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Little Red Herrings — Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin

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

Stop me if you're heard this one before. **Belshazzar**, a king who lived very long time ago, sowed his oats in the worst way and decided to throw a feast honoring, who else, but himself? So he invites all his friends, otherwise known as clagues, and they assemble in his palatially furnished, well, palace.

Kings will be kings, and it all gets a bit out of hand as wine flows freely and scantily clad women dance enticingly. More wine, more women, more song. Then, all of the sudden, he sees this disembodied hand. Did I mention that there had been considerable quantities of wine? But what really proved the buzz kill, not to mention disarmed all those scantily clad women, was that disembodied hand began to write. And it wrote the following: *mene, mene, tekel, upharsin*.

Now this probably doesn't mean a lot to you or me, perhaps, so suffice it to say that the headless hand told **Belshazzar** the jig was up and, essentially, GAME OVER. You can just imagine that it flashed as furiously as any LED "game over" lights could do, complete with braying sounds.

In **Belshazzar's** case, the message was from **God**. Wow, double buzz kill. But our "game over" sign is not from **God**, but **Harvard** and its recent announcement about the restructuring of its libraries (<http://bo.st/A2knM9>). Now it's clear that **Harvard** has a god-complex, and certainly there are some who think **Harvard** is as close to **God** as you can get this side of heaven. The old joke is that a **Harvard** professor was asked in court to give his credentials. "I'm the so-and-so full professor of something-something," he replied. "And is there anyone above that level," the attorney asked. The professor responded. "Yes. **God**."

I'll leave to you how much credence you put in **Harvard**, but I do think its library restructuring is extremely important. The upshot of that plan is a downsizing of librarians. Going forward, we're told, the professional librarian workforce will be smaller. Think about this: the largest and best-funded academic institution in the world is downsizing its librarian workforce.

Does that get your attention? It did mine.

News of this provoked outrage among librarians all over the country. Given **Harvard's** "semiautonomous" structure, it may take an act of **God** to get this plan accomplished. But the rest of us shouldn't brood about it being done, or how fair the process is or isn't. Rather, it might behoove the rest of us still viably employed, to think about what exactly this means for our profession.

I'll go first. I for one think it means that the earth is moving under our feet and the sky is tumbling down, words not from **God** or **Harvard**, nor a disembodied hand, but



Carole King. While we can spend our time arguing that it isn't quite so bad as this where we are, or that there are attenuations to be made but these aren't the right ones, I think our time would be better spent preparing for a future that may well include fewer librarians and more of *something else*.

Now none of us knows what that something, that *tertium quid* is, and that's just the point. We don't march into the future so much as we stumble blindly upon it. The future is one of those maddening things that if you move too fast, people think you're nuts; if you move too slow, they think you've lost touch. Finding that sweet spot, so to say, is never easy, and many a scribe has been made to appear a fraud by subsequent events. But we can know something about our future, and it looks like this: going forward, we're not likely to see more and more expensive professional help, even though, in the scheme of things, we librarians are not exactly at the top of the food chain when it comes to salary.

The plan, **Harvard** officials argue, is necessary because the library's current structure is redundant, unconsolidated, and somewhat digital resistant, or at least slow in that regard. Costs are being consumed by the hundreds of thousands in everything from duplicate serials to redundant tasks that require two or three professionals doing the same thing but perhaps in different but nearby locations.

Now I have written quite a bit about what I don't like about our current digital-everthingism, some of it even in these pages. Unfortunately, my brilliance fell on deaf ears and blind eyes. It's a cross to bear, let me tell you. So, now what?

First, our profession is graying, and we've known for at least a decade. And while we can debate the speed at which this is happening, our ranks are thinning. It's probably not too prophetic to say that we'll be replaced, as we retire, by those who understand the changes taking place and are prepared to do what is necessary. These folks likely didn't learn what that is in library school.

Second, we've always employed a lot of folks who do similar tasks, and we've done tasks that to us seemed important but to our users were not "mission critical." When times were flush, it didn't matter too much. Now that our financial times have been flushed down the economic toilet with little hope of rebounding, things are changing rapidly, and perhaps overcorrecting as they change. It's a habit of pendulums to do this when they sway one way too far: they come back the other way, too far. But that's moot. Librarians may well be slung from that pendulum in its return.

Third, digital-everthingism is pandemic, so if you can't beat them — and clearly we cannot beat them — you better figure out a sound way to join them. The answer to this troubling

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problem isn't going to be more paid staff to handle tasks that can be consolidated, that appear redundant, or that may need covering only at certain times but not others.

Further, we also have to face up to the unpleasant fact that much — but not all that we do — can be done by intelligent individuals who do not have library degrees (of course, the same could be said about just about any other job that does not involve bloodletting). We have a choice: hang on to the silos that draw severe and expensive lines in the economic sands between public services and technical services,

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Collecting to the Core — Physics

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Column Editor's Note: The "Collecting to the Core" column highlights monographic works that are essential to the academic library within a particular discipline, inspired by the *Resources for College Libraries* bibliography (online at <http://www.rclweb.net>). In each essay, subject specialists introduce and explain the classic titles and topics that continue to remain relevant to the undergraduate curriculum and library collection. Disciplinary trends may shift, but some classics never go out of style. — AD

As academic librarians who select monographs in physics, we understand that much of the physics professional literature is written at a level incomprehensible to the undergraduate student. It's not necessarily that the content is beyond the motivated student, but even the notation in most scholarly works is not the same as that taught in beginning coursework. As a result, when determining what books to include in the *Resources for College Libraries* (RCL) core bibliography, a selector must also consider what will be accessible to an undergraduate studying physics. In addition to introductory textbooks and more advanced theoretical works, a solid collection should also include monographs that highlight the interesting concepts driving physicists' research. The RCL physics section includes not only essential scholarly titles but also popularizations, biographies, and select content intended to kindle the imagination of next-generation physicists and launch them into careers investigating the fundamental nature of the universe.

One author helped motivate an entire generation of scientists through his popularizations of physics, as well as various other branches of science and mathematics. **George Gamow** was a renowned physicist who made seminal contributions to atomic and nuclear physics, cosmology (his work contributed to the Big Bang theory before it was known as a popular sitcom), and even to decoding the structure of DNA. He is also known for creating the fictional character Mr. Tompkins. First appearing in serialized form in *Discovery* magazine in 1938, Tompkins is a mild-mannered bank clerk by day who attends physics lectures and dreams of fantastic worlds by night. **Gamow** wrote three monographs featuring

the character: *Mr. Tompkins in Wonderland*, *Mr. Tompkins Explores the Atom*, and *Mr. Tompkins Learns the Facts of Life*.¹⁻³ The first two books were updated and revised in 1999 by **Russell Stannard** and published as *The New World of Mr. Tompkins*, although very little needed to be either revised or updated.⁴ In addition to the influential Tompkins series, **Gamow** also authored several popular nonfiction science books, most notably *One, Two, Three...Infinity*; *Matter, Earth, and Sky*; and *The Atom and Its Nucleus*.⁵⁻⁷ In 2006, *Mr. Tompkins Gets Serious*, with a foreword by **Gamow's** son **Igor**, provided a "best of" compilation of the latter two books, although without even a cameo appearance from Mr. Tompkins himself.⁸ For the interested reader, **George Gamow's** autobiography *My World Line* offers a fascinating look into his eventful and influential life.⁹ This essay will focus on two of the best-known works — *Mr. Tompkins in Wonderland* and *One, Two, Three...Infinity* — as illustrative examples of **Gamow's** popular books.

In *Mr. Tompkins in Wonderland*, Mr. c.G.h. Tompkins' initials refer to three fundamental constants of nature: the speed of light, the gravitational constant, and Planck's constant. As Mr. Tompkins drowns off during physics lectures at the local university, his subconscious creates a fantastical world where the values of those constants are very different than they are in our world. In a world where the speed of light is much slower than ours, he finds that riding a bike doesn't cause the town to go by faster, but rather to get scrunched up, buildings becoming narrow slits. When he gets off his bike and looks at the town hall clock, half an hour has passed, while it seems to him that only a moment has gone

by. Then he meets a young travelling salesman along with his elderly great-granddaughter due to the time dilation caused by general relativity. When faced with a quantum constant (h) much larger than that in our own universe, in a game of "quantum snooker," hitting a cue ball causes it to spread out and become diffuse, eventually covering most of the pool table with "probability." Trying to corral the cue ball in a triangle, Tompkins causes it to bounce around quite quickly, due to the uncertainty relationship between position and velocity, until eventually the ball "leaks" out and rolls across the table, just like neutrons or alpha particles tunnel out of atomic nuclei in the process of fission. A trip to the "quantum jungle" similarly results in Mr. Tompkins being attacked by one wild tiger that appears as a pack surrounding Tompkins from all sides, analogous to the motion of electrons around a nucleus. Then, he encounters a herd of gazelles running in formation, caused by a single gazelle running through a regular bamboo patch. By exaggerating the values of the fundamental physical constants to bring the quantum and relativistic principles to a scale where they are easily observable, **Gamow** uses imagery to both instruct and inspire readers. Between the fantastical dream scenes, **Gamow** provides brief introductory-level overviews explaining the theories that led to those dreams, so an interested reader can immediately find supplementary academic information.

One, Two, Three...Infinity: Facts and Speculations of Science, originally written in 1947, "plays it straight." Rather than offering a fictionalized account, **Gamow** showcases amazing factual stories that require no exaggeration, taking the reader on a tour of mathematics, physics, and biology. The book opens with a section called "Playing with Numbers." The first example describes **Grand Vizier Sissa Ben Dahir**, a skilled mathematician, asking for his reward from **King Shirham of India** for having invented the game of chess. The clever **Vizier** asks for one grain of wheat for the first square of the chessboard, two

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or we can adjust to the economic times in ways that are innovative and creative, preserving the best about what we do but letting go those things that may not be necessary or have been overtaken by change.

Fourth, and final, for the last three decades librarians have complained mightily about the rising costs of library materials, mainly journals, but we have not been able to effect any long-lasting solution. The end result has been journal and aggregate databases that range in price from

a small diamond ring, to a fully-equipped yacht. Again, with these flushed economic times, no one is willing to pay for that any more. When solutions are offered, hysteria reigns supreme from outright resistance, to half-hearted implementation. Don't believe me? Look at our response to possible solutions via **ebrary**, **iPads**, e-readers, demand-driven acquisitions, or even **SkyRiver**. We can either make the hard changes, or suffer harder changes made by others. Neither will be pretty, mind you, but the changes we make are certain to be better than those made by others.

It's easy to protest change, especially the one going on at **Harvard** (and you know as well as I do it isn't just there). Furthermore, change,

when it disrupts, reassigns, or remakes people and their livelihoods, always appears severe and even insensitive. But, unless we as a profession are willing to offer thoughtful, tenable, solutions — even ones that run contrary to what we've done for the past fifty years — to these very pressing problems, we will continue to feel the earth move under our feet and the sky come tumbling down, tumbling down.

Or, in other words, we'll see our own *mene, mene, tekel upharsin* written right there in plain letters.

And mostly likely LED ones, too, with that absurd braying, to boot. 🐘