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ATG Interviews Mike Eisenberg

About Libraries, Information, and Education in the 21st Century

by **Lisa Spagnolo** (Assistant Acquisitions Librarian, Monographic Services Division, University of Washington Libraries, Box 352900, Seattle, Washington) <lspagnol@u.washington.edu>

Michael B. Eisenberg (Ph.D., Syracuse University, MLS, State University of New York at Albany) is the Dean of the Information School at the University of Washington. In this position since August 1998, Mike has led the transformation of the School into a broad-based, global information school—noted for high quality and high impact.

Mike's latest works, co-authored with **Bob Berkowitz** are, *Teaching Information and Technology Skills: The Big6 in Secondary Schools*, and *Teaching Information and Technology Skills: The Big6 in Elementary Schools*. Some of Mike's other major publications include: *Information Literacy: Essential Skills for the Information Age* (with **Kathy Spitzer** and **Carrie Lowe**, ERIC, 1998), *Helping With Homework: A Parents Guide to Information Problem-Solving* (with **Bob Berkowitz**, ERIC, 1997).

He has worked as a teacher, library media specialist, program administrator, and consultant. He is nationally known for his innovative approach to problem-solving and critical thinking/information and technology skills development: the Big6 Skills. For many years, Mike was Director of the Information Institute of Syracuse, which includes the ERIC Clearinghouse on Information & Technology and the award-winning AskERIC service. Mike is also co-founder and co-coordinator (with **Peter Milbury**) of LM_NET, the electronic discussion group on the Internet for the library media community. In 1990, Mike received the *Distinguished Alumni Award*, School of Information Science and Policy of the Nelson A. Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and Policy, University at Albany, and was the 1994 recipient of the School Library Media Section/New York Library Association Presidential Award for Professional Achievement.

ATG: Let's start with all of the recent changes in the School of Library and Information Science—now the Information School. There have been so many. Would you like to tell us about those?

ME: We're starting our fourth year, so I've been in this school a little over three years. I would rather talk about outputs and meaningful things rather than inputs. I could talk about the number of faculty and the space and the budget, but that's not the real change. The real change is that the MLIS program is now bigger than it's ever been in history in terms of number of students. I think we're at 260-259 students in the program now, and

when I arrived we had around 165. That's a growth of 100 students in that program. A year from now we'll have 35 more than that because we'll have started the distance masters program in Library and Information Science. Plus we totally revamped that curriculum—we've gone from a smorgasbord curriculum where you pick one from column A, one from column B, and you could take any reference course that you wanted or any course in organization and cataloging, or information behavior. Now there's a core in each of those, which comprises about half the program, and then total electives, so we think we've got the best of both worlds. In fact we're working real hard on revising all the courses, so the biggest change in the MLIS is just tremendous expansion and a revitalized curriculum.

Also I'd say, in relation to that, there has been a strengthened connection to the community. Like some schools, we had a bit of a reputation for being in the ivory tower. Up on the hill, we didn't venture out into the community a whole lot. Well, I've been in Spokane four times, and we had an official faculty meeting at Tacoma at the Washington Library Association two years ago. Faculty have spoken all over the state and in the region—Montana, Wyoming, Idaho, Alaska, and of course Oregon a number of times. So that's been a really big change.

Also, the other change is that the Library and Information Science program is not the only program in this school, as it had been for the past 90 years. The school is 90 years old this year having started in 1911 as the School of Librarianship. We now have a Bachelors of Science in Informatics, which is an upper division program, meaning that it's a junior-senior 2-year degree program. Students get a 4-year degree but they take our courses for two years. Informatics, which is the study of information and information systems, is very compatible with the library program, but also a bit different. We're not training people to go work in libraries necessarily, as we are consistent with the ALA position that the entry-level degree is the masters in library science. But these students go into information management positions, or technology positions. There's probably a technology bias in this program, but what's really

nice is that they rub shoulders with the masters students and develop a really healthy respect for libraries and what librarians do. We have about 60 students in that program now and it will probably grow to 75 or so.

We now have a second masters, the Masters of Science in Information Management. It is a 2-year mid-career part-time program. People come on Fridays and Saturdays. We even have some librarians interested in upgrading their skills, but most of the people in there are from the corporate world. We have folks who come from Microsoft as you would expect, and also from start-ups and non-

profits. It is a program that focuses on developing what we're calling the "information perspective." Any program in information management or technology would focus on management and IT skills or information systems, but what we bring is an understanding of the organization of information that actually comes from our library roots in taxonomies and metadata and all that stuff. We bring in the user perspective and human/information behavior and an understanding of all that, which includes the service aspect as well as the information policy aspect. That's something that a business school or computer science program can't necessarily bring to the practice of management. But our perspective permeates through the program so you can imagine a matrix of management and information systems and then these areas of policy, information behavior and the organization of information crossing those. And that's the exciting part—at least that's the way we're trying to explain the program this week.

And then we have a Ph.D. program in Information Science that we just started—we're in our second class this year. And I think for next year we already have inquiries from 175 people—just inquiries. You don't get that for a doctoral program, maybe you get 30 inquiries or 50 inquiries. It's phenomenal. It shows that there's a big pent-up demand, and we've disappointed some people since it's a full-time program not a part-time degree. It is extensive—it's a 4- or 5-year commitment, but it's a research degree so students get to push the limits of what we know about information and information organization and follow more of a research approach. It's similar to degrees at Pitts-

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burgh, Illinois, North Carolina, Michigan, Drexel, Syracuse and all the other top information schools. So, those are the biggest changes. We're approaching 400 students, and when I came there were 160 students total.

And now I can give you some of the inputs. We now have 25 faculty, when I came there were 7. We now have 15 staff rather than 2 when I arrived. We have 39 funded graduate research or teaching assistants—when I came we had 2 1/2. We have relations with the **Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation**, the **University Libraries**, **Seattle Public Library**, **King County Library System**, as well as other institutions within Washington and in other states. We have 19 funded and 24 major research projects, which are bringing in around \$3 million total. We are in brand new facilities called **Mary Gates Hall** (Recognize the last name? That's Bill Gates' mother). It's high quality space that we're already running out of. We really revitalized the school and transformed it. We consider ourselves now ready to be considered as one of the top schools in the country if not the world. We're ready to prove ourselves in that. I'm not known for modesty but I think there's some evidence that the **University of Washington** is ready to play as one of the major schools in our field.

ATG: *You've also had support from campus in these developments, not just from the administration but also other departments.*

ME: Yes, there's been tremendous collaboration. First of all, it's a very collaborative atmosphere. And yes, the administration has given us the support in terms of a green light and encouragement, and some money—we were part of a University Initiative Fund, which is a way of funding new ventures on the campus. But we've also done it with major partnerships—University Libraries, right off the top. We have wonderful relations there, first with **Betty Bengtson**, the former director who retired at the end of 2000, and now **Betsy Wilson** and her whole staff from the top managers to folks on the front lines. One of our faculty members has even worked at the reference desk once a week, **Joe Janes**. University faculty teach for us in the library program, but they also teach undergraduate courses on campus in information research strategies as part of the Information School's offerings to the campus.

Computer Science and Engineering, the 4th ranked computer science school in the country, has been one of our biggest allies and supporters and they have worked with us on designing programs, on developing opportunities, and on doing research together. They have also supported us in just recognizing the value that library and information people bring to the table. **Ed Lasowska**, who recently stepped down as chair, has been

known to say that Computer Science folks make a contribution but they don't quite get it—it's people with library experience who understand what it means to put technology in people's hands for a purpose, and there's a partnership between the "computer geeks" and library folks, and that's how we really start to move forward. He's doing that a bit tongue in cheek but it's indicative of the openness with which we've been accepted.

We're working with the Jackson School of International Studies on some special ways of linking international situations, opportunities, and policies with the library and information field. We work with the Law School. We've always had a fine law librarianship program, and we've maintained and expanded that a bit. We have close relations with the Health Sciences Library and with the whole health sciences area. We're partners on a new project in biomedical and health informatics which is really cool. We also have something called HSPICE, which is the Health Sciences Partnerships in Interdisciplinary Clinical Education. No, it's not about the Spice Girls. It's an interdisciplinary approach to health care, and what's really neat is that one of the areas that they recognized needed to be represented on the team was the information side. So we have public health folks, nurses, physicians and librarians helping to treat patients. I could go on with other schools, and I don't mean to leave anybody out, but we've reached pretty much across campus. We've had some contact with Business—frankly that's a little more of a turf thing that I think we're overcoming—but there's certainly room to explore our commonalities there as well.

ATG: *Extending beyond campus as well, of course?*

ME: In the community we've had wonderful opportunities and open arms from the **Seattle Public Library**, **King County Library System**, **Microsoft**, **Amazon**, and the **Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation**. This is a great place. Seattle is one of the centers of the Information Age, and I'm not going to tell you it's been easy, but it's certainly been easier than if we had been in a geographical area that's a little more isolated. And these places have just opened their arms, in addition to local chapters of organizations like the **Special Libraries Association**, the **Washington Library Association**. They've done an amazing thing for our students. They have a special deal that you can join the **Washington Library Association** and the **American Library Association** for a single student rate, which is very low. There's a student member on every committee of the **Washington State Library Association** now. It's just happened in the last five months or so.

ATG: *Earlier you placed faculty on the "input" side of the equation. But doesn't the presence of the faculty and the range of research interests they have afford a lot of*

opportunities for students that weren't necessarily there in the past? I was wondering if you would talk about some of the research and teaching interests of the faculty?

ME: Our research and development projects have a very broad scope and base. As long as it's information at the center it counts as part of the Information School. We met with someone from **Marine and Fisheries** today about a major grant related to marine and fishing-type information. There's a whole information retrieval aspect, and questions about representation, so we brought in a faculty member who does information retrieval systems, someone who does services, another who focuses on taxonomies and cataloging, and those are all interests of our faculty, as well as human behavior. You can characterize our research as starting with people: how do people use information, how do they interact with systems, how do they interact with libraries, how do they interact in physical environments, in virtual environments, etc. I'm not going to name names, because I'll leave someone out and then I'll be in trouble. We do a lot in the human/information behavior area as well as in the healthcare area, but the context is less important than the information part. We have a very strong systems group—people who actually work in developing systems, again information retrieval systems. There's an area called value sensitive design, which is designing systems that enhance and reinforce people's values, like privacy or security. One of our faculty has done work in the area of looking at browsers and cookies and the way they interact, and you'd be shocked to see how many cookies are created every time you click on a Website. We have a knowledge applications lab, where faculty and students interact to develop new systems. We have faculty working on metadata projects and the whole representation area, including the theoretical aspects, which is very interesting. Then we have more of the services side: we're working on information literacy, and we have some projects with the state in that area as well as digital reference. You asked how students are involved: students are infused in all of these studies from undergraduate to Ph.D., a hefty number of masters students and in particular library students. Some of those 39 graduate assistantships are actually research assistantships. Students wind up on publications as co-authors, and they're put in situations where they never had an opportunity before to learn methodologies. We have a required course in the program in research methods and understanding research and I think it will carry over to jobs.

ATG: *Would you elaborate on how those projects involve information content, in terms of providing content and organizing information?*

ME: Of course there's the question of collection development: what is a collection

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today? I've thought about that a lot, and I would define a collection as a prediction of future need. We try to understand a user group and who our users might be, and we want to try to make some kind of prediction of what are they going to need a lot, and that's what we'll build our immediate collection around. If there's more of a peripheral need, we wouldn't incorporate that material into the core collection, but we would try to borrow that or to kick into someone else's services. A Website, then, could be a collection. A portal is a prediction of future need, so I think it's the same principles of collection development that we would bring to bear upon new media. So our projects might relate to building a portal or a collection for a certain group, and that might start with user analysis, etc. There are a number of faculty who use that type of project in their classes. Being able to gather a collection across formats and across situations to meet needs is very much at the center of what we do, and then representing that now with new methods of retrieval and cataloging and metadata and subject access is really important.

You know, one of the buzzphrases of this year is "content management systems," and we have people with library backgrounds who are interested in that, and we also have folks who come to us from industry who are interested in that as well. That's at the core of what we do, whether it's in more traditional library environments or in more off-the-wall environments like the dot.coms, which, by the way, are still around. There's a need for electronic environments, and what we're finding is that the world wants to know what librarians know. They tried to do the Web, and we failed miserably in trying to make a usable Web for people, so whether it's **Tim Berners-Lee** talking about semantic networks or it's **Amazon** trying to sell a product better or it's someone putting a portal together on marine life, someone will say: "Do you librarians know anything about how you select materials that are 'quality' and correct and make those available to people, correct in the sense that they will meet people's needs?" "Do you know anything about how you organize and represent those things and make links to other things and ensure quality?" And, you know, we smile, and we don't beat them over the head with it and say, "Why didn't you come to us five years ago?" We simply say "yes, in fact there's a long tradition of librarians knowing a lot about this, and we can bring those things to bear on the project." The thing is that the window will not be open forever, and it's our job to deliver on that. So while it's nice to be recognized now, and we can use any help that we

can get from the audience for this interview or from the library field in "what is the essence of what we know in library and information science about collection development, about acquisitions, about building knowledge bases that meet people's needs?" What are the ten fundamental principles of acquisitions that everybody would agree on? I would love to take those and to apply them to a digital environment. I would love to show folks over at **MSNSearch** or **Yahoo** what applying those principles would mean, because they're just reinventing wheels, or trying to.

ATG: *You mention this window of opportunity. What are the factors that are going to influence or prevent the window's closing?*

ME: We need to step up to the plate and be proactive. Librarians are cautious and modest. By cautious, I mean that we don't want to say something we're not sure of. That's very ethical—I believe in that. But when we think we may know the ten principles of acquisitions, we may be reluctant to say so, because who are we to say this to other people? Well, that's not the way it works in the business world. They float dot-coms when they don't even know one principle, and they go ahead and do it. So, we have to be able to get in there and not be afraid to put those things on the table. Also we can't whine that they didn't come to us before. They don't want to hear that. All right, they made some mistakes and they set the Web up wrong, and if they'd only

listened to librarians, etc. But that's the past. It's a matter of recognizing the opportunity and showing our stuff. If you have expertise in collection development, in developing controlled vocabularies, in metadata, in setting up services that people want, it's really going to get you ahead. We see that already at Microsoft alone. Some of the former students who are placed at Microsoft are getting sucked up into top positions. We see that also in the library field. It's about proactive people who are confident that they do know something, and when they don't know they're not afraid to say it. I'm not saying we should be phony or false, but we shouldn't be afraid of saying that we know something about this, and we can contribute something. So I think we can make that opening permanent, and then expand it, by getting out there, and also working together on it.

We're involved in an Internet 2 project—they're developing the new generation of the Internet, a thousand times faster than the current Internet and all that. They're doing something called middleware, which is the level of software that makes it all work together. We got involved in the project called "the directory of directories of higher education," which is taking all the directories of various universities and having them interact. So if you're looking for "Mike Eisenberg" you

don't have to know he's at the **University of Washington**. When you retrieve 85 different Mike Eisenbergs, you'll be able to find the one you want. We said, "Wait a second, there are some real issues to think about here. Issues such as authority control. There's this thing called the Library of Congress that has this big authority file, and we might be able to learn something from that." And their eyes opened right up, and they're hungry for this. We're finding this very receptive atmosphere, and then they say "give us more, show more." Once we've proven our point, this moment will continue and we can expand. It's not just us. We couldn't do it alone, so we brought in other library and information schools. We're partnering with Michigan and Syracuse. One of the ways to keep that window open is to remember that it's not just the University of Washington, or your group, it's also opening the window to other groups.

ATG: *You mentioned that students are going into libraries, and they're going to Microsoft. Where else are they going today?*

ME: I think that about 70% of graduates are still going to places that are recognizable as libraries, and that's good. The good news is that is that we once had 165 students and 70% going into libraries, now we have 250 and 70% going into libraries. The perception that there are fewer people going into libraries is a mistake. I believe that there are more people in library education—students—than ever before in history. Fifteen years ago we had a shrinkage of library schools. But now we have more library schools thriving as information schools than ever before, and more people in library programs, and more graduating. There are geographical shortages, and there is no question that there are shortages, for example, in children's services, and some other areas. We can address those—it's a supply and demand thing, but we're very healthy as a field in library education today, and that's collectively. If there's an opening at the University of Washington, and we don't have a graduate to fill it, I can assure you that I would do everything I can to find someone from the University of Texas, or Maryland, or Florida State or someplace else. It's healthy. It wouldn't be healthy for University of Washington Libraries or our school to have every Libraries slot filled with graduates from the Information School. We need this mix.

We have a very healthy Children's and Youth Service's area—I think we have 23 students in that area right now. And there are a zillion jobs out there in that. We have to do a better match for these jobs, and that's something we're working on. We do have students going into taxonomy work. **Joel Summerlin**, for example, is working at **Corbis**, and was on the cover of *Library Journal* this past October. He loves cataloging and organization, and when he found this job he knew it was for him. There's a whole renaissance in cata-

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logging and classification, but it's called metadata and taxonomies. There are lots of jobs in that area. We have four faculty who teach in that area. A number of people are going into school libraries—that's my own background and I encourage people to go into that field. But even there there's a transformation of the role from something more passive to a more active teacher-librarian, who teaches information skills, serves as a reading advocate to get kids excited, and performs information management. We have a healthy number there. We have folks in corporate libraries—not just special libraries in corporations, but people working with databases, in marketing, in standards. One of our graduates is a standards specialist, and he goes around working with the World Wide Web Consortium, Dublin Core, OCLC. I think we're pretty indicative of the other schools. It's like a gold rush out there. There are plenty of jobs for information people, and we want them to move around. Maybe you'll spend five years at a university library, and then you'll go work at Amazon for three to five years, and then you'll come back and work over in Children's Services in Yakima.

ATG: *This might be a good opportunity to address professional competencies. What we've seen recently are some graduates who have gone off to dot-coms coming back to the academy and trying to roll with the economic downturn. How do you see the school's role in preparing students to weather those changes? Do you see professional competencies changing at all?*

ME: In the short term we're very concerned about responding to economic needs. Boeing workers are getting laid off right now. There's a real concern with stepping up to the plate and helping them. We have contributed to the university plan for helping to provide special opportunities for those workers to get—I hate the word “retraining”—to pursue new opportunities through education. The more fundamental part of your question is how does the core of the MLIS program—the competencies, skills, and knowledge—shift based upon the economy. I would say not as much as we might think. We have a very rich 2-year program, and students take many different courses and have different opportunities. We've developed the core of 9 courses—it's pretty elaborate. It's the same mix that I think a group of readers would come up with: we need a service and resources course; we need a course in how people use information, a human behavior course; we need a policy course; we need a management course; we need a course in cataloging and organization; let's add a course in research methods. We also have a course covering the teaching and training role, and I think we're the only school in the country to have a required course in that. And then we

have a technology and systems course and a more general course of the life cycle of information. That's pretty good grounding for someone going into anything. It's kind of like being a cross-country skier. If you've ever gone downhill on cross country skies, you bend up your front foot and you bend back your back foot a little, so if you hit something tough you don't fall over. That's kind of what the core does. And then there's this rich set of electives that students can get into at one depth or another. Right now there are plenty of jobs in almost any of those areas, but I guess if the economy changed one way or another that the electives might shift one way or another. We're very committed to the legal librarianship, to children's and youth services, reference work, to public libraries—so I don't think that it's a faddish kind of a program. I think library education has matured enough these days that we know what the core competencies are. If we got any group of 15 people in the field together they might come up with a curriculum that looks a lot like ours in terms of what's covered. We believe that every student that comes out of the University of Washington Information School library program should have this certain set that people can rely on, and that's the core.

ATG: *This next question hits you a lot, in different versions. You dropped “Library” from the School's name, however it's still in one of your masters degrees, the MLIS. How has the school balanced a commitment to libraries with a commitment to other information fields?*

ME: There are a lot of reasons why the school is now called the Information School. The biggest reason is that the school now represents a broad spectrum in the information field, from undergraduate through Ph.D., and there are many students in our programs who are not in a program called “library.” We had a choice of using a name that's kind of like a laundry list. We could have called it the School of Library, Information Management, Informatics, Information Science, and a Partridge-in-a-Pear-Tree, if we wanted. That's not good cataloging, by the way. Good cataloging says you try to find a broader term. The most common term that unites us all is the “information” word. And we really like being called the **Information School**, so partly we think it's a better descriptor of what we are. We also think, frankly, that it's a good political term. It captures some really high ground on campus. It's a bit sexy. The students are calling us the **iSchool** now. It's really helped us to solidify our place on campus.

The political reality on university campuses is that very small units who are narrow have trouble staying independent. Many library programs are now no longer in Library

and Information Schools, but they're in much larger units that encompass a lot of other things. We've really bucked the trend, in that we've moved from a school that was under the Graduate School to independent status as the Information School, and I moved from Director to Dean. I don't know how many schools have done that in the last 25 years, and I can tell you that it doesn't happen on this campus often. What I'd like to say is that we are the home of the library and information program, not just for the state but for the Northwest. And not only have we maintained it, but we've expanded it. It's expanded faster than even our new programs. It's not just a lip service kind of thing. A library program is at the heart of what we do. It is our largest program. All of our faculty teach across programs. So, we are a library school, but we're also an informatics school, and an information technology school, etc. I understand some of the concern of dropping the “l-word,” that it's dangerous in term of recognition or might endanger the program down the road. But I think our actions speak louder than any words, and I think it's appropriate to call us an Information School, and to have a really

strong library program at the heart of it. When we were a library school, if you asked people at the **Spokane County Public Library System** if they ever saw anybody from the school, well maybe here and there. If you asked them lately if they've seen anybody from the **Information School** representing the library program, they would say yeah,

I've seen **Mike Eisenberg** more in the last year and a half than I saw all of the faculty put together in the last 20 years. Look at our actions. I've presented at a **Central Oregon Library Council** meeting recently. I'm going down to **Fort Vancouver Public Library** to present. We're out there. We're not defensive about changing our name. It was an important development of our school.

ATG: *Last question: we were wondering if you would put on your futurist hat. We would like you to do some forecasting regarding gadgets, user behavior, information behavior, or any related topic that grabs your fancy.*

ME: I often quote **Bill Gates**, and I live in Seattle now, so you have to quote **Bill Gates**, as saying that computers today are a million times more powerful than 20 years ago. This is the 20th anniversary of the IBM-PC. If you think about the IBM-PC with about 256K of RAM and two floppy drives, you can compare that to today's gigabyte processors and 30, 40, 50 gigabyte hard drives. But what Gates also said is that 20 years from now computers are going to be a million times more powerful than today. So computers are not going to exist as we know them. And I really see this business of ubiquitous embedded computing as very important to us in our

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field. Our tabletops are going to be intelligent. Our rooms, our environments are going to be intelligent. The Net will be everywhere. That poses the biggest challenge and opportunity for us because as the hardware and software becomes less of a focus, information becomes more of a focus. We'll have true information appliances, whether it's a portable slate or a "softbook." Whether it's my keyring or my earring, it might be my communications connection. We'll exist in this information environment that is parallel to the real world that will feedback on it constantly. I have no idea what the implications of that will be, but I know that the focus won't be worrying about filtering software on the bank of 20 computers in the corner of a public library or that 300 station computer lab in an undergraduate library on a campus. How are we going to reuse that room? I've got some eyes on that now. That's what's great. I've seen it in the **Health Sciences library** in the footprint for the shelving, and it's shrunk dramatically. They're probably 1/10th the size that they were 20 years ago. Now they're filled up with computer terminals. So 20 years from now, those will have shrunk to 1/10th and there will something else that kind of looks like a computing terminal, but the table and other objects will be intelligent and they will be feeding information to people. There will be computing everywhere. The collaboration role, the "unique place" access to information resources, the broker or the intermediary role in physical or virtual environments—all of those things are the kinds of concerns that we have to deal with. And to those who say that everything will be digital and so we don't need librarians, I say that it's just the opposite. So much will be digital that we'll need librarians and librarians even more.

ATG: Death of the book?

ME: People say that. I don't believe that. I think the book is very healthy—it's a wonderful format for a lot of different uses. One of our faculty, **David Levy**, has just finished a book called *Scrolling Forward: Documents in the Digital Age*, which raises a lot more questions than it answers. But, it's really good in raising those questions. No, I don't believe in death of the book at all. Many more things will be digital, and to me that's all great for us. The more information problems there are in the world the more there's a need for librarians and information people, and information schools. Selection and quality become more and more paramount. That's why the work of collection developers and acquisitions folks is so important. Libraries select quality things. You don't waste your time in selecting something and putting it into a library collection, whether it's a database, or an artifact, or a Website, unless you know it's quality. Want quality, forget **Yahoo!**, forget **Google**, get a library.

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Something About Books

by **Jack Walsdorf** (Jack Walsdorf Books, Portland, Oregon) <jackjuno@teleport.com>

I was, quite by chance and good for tune, recently spending a weekend in Lexington after giving my book-collecting lecture at the **University of Kentucky**. My visit coincided with the 20th **Annual Kentucky Book Fair** held at the **State University in Frankfort**. As good luck would have it, this Book Fair included a number of authors I collect, read and admire. Authors such as **Wendell Berry**, **Allen W. Eckert**, **James Baker Hall**, **Bobbie Ann Mason**, **Sharyn McCrumb** and **Richard Taylor** were in attendance. As they like to say in the ad writing business, a star-studded cast.

One of the authors with the longest line of people waiting to get books signed was **Homer Hickam**, the product of a small coal-mining town in southwestern West Virginia called Coalwood. His name, for many of the readers of *Against the Grain*, may not ring a bell. But the movie, "October Sky," based on his 1998 book *Rocket Boys: A Memoir*, went a long way towards introducing this retired NASA engineer to a wide range of readers.

I was struck, most pleasantly, to find that the boy **Homer Hickam, Jr.** we find in the movie is very much like the character to be

found in the trilogy which started with *Rocket Boys*, followed by *The Coalwood Way* (2000) and *Sky of Stone* (2001), all published by **DeLacorte Press**.

I was also very pleasantly surprised at the writing style, referred to on the blurb of his last books as "an eloquent evocation... a thoroughly charming memoir" by the *New York Times* reviewer. In a strange and totally disconnected way I was reminded of the writing style of the English critic and mystery writer **Julian Symons**. Here, for example, is Symons writing in his 1950 mystery based on the life of an English businessman in *The 31st of February*: "At a quarter to ten on Monday morning a small regiment of black Homburg hats marched down Bezy Street. Beneath the hats advertising men were to be found..."

Here is **Hickam** writing in *Rocket Boys* some fifty years later and 4,000 miles from London: "He joined the line of men and quickly disappeared, one black helmet in a river of black, bobbing helmets, all going up the path to the [coal mine] tippel."

Hickam's memoirs, totally more than 1,050 pages in three volumes, are written in the best tradition of the southern storytellers, with lots of warmth, humor and sadness. This

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