

February 2006

Op Ed -- Little Red Herrings -- Libraries-As-Sex: The New Paradigm?

Mark Y. Herring

Winthrop University, herringm@winthrop.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Herring, Mark Y. (2006) "Op Ed -- Little Red Herrings -- Libraries-As-Sex: The New Paradigm?," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 18: Iss. 1, Article 13.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.4842>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

Op Ed — Little Red Herrings Libraries-As-Sex: The New Paradigm?

by **Mark Y. Herring** (Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University)
<herringm@winthrop.edu>

"Libraries are a lot like sex."

There just had to be a way, I kept telling myself as I watched somnambulant freshperson after somnambulant freshperson (is that what we're calling them now?) drag his or her soporific self into our library research classes.

There just had to be a way to wake them out their stupor and into the glorious, resounding, magnificent ... well, okay, just startle them out of their misperception that was etched permanently on their faces: "Ugh! The pencil-neck, geek-world of librarians and libraries." So I just blurted it out one day.

"Libraries are a lot like sex."

And you can bet it had the desired effect. Suddenly everyone woke up. Several gasped for air. One young man whispered, "Sex in the library!" You see, freshpersons are a trying lot, as anyone who has done these talks knows. They have, most of them anyway, passed from that highly volatile pubescent stage that sends hormones careening in all directions, to that young adult stage, where their neurons *occasionally* out run their hormones to yield a facsimile of reasonable thought. Of course their hormones still win most of the time, and so they are, roller-coaster like, racing from sniggering like clowns to affectations on the order of **Professor Higgins**. A new angle is always needed. So, I just said it:

"Libraries are a lot like sex."

I first uttered the phrase like some throw-away line. But I realized right after I said it that unless I wanted to find myself in the president's office pleading for my job against charges of sexual harassment, I had to come up with something! So I quickly completed the thought.

"No, I'm serious," I said. "Libraries really are a lot like sex. Think about it. Everyone on this campus will wax long and eloquent about libraries. **Dr. Dryasdust** will utter the profundity, "The library is the center of this university." And this will be followed by other latte, tweed coat-wearing-types who will begin waxing their wane: "In order to pass this class you'll have to spend your life in the library, everyday, every night, every weekend. Forget dating, forget" Even your friends will talk about the library. Like sex, some will boast about the library ("I check out fifty books for each paper, minimum!"). Others will resort to wishful thinking ("You outtah see the verso page on the books in the Oversized section"). Still others will attempt to scare the devil out of you ("Have you seen "The Hunch-

back of Notre Dame?" Remember Quasimodo? That's our librarian!"). But the awful part about how libraries are a lot like sex is really the saddest part of all," I concluded. "You'll discover at some point in your university education that the library, contrary to every hope, is indispensable to your education even in the face of the Internet *uber alles*. That's when you'll ask your friend about it only to discover he's got it all wrong."

Okay, so maybe this is a throw-away line. But the more I think about it, the more convinced I am that this analogy isn't the influence of *gaudeamus* acquired from a long stint in a university setting. I think there may be something here. It's no secret that librarianship borders on the true definition of ennui: stifling boredom, to hear others talk about. Watch the face of the next person you tell you're a librarian. Catch that invol-

untary yawn? See their eyes droop? Did you watch that head dotter?

Now try this: "Libraries are a lot like sex."

I think the analogy may solve our problem. Sex sells literally everything these days, so why not libraries? We may well be pushing even the limits of sex here, I don't know, but it's worth a try. I kept telling myself there must be a way and perhaps that day before all those sleepy-eyed students I stumbled on to it. Beside, with the Web, libraries really are filled with sex with you think about it. Didn't **Google** just release data that said 75% of all searches involved porn last year?

Now before anyone resents the implication, bear in mind **Hamlet's** good counsel: "Diseases desperate grown/By desperate appliances are relieved/ Or not at all." Librarianship may not be on its last leg just yet even if it is wavering vertiginously in the face of so many trying to jettison it for the Web. The need for a desperate remedy has long been upon us!

Now can we, so to speak, keep this analogy up? Take the Internet, please. Isn't it like anonymous sex? You never know what you're going to get or from whom, and the information can be highly unreliable if not downright suspect. Then there's online information with its high-priced hullabaloo. This is nothing more than a high-priced ... oh, well, you get the picture.

Watch how the library-as-sex analogy

deepens when compared with the research process: the stops and starts, the fraught-with-error end runs, and the long and involved escapades that take you far off the beaten path, leave you breathless with nothing you can use, consume huge amounts of valuable time, wreck your home life, only to leave you spent and good for nothing for the rest of the day. To this add the unintended consequences of library research and there you have it, a baby — no, I mean, something you're delighted to have but not sure what to do with next.


Lastly, there's the piece de resistance of research to make the analogy complete. When you find the right match, are in the right place, and have surrounded yourself

with the right circumstances, sex — I mean — research (I'm getting confused here myself) can be vastly and extraordinarily rewarding!

Heck, we could even invent pretty ribbons to wear for those who were lost to research. A way of saying, "We remember **Kilroy**. Walked into the almanacs and never returned!"

Maybe it isn't such a bad analogy after all. Tactless, no doubt, but not bad. Libraries are a lot like sex when you ponder it. Think of the possibilities for **ALA** posters: "SEX: Have you been to the library lately?" Well, it sure beats those **READ** posters.

Maybe, just maybe, we've been going about teaching library skills all wrong. I'm not saying we should turn it over to the Sex-Ed classes just yet, although we'd be sure to reach far more students. But maybe if we work a little harder on drawing these not-so-far-fetched analogies students will actually begin not only to like the library, but also to begin learning something about it ineffable riches.

Who knows, we may be able to teach them how to practice safe research after all! 



Adventures in Librarianship from page 26

colorful terms available to describe one's girlfriend. **Pungent** uses an editorial staff hired from seven metro-area high schools to keep this database up to date. \$450. 