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Devil's Advocate — Libraries in Science Fiction

by **Robert Molyneux** (Assistant Professor, University of South Carolina, School of Library & Information Science) <drdata@molyneux.com>

Science Fiction (scifi) is sometimes called "speculative fiction" because the genre involves manipulating possible futures or pasts. A subset of the stories are "space operas," a term that indicates these stories are like the "horse operas" many of us grew up watching on TV in the 50s; that is, strictly escapist adventure. Historically, scifi was largely the province of young men—the kind of young men who now play with computers. However, not all of the works of scifi were merely space operas; many involved what the world (or worlds) would be like in the future and how people would function in these futures. Occasionally these works became part of the language and literature of our society, such as **George Orwell's** *1984* (1949).

Here I consider what Science Fiction works have to say about libraries and the library function in the various futures they treat.

Libraries and the library function are touched on tangentially in a number of works. **Jerry Pournelle's** *Janissaries* (1979) involves a colony of humans on a distant planet who were hijacked there by intergalactic drug traders. This planet has been colonized from different times in Earth's history with the result that there are books lost on Earth but are extant there.

Clifford Simak's *Way Station* involves Enoch Wallace, who runs a way station through which galactic travelers pass on their trips here and there. We get only the barest glimpses of the civilization that maintains this network, but we learn that Wallace sends the science journals he subscribes to somewhere in the galaxy. Presumably, then, there are libraries in space with our publications. That is a thought to ponder. (Let's hope the *National Enquirer* never makes it off planet or we are doomed.)

The most important scifi library may be the

university library on Trantor, the decaying home world of the former galactic empire in **Isaac Asimov's** *Foundation and Empire* (1952), the second book in the Foundation trilogy. A conqueror needs vital information and the story takes us to this great library to find it. The library has a bit part to play, but we are led through the "deceptively small building" to do that research. We see little of the technology: the proceedings of an important convention are on "twenty-five fat films." Books are on films, then, and we later learn of someone reading a "book film." These films are read on projectors. We also know of a "catalog room," where, we can presume, catalogers still have problems cataloging proceedings. There is a kind of feel like **Vannevar Bush's** 1945 *Memex*.¹ A nice touch are the citations throughout the trilogy to the *Encyclopedia Galactica*, 116th Edition (**Encyclopedia Galactica Publishing Company**, Terminus: 1020 F.E.).

Another interesting library would have been that in **Asimov's** *The End of Eternity* (1955). In this book, Eternals travel through time straightening out things. There is a place in the story where people stranded in the past communicate with later times by placing an ad in a 1932 magazine with an atomic mushroom cloud. The anachronism allowed the lost party to be located. The magazine was in a "volume," presumably a hard copy. Given that every time the Eternals monkey around with the past, they change the future, the library's shelves would have to have copies of alternative versions of each work protected from the changing external world. Imagine having to catalog 1,000 different works with the same author, title, place, publisher, and date resulting from 1,000 changes in the past. That would present a cataloging problem of no small difficulty.

H. Beam Piper tells us about the *Space Vikings* (1963) who loot planets of the decaying Federation while building a new civilization with the pieces they take. The protagonist steals from libraries that have books in them. In **Piper's** *Little Fuzzy* (1962), we see information technology that is primitive by today's standards: sound files are compressed and sent, but the compression protocols are not standardized because one must tell the person receiving the file how much compression was used. *Orphans in the Sky* (1951) is not one of **Robert Heinlein's** better works, but in it we see another odd juxtaposition of technologies where a large spaceship is taking people to establish a colony. In it, there are scribes copying books and these scribes marvel at the exactness of the transcriptions they are copying. Of course, we know about the printing press and they do not. When scifi does not go into detail on technology perhaps it is because what was futuristic at one time will seem quaint in a short time. Of course, **William Gibson's** *Neuromancer* (1984) gave us the term "cyberspace" and a view of a world where technology is a part of the story and still advanced in many ways beyond what we have today.

Gordon R. Dickson's *Final Encyclopedia* (1984) is an interactive library where all knowledge is collected. The Encyclopedia's objective is to help "see the back of our heads." That is, is there knowledge we cannot see but which is there? By assembling everything, we will be able to discover what we cannot see. This is an interesting notion about what a library can do. I think we could argue that today we attempt to do this function through scholarship.

Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) tells of a future society where firemen burn books because books are bad. Books apparently burn at 451 degrees. At the distant fringes of this society a group of people memorize books and, in effect, become the books. Children learn books from old people and thus culture passes on to the future. In light of recent developments in our world with copyright, this future seems more possible, doesn't it? (I get dibs on "Richard II," "Henry IV," "Hamlet," and "Romeo and Juliet.")

Lost knowledge is a theme in scifi. **Isaac Asimov's** *Nightfall* (1941) is arguably his best known short story. An alien race on a planet of multiple suns does not know about night because there are always suns in their sky. A university researcher figures out that every 2,500 years, the various suns are in such a position that the sky grows dark. He bases this conclusion on research and calculation and makes a prediction. He is treated with disdain... and is called a "cultist." The world, of course, goes dark and the aliens go mad trying to light the sky—which they do by burning their libraries,

continued on page 79

Questions and Answers from page 77

tion, arrangement and indexing of the recipes along with any material such as a preface, descriptive instructions, photographs, etc. So, all recipes in a cookbook do not even have to be original.

QUESTION: May a library circulate CDs just as it does books? What about making a backup copy of the CD to loan?

ANSWER: Libraries may circulate CDs and other materials just as if they were books, unless the library signed a license agreement when it acquired the CD that restricts its right to circulate them. Absent such an agreement, the first sale doctrine permits libraries to circulate materials in their collections. If the CD contains computer software, then the CD package must contain a copyright warning.

Backup copies of CDs are not permit-

ted except for CDs that contain only computer programs. Section 117, governing computer programs, gives owners of the program the right to make a backup copy. For other CDs the library can always request the right to make a backup from the publisher.

QUESTION: Is it true that if someone has proof of requesting copyright permission from the copyright holder, but the owner does not respond, it can be assumed that permission is granted?

ANSWER: No, all it means is that the copyright holder did not respond. There is no affirmative duty in the Copyright Act for an owner to grant permission to use a work or for that owner to respond to requests for permission. What it may mean, is that if a library has sent several letters, tried to call, fax, etc., and still gets no response, it may be willing to assume the risk of reproducing the work.

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Devil's Advocate from page 78

among other things. It rather seems like this race is in a cosmic rut because every time it builds enough of a civilization to understand the situation, that civilization is destroyed.

I have already mentioned **Orwell's 1984** where knowledge can be intentionally thrown away. It was my experience as a Webmaster at a US government agency where the connection between the library function and scifi first occurred to me. As a former documents librarian, it was interesting to see the pressures build to change the contents of Web sites. Correcting spelling or updating information is one kind of correction, but I am talking about altering documents in response to the vagaries of policy to make documents published in the past conform to current policy—bear in mind that there would not be archives of the originals. If all our documents are digital, changing them becomes trivial and inevitable. I discussed this matter elsewhere.² I think that libraries may play a deeper part in preserving government records than we think because documents depositories are a means of keeping our past unchanged. Now that government publications are often digital, I would not be too surprised if we do not eventually have people whose job it is to adjust the digital record and change history.

Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle wrote *The Mote in God's Eye* (1974) which deals with our meeting an alien race called the

"Moties" and the resulting events. The Moties are a race with a problem and a secret. Much like the aliens in *Nightfall*, the Moties periodically destroy their civilization but the cause is what we might consider a pathology of their race. In order to help their descendants rebuild after the inevitable collapses, they do what the aliens in *Nightfall* do not do: they build archives of their civilization—they back it up, in computerese. These archives house the knowledge of the civilization: their archives and technological artifacts. But, in order to get into these buildings, the budding civilizations to come must be sufficiently civilized to decipher the codes necessary to get in. This theme of threshold knowledge occurs elsewhere in scifi, for example in **Arthur C. Clarke's 2001: A Space Odyssey** (1968), humans only find the obelisk after colonizing and mapping the moon. In any case, the Moties have an advantage over the aliens in *Nightfall*: they know they are in a rut and the only way out of it is that each time they go through it, they have to add more to their knowledge.

This story is depressing in the sense that we know from our experience what happens when human civilizations fail and that is that the descendants mine the old civilization for things to help them survive. Large libraries would supply books for heat; if your children are cold and you are near a big library, what would you do? The Moties had a solution; we have none. Libraries or entities doing the library function—as I have defined it, to include archives and museums, are the indicator of the highest aspi-

rations of humans, but they are fragile in the face of the lowest behavior of humans: war and chaos. Libraries cannot move to avoid armies. What can we do to protect them?

Star Trek's "Lights of Zetar" (First air date: January 31, 1969; Star Date; 5725.3), shows the United Federation of Planets (UFP) gave this question thought. As the Enterprise approaches Memory Alpha, a library established by the UFP, it is destroyed. We never learn much about this library but that it existed. What the UFP did was put its library out of the way of armies—way out in space. In effect, this library is the offsite backup of the UFP's civilizations. Backing up anything involves a tradeoff between a number of factors such as the cost of losing what you might back up. If there is any conclusion for librarians in the loss of Memory Alpha, it is that cautionary one that one backup of a civilization's records may not be enough.

Endnotes

Most of the books here have gone through many, many editions so what I have done is to include the original date of publication. — RM

1. Vannevar Bush, "That We May Think." *Atlantic Monthly*, April, 1945, 176(1): 101-108.
2. Robert E. Molyneux. "Two Perspectives on Internet-Only Access to Government Documents: Data Producer Reaction." *Association of Public Data Users Newsletter*, 19, no. 3, (1995): 3+.