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Little Red Herrings — Collaboration is the New Black
by Mark Y. Herring (Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University) <herrimg@winthrop.edu>

Orange may be the new black, but as I have seen only five minutes of that show, I can’t really use it here. Besides, based on the five minutes I saw, I would assume it is a series written by males. Not since the five minutes I saw, I would assume it is a good way to get your arms around it. But if we can negotiate a deal. book shop will come into a collection and we can negotiate a deal.

So far my reading had included only one truly great book, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, but I saw it only as a boy’s adventure. I was not to discover literature until I attended Department of Defense high schools in West Germany. My eureka moment came when I saw The Grapes of Wrath on a shelf in the high school library. I thought (don’t laugh) that it was a boy from ten to fourteen.” (p. 227, Jennings, Shirley May, A Study of the Genesis of the Twenty-two Published Children’s Novels by Howard Pease (Stockton, University of the Pacific unpublished doctoral dissertation, 1969).

The main character in several of the Pease novels is Tod Moran. I recently bought and re-read The Jinx Ship (reprint and not a first) and understood why I read every book of his in the junior high library. Pease wrote well and with an adult vocabulary so the notion that he wrote “children’s” novels is a bit misleading and inaccurate. He wrote high-sea adventure stories that kept me spell-bound to the last page. He is a highly collectable author, so it is rare to find his books for sale. I don’t collect him, not yet, but the prospect is there. Maybe next year. Maybe my favorite second-hand book shop will come into a collection and we can negotiate a deal.

The idea of a university, was to help people put their heads together. Libraries did this with books first, then with journals, and now with just about everything else you can think of.

Four other authors deserve mention and maintain niches in my pantheon of best books.

James T. Farrell’s Studs Lonigan trilogy is as fine an example of what was called realism as I know of, but I had never heard of realism or any other ism other than communism in 1960. Studs Lonigan was an Irish Catholic who grew up in Chicago during the Great Depression, and the novels Young Lonigan, The Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan, and Judgment Day deserve a place next to The Grapes of Wrath. I still remember scenes from that Trilogy after more than fifty years. I have a one-volume edition waiting to be read.

I identified with Philip Carey, the protagonist in W. Somerset Maugham’s Of Human Bondage. I had no club foot, no stutter, no reason at all to feel sorry for myself, but I was a teenage boy with my own issues and pain. It’s a masterpiece that even now deserves to be read, preferably by teenage boys.

And finally, there is Walden by Henry David Thoreau. He awakened my critical thinking and gave me the courage to stand up and be counted at a time and in a place where conformity was not only safe but expected in spite of lip service to rugged individualism. Without Thoreau would I have had such a visceral and heartfelt dislike of the House Un-American Committee, one of the least American institutions that have ever existed?

No wonder that I still enjoy reading today. No, it is much more. As Thomas Jefferson expressed it so well for me, “Without books I cannot live.” As I look at my short list, I think they can rightfully be called “Best Books,” and a young person today could do worse. The world is very different now, but great literature, even merely good literature, transcends time and place. I wouldn’t want a school to get hold of the list and require that students read my best books, but I wouldn’t be averse if some kindly librarian, responding to a young reader hungering for more, to say, “why don’t you try one of these?” And as with salted peanuts, you can’t stop with just one. 🍟
collections and even staffs when geographical propinquity allows. Public and academic collaborations, now more than a decade old, have caught on in other countries but more slowly here in the U.S.

Libraries are also looking more carefully at collaborative space sharing, combining the library with other academic spaces on campus. New library buildings, if they are being built at all, often include shared spaces with IT, writing labs, technology rooms, and so on. Again, not any of these things are new, but they are getting new looks as universities work hard to get better returns on investment.

Collaborating is also beginning to take place even within the library, but this may be the most difficult of all collaborations to effect. For most of my career, libraries were thought of in terms of public and technical services. Sometimes archives were added to the mix. Today, however, more and more libraries are breaking down these barriers and removing the divisions. Acquisitions units are taking over more of copy cataloging while cataloging proper is headed toward more original cataloging endemic to that library. Public services personnel are no longer tied to the reference desk (if it still exists), but expanding their roles into on-campus labs, dormitories, and faculty classrooms.

Less common but not unheard of are makerspaces (or fablabs, hackerspaces) in academic libraries. These are places where anyone can come in and with others try out new things using tools, software, networks, technologies — you name it — to create whatever it is they wish to create. In any event, it is a place where collaboration can take place.

None of these collaborations take place by themselves. They require good leadership and someone willing to push them forward over the rough spots. It’s easy to make a mess of them, hard to make them successful. As mentioned above, making collaboration take place in the library is often the most difficult of all because so many of the people working there have been there for decades. Making these collaborations work means asking them to do something completely different from what they have been doing for years. Most will adapt to the changes but need to be ushered into them.

I don’t know about orange being the new black. I would hate to think that what I saw in the five minutes of the show I watched will soon become the norm! But collaboration, as far as libraries go, really is the new black. It will soon be as commonplace as p-slips once were.

Let’s embrace it while we can.