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Not Fit For Print — Are Libraries Sexist?

by **Tony Leisner** (Dawson Information Services Group) <71023.3440@compuserve.com>

There is a joke making the rounds about why women were admitted to the NASA space flights program. They needed someone willing to ask for directions if the craft got lost. Sitcoms and late night talk show hosts have had a heyday about men's apparent unwillingness to ask for directions. "Why won't you just stop and ask" has become every woman's complaint. There have been countless studies of boys and girls and computers and speculation that boys like the primal experience of "exploring" computers and figuring things out for themselves whereas girls feel frustrated because there is no person to ask for directions on the system. Is there some ancient driving force in boys and men that accounts for the large number of male explorers? From Cousteau's adventures under the sea to the great Everest climbers and Pole explorers, there have been so many men risking life and limb that there must be more than just a grain of truth to the idea that we guys enjoy plunging into the unknown. What else drove Sir Richard Burton or Stanley or Livingston to risk their lives in unknown and hostile jungles and diseases in unexplored Africa? Why leap into the unknown with no one to ask for directions nor tell them to stop and admit they were lost? Being lost can stimulate the imagination of guys. While wandering around England, I encountered a strange road sign. Humped Zebra Crossing. My mind went wild with mental pictures of a cross between a Zebra and a Dromedary wandering across the roadway. Major letdown to find it meant a raised speed bump with stripes on it for pedestrians to cross the road.

On the road to the library

Over my 30 year career in peddling books to libraries I have played explorer to a lesser degree. I loved to drive into a strange town and see if I could find the library without a map or asking. God forbid, for directions. It surprised people who traveled with me how often I could drive directly to the library by pure instinct with no help or directions. It seemed as though the library was just where it should be and looked just like a library should look. Rarely were there any signs on the roads to tell me where the library was, or if there were, they were on the nearest corner and by then I was within sight of the building. I still do this kind of exploring on my many trips to Africa. Just fly in to a strange land and try to explore the terrain until I find what I am looking for.

With over three thousand library visits under my belt, I've noticed subtle changes over the years. There used to be a bold sign with the simple word LIBRARY to confirm my find. Once in a while it might be preceded by a benefactor's name and then gradually accompanied by longer list of names of the counties, regions and governments it served until the

word LIBRARY has become nearly invisible. I began to take pictures of some of these signs. Both the really clear ones and those that obfuscated the real use of the building. Some had no sign at all, but the librarian assured me that there was an explanation and besides, everyone knew where the library was anyway. At least those who used the library knew where it was.

While this appealed to my spirit of adventure, I can't imagine this lack of clues or identity was helping the library, but then maybe it lightened the work load for the staff and served some other purpose. Who was I to question the wisdom of these professionals?

Into the interior

I'm kind of a Tim Allen kind of a guy. I love Home Depot where every aisle has a clear sign telling me what is in that location and in plain language. The plumbing section is clearly labeled with the contents of each aisle. Pipe, faucets, sprinklers, toilet parts and fittings are all listed on the sign and each item is near the related parts needed to complete a job. When I enter the store, I get a map, called a plan-o-gram in retail lingo, which shows where each major category is located. Even Henry Stanley had a general map so that he would start his exploration in the right country, so this is OK with my adventuresome spirit.

I also like bookstores where the travel books are all in the same place. Sometimes I want a guide for a specific country and other times a story of someone else's travels. I've been in a few libraries where everything related is inter shelved in the same section and I liked that too. The book, the video, and the music of a country were all on the same shelf. I've also been in libraries where the signs were so clear that I had no trouble finding everything I was looking for, but most often, unlike **Home Depot** or **Barnes and Noble**, I have to do the unthinkable for a man. I have to ask for directions and usually from a woman no less. Then the real humiliation sets in! I may be told to go to the 900's which, of course, are not near the 800's because they are in the Art section. The tiny signs on the ends of the stacks aren't much help either because they often break right in the middle of the sequence. There is never a simple sign telling me what subjects are in a section. The labels are always in librarian talk. Of course, the titles are not together. History of a country isn't with touring information so I have to go back to the librarian and ask again. In short order, I feel like an idiot and I am using up an incredible amount of the librarian's

time to find what I should be able to find on my own. Is that the objective of the librarian?

Gorilla Dung

In the mountains of Rwanda, I tracked Silver Back Gorillas and when we spotted piles of gorilla dung we were safe knowing that the whole animal was nearby. In a library, that same clue would only mean that an anatomical part of the gorilla was there. You would have to ask a librarian where the rest of the critter resided. Now I realize that women don't mind asking for directions but we guys don't like to do that. We want clues and hints to make us feel smart enough to use a library. I have seen some of those devices in my travels. Little "shelf talkers" that are kind of like "see also" references. They are on the shelf and lead you to other areas of related interest such as the video

section. I have also seen signs on shelf ends that tell you exactly what is in each section. The **Miami Dade Public Library** realizes that Spanish is not a foreign language to a Spanish speaker and says "Libros en Espanol" on its end cap. They have a big plan-o-gram in the lobby and

lots of signs and arrows in plain English and in other languages too. Their staff spends less time unraveling the confusion caused by librarian-speak and more time being real librarians helping people with their destination and not just the journey.

Sexist library?

Most librarians are women and more customers are woman also so does that mean your library is a sexist institution? It could be and you might not even be aware. If your library has a big sign and section for Women's Studies but no comparable Men's Studies, or if far more women than men use your library, you may be running a sexist library. If your collection on breast cancer is far more in depth than your collection on prostate cancer you may be sexist. Prostrate cancer kills just as many people but they are all men. Single parent doesn't mean only women. Finance for divorce isn't just a woman's issue. If your staff is mostly female are you actively recruiting men? Do the friends of the library only hold teas and not B-B-Q's? If your signs aren't as clear as **Home Depot**, then you may be running off the men. Few people admit to being sexist and most want to stop when it is brought to their attention. The oldest excuse is: "I was just doing things the way they have always been done." But we know that doesn't make it right.