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Not Fit For Print

The Facts, Ma'am, All I Want Are the Facts . . .

by Tony Leisner (Dawsons)

Tony Leisner was loafing when it was time for the November issue of ATG, but he has delivered a great column this time. I guess you can have another chance, Tony, just this once! — KS

For more than a year the editor of *Against the Grain* has given me an unusual freedom in the business of writing. She has allowed me to write a column without a heading which, while not Royko or Barry, has enabled me to delude myself ever-so-slightly into thinking that it is my opinions or clever humor and insight that people seek to read. Not true it turns out. When the column is quoted it is the facts that are picked out and only those that relate to the looming "threat" of non-traditional library services or substitutes. In other words, I'm supposed to be writing about the future of libraries and the electronic publishing industry and this led to the new heading for this regular column, Not Fit For Print.

Well, I'm here to tell you, and the editor, that I'm just plain not going to do that if it means that I have to load this space up with tons of "facts" that you can quote and predictions of a future where librarians are in control of their destiny because they have these facts. The reason? It isn't fun! Now what does fun have to do with electronic publishing and the information age? While at the recent **Charleston Conference** (the 14th), which was the best ever in my opinion, I heard a librarian discussing the inability of students to use the library properly at the college where she worked. She wasn't happy at all that a student had come to the library seeking an answer for a class assignment and the student only wanted the facts. He didn't want to learn how the library works, how to use all the tools properly, how to search out appropriate resources and references, he just wanted the facts. Sounds like he has a promising career ahead as a librarian. But seriously, this incident which no doubt is repeated thousands of times daily in America's libraries should lead you to a conclusion.

Too many librarians are control freaks. The language of librarianship is loaded with phrases and words like authority, control, official and governed by a system of numbers and letters and there are hundreds of meetings where librarians discuss how they will control access, circulation and patron behavior. It isn't just their own control systems that they talk about either. They seem to welcome control from higher authority too. These professionals are quicker to comply with ADA and diversity and AACR2 than they are to introduce circulating CD-ROM's or Nintendo/Sega games. They are concerned that their association's aren't lobbying hard enough in Washington to force the government into making the library a major artery in the information superhighway. In my observation they are terrified that if they lose control, they will be found out and someone will discover that they are no longer needed in an age of electronic information.

The information age is about losing control. It is about raucous crowds of kids in an arcade demonstrating a manual dexterity and quickness of mind that boggles their elders. It is about encyclopedias that talk back to you with animation and music and spoken speeches of famous people. Edutainment is more than just the facts, it is fun filled facts. Many library reviewers said that the electronic encyclopedias were lightweight and shallow. Yet the public buys them by the millions. The reviewer thinks the library should be more serious, and the public thinks it should be more fun. Why can't it be both? Millions of children learned to read and count with Big Bird and Count Dracula and they didn't have to worry about being called sexual harassers when they laughed at Miss Piggy.

One of this season's hit movies will be **The Pagemaster**. It is Macaulay Culkin's of *Home Alone* fame but with a twist. It is acted, animated, has a public library as its focal point and it is non-preachy. This feature film puts the fun back in classic literature and the library and does it using the tools that kids are most familiar with. A young person like themselves, cartoons and a screen. One reviewer's conclusion was that **The Pagemaster** reminds us that the best piece of paper in our wallets may be a library card. But there is a reminder of librarian control in the movie when our main character finds he can only check out two books. After all, if a little reading is good . . .

The big question in my mind is where will the kids go after they see the movie. Will they go to the arcade expecting to find the classics on their familiar game machine or will they go to the library and find public access multimedia stations where they can continue the adventure. Multimedia is boisterous and loud and noisy and fun and it means giving up a measure of control. The original multimedia show in the library was the story hour. It had voice and pictures and an animated librarian. The crowd was emotional and enthralled and got into the act by laughing and clapping for the good guys. Story hour was an arcade for the mind and librarians had fun running the show.

Today, it seems, having fun means taking a risk. Trying something new. Taking a chance that what you say or do won't be "something for everyone." That it will stir some into wishing for the way things used to be and whetting the appetites of those who can't wait for what will be. More money is spent willingly on games in arcades than is collected in taxes for books in libraries. Is it the fun factor? ☹