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Oregon Trails — The Gift of Reading

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The American Library Association once offered a bookmark with “Reading is FUNdamental” on it. The play on words was meant to show that a basic skill can be fun rather than drudgery.

Reading as fun? I don’t think so, at least not for me. Fun for me was riding my bike, swimming and diving, and playing pickup baseball games. Reading was escape, vicarious adventure, and discovery of worlds outside my narrow environment.

The first intimation of what a printed page contained, besides pictures and black marks on the paper, came from being read to. Those books my father read to me, very infrequently actually but enough to produce powerful memories, came alive with stories of animals that could think and talk like people. It never seemed fantastic to me, merely fascinating. And as I grew older and began to learn my ABCs, reading became not a possibility but a goal that I yearned to reach as I struggled with the words beneath pictures of a dog, a pony, a young girl, and a young boy about my age then.

As far as I remember, it would have been 1948 when I learned to read, and I have been a reader ever since. I was not one of those kids who snuck a book to the dinner table, but I did read in bed with a flashlight so as not to disturb my little brother. My father always took both the morning and the afternoon newspapers, so I had comic strips to read and the Sunday funnies where I became friends with the likes of Dick Tracy (and **Al Capp’s** Fearless Fosdick spoof), Pogo, Lil Abner, and many others. And books. Yes, reading became my way of escaping into imaginary worlds as presented by the **Grimm** brothers, **Hans Christian Andersen**, and the Illustrated Junior Library edition of *Arabian Nights*, but not because I had an unhappy childhood. I led a happy, care-free childhood and reading was just one of the activities that I enjoyed, and the fact that reading could carry me to so many other places, although I could not have articulated such a thought back then, was enough to hook me, a phrase reminiscent of another **ALA** slogan, “Hooked on Books” — one that I find more apropos to young readers through large-type readers of a certain age.

The concept of reading for fun has a certain appeal to adults, especially teachers, parents, and librarians. But do they really hook children on books with slogans? And suggesting to children that reading is fun may work in reverse, especially if reading doesn’t come easily.

There is evidence that reading to children when they are babies and preschoolers provides a head start, when reading is introduced in school, with some learning to read even before kindergarten, but it is those deprived of a rich verbal childhood who often have difficulty learning to read. There are some who grow up functionally illiterate, unable to read things that we take for granted, assuming that even a

second grader could make sense of things such as menus and road signs.

True oral societies memorize thousands of words that the people weave into songs, stories, and historical narratives passed down through generations, word for word, cadence for cadence. Was it **Einstein** who said that memorizing facts was not necessary if one knew where to look for the answers? Where to look then? In books, of course, but that was long before the World Wide Web and the Internet but even there, one must know how to read, at least rudimentarily.

But in an oral society, being able to read is not a survival skill and might even be a hindrance or a danger. A citizen in such a society could be of great help to Guy Montag and his confederates in **Bradbury’s** *Fahrenheit 451* as they strived to preserve the body of great literature that was in danger of being lost forever.

Many years ago, I was at the DMV to take the written exam so I could get a local driver’s license. As I sat at one of the stations marking my answers, I observed one of the agents administering the test to an older man, probably in his late 60s. He was functionally illiterate, unable to take the standard written test. Had he been driving without a license? Had he been out in the country on a farm and had not had to bother with a license? Could he even sign his name or did he have to draw an X and have the agent certify that it was the man’s legal mark? And how did he ever arrange to have an oral exam, one that involved generic road signs? At the time, I never gave silent thanks for being able to read. I just took it for granted that reading was fundamental and everyone in the United States past the first grade could read.

One of the advantages of being a librarian is that I have been able to meet literary people, not necessarily writers although there have been a few of those along the way. Among those literary folk was the widow of **D. H. Lawrence’s** bibliographer who had been friends with **Frida Lawrence** as evidenced by the scrapbook of **Frida’s** letters. When I first met her to look at some books she was thinking of donating to my library, she was a bit leery but once we got to talking and discovered a mutual love of reading and some mutual friends and booksellers we knew, I got the books but also got to know her as a friend. I remember her fondly but with a touch of sadness, too, because, even as she aged gracefully and graciously, she was suffering from macular degeneration and it was becoming increasingly difficult to read even with the use of a large, illuminated magnifying glass.

For someone who had read thousands of books, who had been surrounded by them for most if not all of her adult life, the loss of sight necessary for reading haunted her. She lived alone with no one to read to her and with all

of those familiar volumes — old, comfortable friends — an audio book would not and could not fill the void. She later moved to a very nice retirement center close to a bookish grandson who perhaps, I would like to think, spent time reading to her. After almost twenty years of reading aloud to my children and remembering the teachers who read aloud to me, it is more gratifying to be the reader, but that is from the perspective of someone who can still read for himself.

In 2006, I, along with several other librarians, was privileged to spend an hour or so with **Father Ted Hesburgh** in his suite on the 13th floor of the **University of Notre Dame’s Hesburgh Library**. I enjoyed that time with **Fr. Ted**, hearing, first-hand, some of his stories, most of which are included in his autobiography, *God, Country, Notre Dame*. The story I most enjoyed was how he, suffering from macular degeneration, would leave his suite and wander into other parts of the library where he would encounter students and then draft one to come and read to him. What a wonderful way of dealing with such a debilitating and often depressing disease and **Fr. Ted** could choose reading matter from his own library, the one in his suite or the one surrounding him in all directions.

I have stopped taking reading for granted and have been even more careful with my eyes and pleased when I leave the ophthalmologist’s office with a clean bill of health.

Anyone reading this essay takes for granted the gift of reading, of words on paper, television and computer screens, road signs, test booklets, newspapers, **IKEA** instructions, and on and on and on.

I didn’t even mention typography and the codex and its earnest counterfeiter exemplified by Nook and Kindle.

Now try to imagine what your life would have been like had you never learned to read in our literate world? When I take myself back to the late 1940s when I was learning to read, I know that I became frustrated when all of the words on the page were not intelligible. Without being able to articulate it, I knew that there was a whole new world waiting for me if I could only learn to read. I was not concerned with employment applications and driver’s exams, I just wanted to decipher those letters so I could read on my own.

But at some stage the act of reading became second nature and as much a part of my personality as the clothes I wore and the way I combed my hair. And reading became, it seems at times, as important as breathing. Imagine that I can’t read? I can’t imagine.

In *From Here to Eternity*, the book’s hero is wounded in a knife fight and is taken in by a woman who loves him. AWOL and hurt, he

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new purchases to end users) can be especially useful for smaller libraries or those without dedicated marketing personnel. Whether a library is looking to enhance outreach, prove value on campus, or simply looking to get a little more bang for their buck, there is really no limit to the types of collaborations the account development team is willing to try. We are always interested in hearing your own ideas, as well.

Everything Else

Earlier, I mentioned implementation and discovery assistance. We communicate regularly with the editorial, platform development, and metadata teams so that we can answer any questions libraries may have about MARC records or how **Springer** works with various discovery services. Occasionally we will perform a “discovery review” on a random library Website. This entails crawling the search environment, searching for **Springer** content, and recording its findability. Exercises like this provide valuable insight — not only into how our content is organized and discovered in the field, but also helps us keep up with trends and changes in the land of discovery.

There’s a twelve hundred word limit on this column, so I’m not able to include every single way account development teams work to add value to licensed content. If you see us during conferences or at your campus library, please say hi — we’d love to meet you! 🌱

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turns to reading while she is away at work. Prewitt was a boxer and bugler and a soldier destined to be a thirty-year man before fate intervenes. Still, reading opened up a whole new world to him, never mind that he was unable to take advantage of it.

Studs Lonigan, the Irish Catholic protagonist in **James T. Farrell’s** trilogy tells of a boy’s life into manhood. I read that trilogy while I was in high school, and it is among my all-time favorite books. That aside, I thought of Studs as I wrote the lines about Prewitt. However inadvertently, Prewitt discovered literature and, had there not been a war going on, he might have gone on to be a writer much like his inventor, **James Jones**. **James T. Farrell**, on the other hand, does not give such an advantage to his creation. The system didn’t allow it, and Studs also dies young. Studs, the right book would have done you a lot of good.

Once children have learned to read, how do we keep them reading? What causes some to read only what is required of them and others like **Richard Wright**, the novelist, to forge signatures in order to check out books from a library that excluded blacks? Nature or nurture or a bit of both? Let them have books! 🌱

Let’s Get Technical — Moving Technical Services to an Off-site Space

How One Public Library System Worked with Architects to Make this Happen

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Introduction

When we started this column, one thing we wanted to do was to hear stories about problems and solutions from other technical services departments. So, we sent a message to various technical service listservs, asking if anyone would be interested in being interviewed for the column. Our first conversation was with **Pauline Rodriguez-Atkins**, Manager of Cataloging and Interlibrary Loan at the **Metropolitan Library System** in Oklahoma. We were interested in her story of how their technical services team was able to work directly with architects to design a customized space for technical services when their department moved off-site. Working directly with the architects enabled them to design a building specific to the needs of a dynamic, fast-paced, and large-scale technical services section. As **Rodriguez-Atkins** states of working directly with architects: “It was such a great experience. Once in a career experience. For us, very often you know with technical services nobody asks you what you need, they tell you what you get. It was such a great experience to be asked what we needed.” The following column is a summary of the phone interview we had with **Rodriguez-Atkins** on May 18, 2015.

The Library System

Metropolitan Library System is a public library system serving Oklahoma County, covering around 700 square miles and serving a population of approximately 720,000 in and around the Oklahoma City metropolitan area. The library system is comprised of 19 library locations, 14 of which are full-service library locations and 5 that provide limited service. Outside of Oklahoma City, the communities served have populations of between 600 and 87,000.

How do Technical Services operate?

Technical services (called Materials Services) is comprised of Acquisitions, Cataloging, Processing, and Interlibrary Loan. The whole unit is centralized for the entire system. Acquisitions includes the staff who select the material for purchase. The Acquisitions staff and selectors have always resided apart from the rest of the unit. When the unit moved to the new building, Interlibrary Loan joined them.

How did you operate before coming together in one building?

Initially, all of the technical services operations were located in the downtown library

branch. Because of construction being done around the main library in the 1970s, the Cataloging and Processing units were moved into a smaller 1950s-era branch. It was difficult to operate in that building because Receiving and Processing were located on the first floor and Cataloging was on the second floor. There was only one elevator in the building, and it sometimes malfunctioned. Materials would then have to be moved from hand to hand up and down the stairs. This “temporary” relocation of technical services in 1974 lasted until 2010! By that time, the library system had expanded and the space was just too small to be able to handle the influx of materials.

What was the rationale for having a building just for Technical Services?

The library system does not outsource any technical services operations or buy any shelf-ready materials. Technical services was no longer able to function in their space, despite being creative and utilizing every inch. The idea of moving to a new space was first brought up in 2002 and finally approved by the library commission in 2006, with the units moving into their new space in 2010. The library commission was told that if they wanted to build a huge new library, with a collection of over 100,000 volumes, more space needed to be made for Cataloging and Processing. Within three years, the process went from nothing to design, construction, and moving in. The library system delayed the construction of a new branch library until Technical Services was able to move into their new space.

Why was Acquisitions in a separate location and where is it now located?

When Cataloging and Processing were moved out of the downtown building, there wasn’t any room to put selectors or Acquisitions staff in the branch library, so they stayed in the downtown library. When the new downtown library was built, Technical Services was supposed to be reunited with the selectors and Acquisitions in the new building, but the planned technical space was reallocated. There was discussion when the design phase started on the building that currently houses Technical Services that it would include Acquisitions, but at that point there was a desire from the administration to keep Acquisitions in the same building with them, together with financial operations.

Why did you decide to work directly with architects? What were the benefits of being

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