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Books Are Us

by Anne Robichaux (Professor Emerita, Medical University of South Carolina) <awkr772@charleston.net>

Column Editor's Note: This column covers fictitious accounts of people in our industry—librarians, publishers, vendors, booksellers, etc.—people like us. All contributions, comments, suggestions are welcome. —AR

Last month I checked out a book on tape from the local branch of our public library to keep me company on a car trip, later checking out a copy of the book to finish the story, based purely on the title and this column. *The Burglar in the Library: A Bernie Rhodenbarr Mystery* (E. P. Dutton, 1997, ISBN 0-525-94301-3) is the eighth title in the *Burglar* series by writer **Lawrence Block**. I should have qualified the word writer with the adjectives prolific (he's published more than forty books) and renown (he's won almost every mystery award and is a best selling name in mystery fiction), and definitely entertaining.

For those who may be unfamiliar with this particular series, the main character, *Bernie Rhodenbarr*, is an antiquarian book dealer by day and a burglar by night, or as the book jacket describes him: burglar extraordinaire and bookseller ordinaire. He apparently is also an amateur sleuth. This mystery involves: books, in particular a first edition of *The Big Sleep*, supposedly inscribed by **Raymond Chandler** and given as a gift to **Dashiell Hammett** (which *Bernie* hopes to find and steal); an old English style inn called *Cuttleford House* somewhere in New England, in particular the library in the inn (where *Bernie* believes the rare edition might reside); and several murders that take place, including one within the inn's library.

The book early on includes mention of a "very helpful librarian" at **Columbia University** (when *Bernie* was researching **Chandler** and **Hammett**). More writing is devoted to the description of *Cuttleford House's* "classic formal library," an enormous room, with built-in shelves as high as the twelve-foot ceiling, running the length of the room, with a wall of windows on the opposite side. A fireplace was at one end, with "various savage-looking tribal weapons mounted above it and a bookcase on either side. At the room's other end, a carved Jacobean table held magazines and newspapers; above it, a Mercator-projection map was mounted on the wall. It showed all of Britain's crown colonies and dominions and protectorates in pink, and it dated from a time when the sun never set thereon." Lecterns held copies of the *Oxford Universal Dictionary*, and a *National Geographic* atlas a half-century more recent than the map. A copy of the eleventh edition of the *Britannica* resided on a two-tiered bookcase. Tables, chairs and sofas were strategically positioned, with good reading light wherever you might sit. *Bernie* had already seen a picture of the library in the inn's brochure, "but you know what they say about the Grand Canyon. Nothing prepares you for it." He wanted to steal the whole room, to "wrap it up in a magic carpet... and whisk it back to New York." He felt he would need nothing more than that room to be perfectly happy.

The parlor of the inn also has floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, and books abound on nearly every surface and in every guest room. The whole description depicted *Cuttleford House* as an appealing place, especially to bibliophiles, though *Bernie* initially made a reservation to go there to please his girl friend, a lover of "all things English."

Then, of course, the novel turns dark, not the least reason being a snowstorm that strands all the guests and staff at the inn. The library is also dark, when *Bernie* sets out at night to find the rare copy of *The Big Sleep*. He hears furtive whispering coming from the library, his plans are foiled, he retreats to his room, and the next morning, a body (the first victim) is found in the library. At one point, *Bernie* even quotes **Emily Dickinson**: "there is no frigate like a book" which leads him back to the library on more than one occasion. He eventually solves the crime(s) and we discover "who-done-it" in the library, where the mystery had its beginning.

There are also descriptions of *Bernie's* bookstore in NY, of book selling and collecting, and several references that assure the reader of *Bernie's* expertise in book dealing. Of course there are many more characters that lend interest to the story, among them *Bernie's* good friend, *Carolyn*, his cat, *Raffles*, his former girl friend who has shown up at the inn with her brand new husband, a precocious 10 year old, a pompous British colonel, and many more. The story reminds one of **Chandler**, and in some cases **Hammett** (*The Thin Man*), and gives more than a nod to **Agatha Christie** (*Bernie as Hercule Poirot?*). *Bernie* is quite a likeable character (in spite of one of his more dubious professions) and I plan to read more of the *Burglar* series by **Block**.


Check out <http://www.lawrenceblock.com> for an entertaining Website and to learn more about the author.

On a quite different level, a couple of years ago I was introduced to *Arthur* through a memory card game by two of our grand-children, and learned more recently that a television show of the same name is broadcast on **ETV**. For those who aren't familiar with the show, *Arthur's* last name is "Read" and the show, among other things, emphasizes the pleasures of reading to children. The one show I watched had characters reading books, and ended (as many **PBS** shows do) with the suggestion that more stories like these can be found at the local public library, the difference being that an animated library was depicted at the end of the show!

On a recent trip to Reno to visit the just mentioned kids, we discovered one of the *Arthur* books, *D.W.'s Library Card* by **Marc Brown** (Little, Brown and Company, 2001, ISBN 0-316-73820-4 paperback). Given the title, I had to read it, and was immediately pleased to note that the book is dedicated to a "very special librarian." I learned that **D.W.** is

Arthur's younger sister, and she has her eye on a frog book in the library. *Arthur* won't check it out for her (he doesn't want "baby" books on his record), so she needs to get her own library card. The librarian tells her she has to be able to write her full name in order to get a card. This news upsets **D.W.** since she can hardly even say her full name (**Dora Winifred Read**), much less write it. Of course she eventually learns to write her name, even practicing one evening in mashed potatoes! **D.W.** is thrilled to finally get her own card, only to learn the book she wants is checked out and she has to wait for it. (This story didn't include the joys of randomly searching shelves and picking out other possibly interesting books!) When the book is returned and she is finally able to check it out, she is told (not by the librarian but by the boy who returned it) that she has to treat the book very carefully, because "they take away your library card forever" if you hurt a library book!

Thus she is afraid to even touch the book, much less read it, until *Arthur* comes to her rescue. **D.W.** enjoys the book so much, she is sad when its time to return it, until she learns about the practice of "renewing." This book has wonderful illustrations and is a great book to use to introduce libraries to young readers.

Creator, author and illustrator, **Marc Brown**, published the first *Arthur* book in 1976 and has published more than thirty books for children, including another "library" title in the *Arthur* series: **Locked in the Library**. For more information about **Marc Brown**, check <http://www.twbookmark.com/children> and http://www.pbskids.org/arthur/grownups/marc_brown. 



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So, where are we in our world of intellectual content and services? Are the security concerns significant enough to prevent librarians from using them in libraries? Part of me wants to simply observe, it is already too late and with the advent of penny tags, tags in books may be the least thing we have to fear. The other part of me is a bit worried about the invasion of privacy issue—but with the high price of today's tags, I don't need to stay up at night trying to make a decision of whether to use this technology in my library.

Of one thing I am sure, investing in a company that successfully develops a low cost blocking device is probably a good idea. Maybe a bunch of us about to retire could form a small business that sells such devices at political rallies and marches. Maybe I could wholesale them to the ice cream truck and bagel/hot coffee drivers (US), BBQ chicken wings and soy milk (Asia) that always show up at such events! 