within ALA.

It is time for the rest of us to take stock of what is actually going on in our libraries and to begin to share the truth with our colleagues. We know that the Internet is useful and that CD-ROMs, when we can afford them, offer our patrons and ourselves ways of looking for information that would either be impossible manually or would take much more time. We know that online catalogs, even the clunkier ones, offer vast improvements over card catalogs just as card catalogs improved over the book catalogs of earlier times.

But we also know that the indexes, abstracts, and other pointers are there to help our patrons find the material that they need. Gorman and Crawford, in the first chapter of *Future Libraries*, cite Mortimer Adler's distinction between what he calls "the four goods of the mind," which are information, knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. They further divide information into data — facts and other raw material that can be processed into useful information — and information — data processed and rendered useful. Knowledge is defined as information transformed into meaning, understanding is knowledge integrated with a world view and a personal perspective and exists entirely within the human mind, as does wisdom, understanding made whole and generative. Isn't this obvious? And isn't it obvious that our stacks are full, even overflowing, with such material? Do you really want to waste all of that or any of that just because some whiny zealot tells you that it isn't hip, it is the result of the tyranny of editors, publishers, tenure committees? Do you waste those invaluable resources because they aren't electronically accessible from a computer? And I don't mean bibliographically accessible, I mean accessible, as in touching, feeling, reading.

Who knows what the future holds? Not even the Shadow knows. We must continue to move with the times. but only a desperate people with no hope or sense burn bridges behind them.

During the 1940s, literary folk were enamored of anything in French. Arthur Koestler called it the French Flu. Library folk in the 1990s have caught the CyberFlu. It is a serious, debilitating disease but there is hope because there is a cure. It is called common sense.

Gesundheit! 🐾

Electronic Journal Access
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print will continue to be significant and we shouldn't underestimate the agents' importance there.

"In these early, experimental stages, Elsevier Science and, in fact, other publishers, have tended to work directly with librarians and end-users because we're very involved in a development and refinement process and close collaboration is essential. As we move to a larger-scale electronic delivery environment involving the large subscriber base presently well-served by subscription agents, then the parameters of the agents' role will emerge. Right now, we are in an evolutionary stage, exploring what information can be delivered electronically and how to accomplish it. Thus it is very difficult to clearly define the agents' role at this point." 🐾

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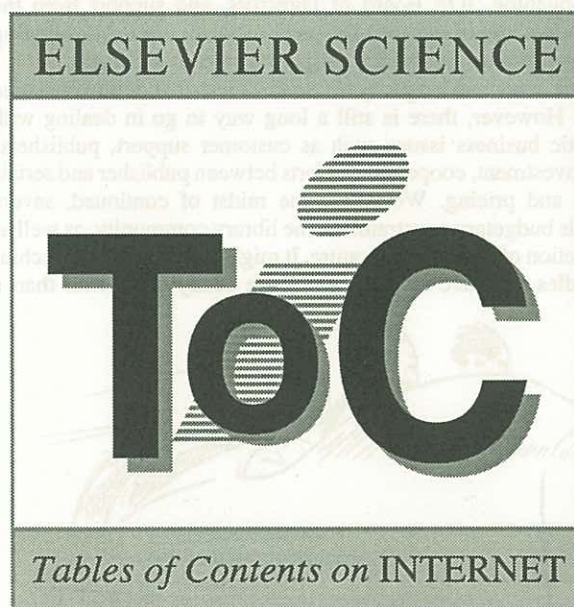
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