Book Reviews: Monographic Musings

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The relevance to modern librarians of political advice written by Niccolò Machiavelli, a bureaucrat from the early 1500s during a time of the feuding Italian city-states, might surprise. In The Machiavellian Librarian, editors Melissa Aho and Erika Bennett, along with 28 contributing authors, explain how Machiavelli’s political advice from 500 years ago, to the glee of liberal arts advocates everywhere, is relevant to librarians today.

When thinking of someone who is Machiavellian, we more likely think of a Francis Underwood of the recent American House of Cards series than we do a librarian. Despite the title, the editors and authors do not advocate for ruthlessness in the stacks. Instead, some of Machiavelli’s advice is repositioned to advocate for librarians to be personally assertive and high-achieving in the pursuits of preserving libraries in the midst of turbulent times and improving the profession’s services throughout our respective realms.

Rather than simply using Machiavelli as a gimmick in the title or introduction, he is quoted throughout to make salient points. These quotations reassert the theme — that librarians can influence those in power and ally with those who can share their influence with us — in this collection of 26 chapters. While a few quotes are repeated by multiple authors, making it seem that a list of quotes might have been provided to be worked into the chapters, this repetition is slight compared to the duplication of content and context by the many contributing authors in their respective chapters. Such duplication is outweighed by the diverse perspectives represented, which allow readers a walk through the trenches on the multiple fronts in the battle for the relevancy of libraries in today’s conflict-ridden, resource-scarce society. The inclusion of authors from large public and private universities to a small liberal arts college, a community college, and even one K-12 school library, authors accounting experiences as new librarians, middle managers, and library directors, and authors from both public and technical services shows how any librarian can have influence.

Each chapter begins with an abstract, and keywords then recounts how the author(s) have had influence before concluding with specific practical recommendations and references. While many recommendations are not particularly revolutionary (e.g., “listen to your users” and “collaborate with other campus units”), having them collected into one tome and reinforced through the various authors’ experiences and phrasing greatly increases the likelihood that a reader will understand some of them and be able to apply them in one’s own situation.

Jorge Brown has a particularly instructive chapter on the relationship between satellite libraries and main libraries and advises that “you are your public relations agent.” Leslie L. Morgan calls upon librarians to “take an assertive and confident approach in articulating who we are in the profession today.” Maggie Farrell explains, “politics is also the process of helping others get to yes for your initiatives.” Kacy L. Allgood shares about how to effectively network: “A Machiavellian librarian must constantly create opportunities to sell library services and build the client base” and can achieve support from others by being “the best informed, most polite, and nonthreatening stalkers.”

A concluding chapter by the editors would have been welcomed to summarize the various recommendations, but Eric Owen concludes the book with a particularly engaging chapter about the opportunities and pitfalls of transitions in campus and library leadership, reorganization, and shared governance.

A more convincing, more unified narrative advocating the thesis could perhaps have been achieved with less duplication by actually rewriting The Prince as the Librarian or by taking passages from The Prince and expounding on each from the view of a modern librarian. As written, though, The Machiavellian Librarian certainly inspires and equips librarians to become influential leaders. Useful advice on personal career advancement, networking, identifying one’s strengths, listening, and communicating is provided. Examples are provided of how to improve strategic planning, outreach to power brokers and influencers, provide services to underserved populations, and build alliances across campus and the greater community.

Todd Fenton, while explaining process mapping and needs assessment, encapsulates the book well. Like a prince, he writes, “being a librarian is about serving people” while reminding us that “service is not about martyrdom, nor is it without reward.” Throughout the book, inspiration is found in the wisdom of centuries-old political advice — that in the best cases through carefully planned and implemented strategies and interpersonal relations we can improve our personal station while also improving the conditions for our patrons and coworkers. If we fail, like a prince, our project, department, or library will be defeated, our realm divided, spoils distributed to the victors, and our works relegated to the pages of history or forgotten.

This book is highly recommended for all librarians seeking to have influence, particularly those with a proclivity for the liberal arts. Deceit and megalomania are optional.


Reviewed by Kristina M. Edwards (Acquisitions Librarian, Elihu Burritt Library, Central Connecticut State University) <k.edwards@ccsu.edu>
This two-volume encyclopedia fills that gap. Chapters address legal, social, political, and cultural issues of immigrant groups on a state-by-state basis and explore immigration trends and issues faced by individual ethnic populations...

Earth’s Landscape: An Encyclopedia of the World’s Geographic Features (Feb. 2015, ISBN: 978-1-61069-445-2, $205; e-ISBN: 978-1-61069-446-9, call for pricing) is another two-volume set. It is authored by Joyce A. Quinn and Susan L. Woodward and “describes continents and oceans; individual mountains, islands, caves, and rivers; and ecological entities such as wildlife refuges and national parks. Each entry provides a geographic overview of the feature’s significance, location, description, geologic history, biota, protected areas, and environmental issues. But the coverage goes even deeper so that entries also discuss the cultural importance of each natural place...”

Rowman and Littlefield is also publishing a couple of new reference works.

Encyclopedia of Christian Education – 2nd edition (March 2015, ISBN: 978-0-8108-8492-2, $215.00; eBook: 978-0-8108-8493-9, $215.00) is edited by George Thomas Kurian and Mark A. Lamport. This reference “explores the many facets of Christian education in terms of its impact on curriculum, literacy, teacher training, outcomes, and professional standards. This encyclopedia is the first reference work devoted exclusively to chronicling the unique history of Christian education across the globe, illustrating how Christian educators pioneered such educational institutions and reforms as universal literacy, home schooling, Sunday schools, women’s education, graded schools, compulsory education of the deaf and blind, and kindergarten...”

Encyclopedia of Archival Science (June 2015, ISBN: 978-0-8108-8810-4, $125; eBook: 978-0-8108-8811-1, $125) by Luciana Duranti and Patricia C. Franks “features 154 entries, which address every aspect of archival professional knowledge. These entries range from traditional ideas (like appraisal and provenance) to today’s challenges (digitization and digital preservation). They present the thoughts of leading luminaries like Ernst Posner, Margaret Cross-Norton, and Philip Brooks as well as those of contemporary authors and rising scholars. Historical and ethical components of practice are infused throughout the work...”

ABC-CLIO Greenwood has a number of new titles in the offering.


Lafayette. This is her second book about political handbook of the world 2015 (April 2015, ISBN: 978-1-4833-7157-3; e-ISBN: 978-1-4833-7159-7, $395) by Thomas Lansford is another single-volume published annually. This reference will continue to be an “authoritative source for finding complete facts and analysis on each country’s governmental and political makeup. Compiling in one place more than 200 entries on countries and territories throughout the world, this volume has coverage of all major and minor political parties and groups in each political system. It also provides names of key ambassadors and international memberships of each country, plus detailed profiles of more than 30 intergovernmental organizations and UN agencies...”

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