Op Ed -- Onomastic Musings: What's Your Library Nom du Jour?

Larry Madison
Millsaps College, madisle@millsaps.edu

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Onomastic Musings: What’s Your Library Nom du Jour?

by Larry Madison (Instructional Services Librarian, Millsaps College; Phone: 601-974-1072) <madisle@millsaps.edu>

Shakespeare’s rose not withstanding, studies in the field of onomastics (the science of names) reveal that the names we use, and our acts of naming, carry great significance. The naming of the animals by Adam and Eve established the dominion of humans over beasts. Some cultures postpone naming a child until a significant or portentous event occurs. Initiates into certain societies, organizations, or adulthood sometimes take new names. The names of the mighty are vessels of power. Others become synonyms of treachery and shame such as Judas Iscariot and Benedict Arnold.

There are, of course, historical appellations for those who spend their days (and nights) laboring in libraries. The earliest entry in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) for a word meaning either a bookseller or a librarian is librarian (Caxton, “Of ketelmakers and librarians” (c. 1483) and Waterhouse (1667), “Mr. Spencer, the aboriginal Librarian, yet living and yet faithfully attending the remains of the Books,” are cited as examples of early use. The initial listing under librarian in the OED defines the word as “A scribe, a copyst.” The citations are interesting. “The Booksellers got these books transcribed by unmeet librarians,” (Gale, Crit.Gentiles, II, IV, i. 370. 1670). The adjective preceding the noun librarians here, of course, means improper, unseemly. In Notes on Pope’s Odyssey, XII. 131, William Broome wrote, “This is the error of the Librarians, who put ___ for ___.” Samuel Johnson refers to the same error in A Dictionary of the English Language (1767). “Charibdis thrice swallows, and thrice refunds, the waves: this must be understood of regular tides. There are indeed but two tides in a day, but this is the error of the librarians” (emphasis in the original). Perhaps it’s just as well that we are not still copyists.

The OED goes on to explain that prior to being supplanted by our present sense of librarian, those in charge of the library were known as library-keepers. This, it must be supposed, was in the sense of housekeepers, beekeepers, or bar-keepers. The first recorded use of the word librarian for “the custodian of a library” is cited as occurring in 1713. Richard Steele, writing in the Englishman, N. I. 8, asks, “Why mayn’t I be witty, as a Man that keeps a Librarian is Learned?” Thus, we move from being keepers to being kept. The sense of the word kept is not explained here. Neither is the gender of the librarian clear, since it is not until 1862 that Trollope provides our example of the correct title for a female librarian: “The librariansess looked pretty and learned....” It’s clear which attribute Mr. Trollope noticed first.

On the American scene, Melvil Dewey dubbed librarians library economists in the 1880s. The link with economics seems a bit puzzling until it is considered in light of a sister profession, home economics. Clearly, the library was becoming a female domain, and so it remains. This has inspired some way to define the au courant job title “information scientist” as “a male librarian.” However, “male librarian” brings to mind such gender-clarifying phrases as “male nurse” and “lady doctor.” Stereotypes die hard, but they do sometimes die, or at least change names. Even given the ubiquity of women in the profession, one seldom runs into a librariansess anymore. Librarian, originally a masculine pronoun, has now come to be thought feminine. Presumably this is meant to represent progress. After all, naturalists tell us the lions do all the work while the lion sleeps, roars, eats (what the lionsesses have caught) and mates. Maybe the librariansess were on to something.

We librarians haven’t done particularly well at picking our own monikers either. Take bibliographer, for instance. Who knows what a bibliographer is? Everyone knows what a librarian is. Of course, nobody is exactly sure what a librarian does. Even we can’t seem to make up our minds about whom or what we are. There are, however, people quite willing to define us.

Cultural historian and former Columbia University provost Jacques Barzun has likened librarians, along with journalists, to “intellectual middlemen” and computer professionals to “machine salesmen.” Let me repeat. Professor Barzun places librarians and journalists in the same cohort. No offense to journalists, but this is troubling. According to recent polls, journalists are among the least respected occupational groups, along with salespeople (machine salesmen?) and politicians. Is Professor Barzun the only person with such opinions about librarians? Hardly.

Writer, critic, and semiotician Umberto Eco is well known for his ambivalence toward libraries and librarians. He points out that they do as much to block access as to provide it with their labyrinthine stacks and confusing catalogs, adding that he often perceives a hostile attitude toward patrons in Eco’s medieval literary mystery The Name of the Rose, the old librarian is blind (interesting), humorless, power hungry, and a murderer to boot. Thomas Carlyle despised the way librarians organized materials and compared them to treasure chests stashing everything away in drawers. He got so fed up he started his own library. Although an advocate of libraries, John Henry Newman called them, and by extension, librarians, “embalmers of past genius.” The humanist scholar and library director John E. Burchard referred to librarianship as “the Waterloo of science,” and wrote that the more a researcher wades through mounds of materials, the more he comes to hate librarians. In his novel, The Gold Bug Variations, Richard Powers refers to a librarian as a “gas station attendant of the mind.” And of course, there’s Nicholson Baker.

The inevitable resistance against stereotyping and misunderstanding has produced a plethora of self-referential titles: feminist librarians, anarchism librarians, groovy librarians, guerrilla librarians, self-mutilating librarians (OK, they call themselves modified librarians), even naked librarians. The creative potential for definition and job titles seems boundless. Over 300 job titles for library workers have appeared in the periodicals American Libraries and College and Research Libraries News, and on a Web site that monitors such things. Among the listings are Category Architect, Cybrian, Imaging Coordinator, Interface Specialist, Metadata Development Specialist, Product Analyst, and Virtual Services Librarian. The last noted position was doubtless created for librarians who prefer not to deliver real services.

To complicate matters further, academic librarians have been given faculty rank and/or status at many institutions, although studies indicate that they are not considered peers by a majority of teaching and research faculty, and that a sizable minority of faculty see librarians as semis- or paraprofessionals. So to MLS and say, Metadata Specialist, we add the title Assistant or Associate Professor. Once again, the OED proves edifying. According to this reliable source, pro-

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Tracking Not Yet Published Material: Using the Bibliographic Record The Smart Way

by Rosann Bazirjian (Assistant Dean for Technical & Access Services, University Libraries, The Pennsylvania State University, 507 Paterno Library, University Park, PA 16802-1812; Phone: 814-865-0404; Fax: 814-865-3665 <rvb9@psuilias.psu.edu>) and Betty Nirnberger (Fiscal & Data Services Team Leader, University Libraries, The Pennsylvania State University)

Summary

In July 2001, the Pennsylvania State University Libraries stopped placing purchase orders for materials that were deemed not yet published or available. It was important that our carry-over encumbrances not be too high since that would impact the Libraries’ purchasing power for the following year. In addition, it was felt that the collections budget should be spent on titles that are readily available, rather than tied up in materials that may not be published for one to two or even five more years. In should be noted that Penn State’s fiscal cycle runs July 1 to June 30, at which time State appropriated funds should be fully expended. Any outstanding orders for library materials are then applied against the new year budget(s). For the first year of implementation of this new policy, manual files that were reviewed at specified intervals, were kept of all titles not yet published. This was a time-consuming and tedious process. In an effort to make this process much more efficient, and to take advantage of our new library management system’s capabilities, our Budget Coordinator worked with a group of individuals1 in Acquisitions Services to develop a procedure that was not only automated, but would allow selectors to gain up to the minute information on not yet published requests via the Web with a WebCat (public catalog) view of their titles.

Budget Efficiencies Achieved By Not Placing Orders For NYP Materials

It was imperative to see positive results from the holding of NYP materials prior to embarking on a technological way to address the process. To demonstrate the budget efficiencies, our Fiscal and Data Services Team took a look at the University Park budget performance figures at the end of FY 2000/2001 and compared them to June 30, 2002. Please note, however, that 2001/2002 figures do include a small number of NYP orders placed later in the fiscal year.

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<th>Monographic Budget Performance Comparison</th>
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<td>General 1001 Funds</td>
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<td>- Encumbrances carried over from FY 2000/01 = $72,162</td>
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<td>- Encumbrances carried over from FY 2001/02 = $33,1053</td>
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(some NYP)

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