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Books Are Us

by Anne Robichaux <akr772@mac.com>

This New Column is supposed to cover fiction about people like us -- librarians, publishers, vendors, booksellers, etc. All contributions are welcome. — KS

In case you missed it, in *USA Today*, August 16, 2001, **Bob Minzesheimer** reviews *The Grand Complication* by **Allen Kurzweil** (*Theia*, August 2001, \$24.95, ISBN 0-7868-6603-9). This is a new mystery described as “a wonderfully inventive novel,” and narrated by **Alexander Short**, “a young, unappreciated reference librarian” also diagnosed in the novel as a



“graphomaniacal, emotionally stunted librarian.” The novel was “inspired by and features the real-life theft from a Jerusalem museum ... of a time-piece commissioned for **Marie Antoinette**.” The various characters also include a curator “whose scholarly taste for ‘erotic curiosa’ earns him the nickname ‘the Librarian of Sexual Congress.’”

Minzesheimer further notes that the novel “realistically depicts sleuthing conducted through computerized hits,” and as many of us will relate, the protagonist **Short** “remembers from the librarian who nurtured his love of books

and libraries in the fourth grade.”

Among the quoted reviews at the publisher’s Web site (www.hyperionbooks.com/theia) we find that *The Grand Complication* is “recommended for all literature collections” by *Library Journal* and described by *Publishers Weekly* as “a remarkable novel — a flawless blend of adventure, intellect, suspense, humor and antiquity.” **Doris Lessing** notes that “this erudite book ... will enthrall all lovers of books and of libraries.”

For more reviews, check **Amazon.com** where **Otto Penzler** recommends not only the story of *The Grand Complication*, described as a well-written, well-researched bibliophile mystery, but also comments on the notable design of the book. 

Adventures in Librarianship — The Weakest Librarian

by **Ned Kraft** (Serials Librarian, Ralph J. Bunche Library, US Department of State)
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Welcome to “The Weakest Librarian.” I am your host, Illeanna Snarb. Beautifully puritanical, attractive yet thoroughly emasculating, learned but somehow crude — cross me and I’ll crush you like a bug under the heel of my boot. Now that you know the rules, I suppose I must introduce our contestants. From Wichita Falls Public Library we have Gary Haplis. Nice to see you could make it, Gary.

Thank you, Illeanna.

You may call me Ms. Snarb, Gary. My sources tell me you failed at several other professions before deciding that Librarianship would be your only hope for salvation. True, Gary?

Well not really, Ms. Snarb, you see I...

Silence! Our next contestant is Jennifer Hamper, a reference librarian from Overlook College. The bus trip wasn’t too terrible Jenny?

Actually, Ms. Snarb, I flew out and...

And “Hamper,” certainly the gods must have been displeased with your family to curse them with such a name.

I... I don’t know now how to respond to that.

Mmm, of course you don’t. Finally, we are most unfortunate to have with us today Jay Lubold, from the Hempstead Museum Library. I take it, Jay, that your job is to shelve and dust the books?

No, I’m in charge of microfilming the Millett Archive Collection of...

Very, very interesting Jay, if we only had time. But we don’t. First question, Jay. How many public libraries are there in the United States?

Oh, gee, I’d have to take a wild guess. Sixteen thousand?

Wild, indeed. Sixteen thousand and ninety would be correct. Jennifer, still awake? If all of the patrons who asked reference questions to public librarians last week were to line up at the door of Boston Public, that line would stretch to... where?

I... I don’t really understand the...

You are trying my patience, Miss. The line would stretch from Boston to...?

To, outside of Boston?

This is going to be a strain for you, isn’t it dear? The correct response would be “To San Francisco.” Gary, can you redeem your mentally challenged cohorts?

I think I can, Ms. Snarb.

By the look of you, Gary, I sincerely doubt that. But let’s give it a try. Question: for every dollar spent on higher education, how many cents go to college libraries?

Wow, that’s tough. How about... six cents?

Are you asking me, Gary? Because not only am I forbidden to provide you with answers, I am disinclined to do so.

No. No. Six cents, that’s my answer.

I must tell all of you that I am still quite satisfied with your ability to disappoint me. Gary, three cents. Not six. Three. Little Jenny, care to try again?

Can... can I go home?

Not until I’ve finished with you. Now: in the United States, how many Government Libraries are there?

I... I don’t even want to...

Jenny! Stop your sniveling!

Fifty! There are fifty!

Thank you, Jenny. Wrong again. There were one thousand four hundred and eleven the last time I counted. Back to Jay. By the way, are all the members of your clan named after letters of the alphabet?

Well, I’m an only child, and...


No doubt. No doubt. Let’s not wallow in it, shall we? Now: what percentage of public libraries provide patrons access to the Internet?

I’ll say... eighty percent.

Bad luck, Jay. And I say “bad luck” because I’m assuming these are all guesses, that none of you actually knows anything. The correct answer is, of course, ninety-five percent. Gary, back to you. I trust you won’t spoil the perfect record your team has established. Answer me this: federal spending on libraries comes out to how much per person?

There’s really no way I could know the answer to that question.

I agree. Your mind is a quiet, quiet place, isn’t it, Gary? The answer is fifty-four cents. Couldn’t be simpler.

Considering the obvious and unfortunate deficiencies of our contestants, I will exercise my prerogative to dub them all... The Weakest Librarians. Goodbye. 



All of the facts shown here came from ALA’s “Quotable Facts about American Libraries, 2001-2002,” that’s at <http://www.ala.org/pio/quotablefact.pdf>.

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