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Random Ramblings — Why Don't Public Librarians Brag More about One of Their Greatest Successes: Providing Pleasure Reading for Their Patrons?

Part Two — Comments from Public Librarians

Column Editor: **Bob Holley** (Professor Emeritus, Wayne State University, 13303 Borgman Avenue, Huntington Woods, MI 48070-1005; Phone: 248-547-0306) <aa3805@wayne.edu>

This column continues the discussion of my contention that public librarians hesitate to brag about one of their most successful services — providing pleasure reading and viewing materials for their patrons. As I say below, I was struck by the fact that the textbook that I used talked mostly about information but said nothing about the importance of pleasure reading. Since my professional experience as a librarian was in three large research libraries, I thought it a good idea to ask public librarians if they agreed or not with me. I do have experience teaching three courses — the introductory course, management, and collection development — where I needed to be aware of and teach public library issues. I also invited guest lecturers from all types of libraries. Finally, I've been sequentially married to two librarians whose professional experience included working in public libraries. Nonetheless, some might challenge my credentials to talk about a public library issue and asking public librarians to weigh in could provide additional perspectives.

A good way to begin for those who haven't read my first column (see *Against the Grain*, December 2015-January 2016, p.58) is to provide the question that I asked on two discussion lists since it summarizes my main points:

In teaching the introductory library science course at Wayne State for the fourth time, I was struck by the lack of attention paid to recreational reading in the course readings. The stress for all types of libraries, including public libraries, was finding information for users. While I know that recreational reading is technically information, I don't think that the authors were talking about access to genre fiction. The same was true for the history of the public library with an emphasis upon teaching immigrants how to adapt to American culture. Am I correct in my assumption that even the early public libraries provided fiction that their patrons wanted to read, perhaps even fiction from popular authors with less than high literary status? Finally, my overall impression is that publicity about the value of public libraries tends to focus on things like helping people to find jobs, overcoming the digital divide by providing people with Internet access, support for economic development, etc. I don't much remember public libraries bragging about providing tons of best sellers and genre fiction to their users though they may brag about circulation in general.

I bring this up in part because I think that support for recreational reading is one of the reasons why the public library will not only survive but flourish. An average family of heavy readers would have trouble paying for the number of books that they wish to read unless they are happy enough with access to the free self-published materials available on many sites or with Project Gutenberg. Even this solution wouldn't work for acquiring quality materials to read in print before bed to younger children. Such a family can check out a hefty number of books, whether fiction or non-fiction, for their recreational/entertainment value. Many may not even have to use the catalog and other expensive information resources as they head to their familiar shelves, which may now be arranged in book store order.

*I've always been an academic librarian so I'd appreciate any opinions on my thoughts above.... I plan to treat this topic in my next column for *Against the Grain* and would like to have a bit more authority in what I say.*

I posted the message first on PUBLIB, perhaps the most important discussion list for American public librarians, on June 5, 2015 and

received 20 responses. Since I deferred writing this paper until now, I decided to ask public librarians in my home state of Michigan the same question. I did so on March 1, 2016 and received 15 emails. As a convenience sample, the comments below have little statistical reliability. I'll add that many who responded were professional colleagues that I knew well or former students. I did receive, however, emails from people that I didn't know. In addition, the respondents most often showed a love of reading that induced them to agree with my arguments. In all, I received only one email with substantive disagreement, and this letter wondered about publishing this piece in *ATG* rather than a public library focused journal and stated that much of the public would not want to pay taxes to support pleasure reading (Anonymous). Overall, the respondents mostly worked in small to mid-size public libraries, but I received one response from a library science professor.

My first comment concerns the definition of pleasure reading. Upon reflection, my request for comments included too much emphasis upon fiction. **John Sheridan** reminded me that non-fiction is also important, a fact that I wouldn't contest because my mother, an avid life-long reader, never read fiction. In a similar way, three librarians (**Deborah Battisti**, **Teresa Natzke**, and **Jessica Parij**) noted the popularity of DVDs as the visual equivalent of books or focused on the increasing expenditures and publicity for this pleasure viewing format. Finally, **Mark Arend** added that the "trashy" popular fiction of yesterday may become today's classics and cited "**Fitzgerald**, **Hemingway**, [and] **Twain**."

Suggesting other resources that I could use to develop this topic was another frequent contribution. Two librarians (**Julie Marie Frye** and anonymous) referred me to additional resources on the history of pleasure reading in libraries. The majority talked more about the current situation with suggestions about other publications (**Sue Kamm**, **Kathleen McCook**, **Steve Norman**, and **Donald Reynold**), authors (**Heidi Butler** who suggested the works of **David Carr**), and Websites (**Kathleen McCook**).

My next category consists of comments about the popularity of pleasure reading with users. **Darwin McGuire** pointed to the importance of circulation: "At the **Genesee District Library**, in 2015, fiction for all ages accounted for 3/4 of total print circulation." She went on to add that the circulation of eBooks is growing and "is nearly all recreational reading." **Jessica Parij** provided statistics on the high circulation of adult non-fiction and DVDs at the **Rochester Hills Public Library**. Finally, **Teresa Natzke** of the **Franklin Public Library** believed that "90% of the reading that my patrons do is recreational."

A surprising number of respondents emphasized readers advisory, including its history (**Kirsten Corby**), though I didn't specifically ask about this aspect of pleasure reading. Several librarians contrasted this skill with the more technological and information science aspects of public library work. For me, the most telling account dealt with the retirement of a paraprofessional whose "technical skills were not the best" but who occasioned "a call from a patron who was extremely upset that we would let this person go and demanded that I come up with some way to make her stay." (**Elyse Streit**) For **Betsy Sherednik**, "when libraries get sidetracked with maker spaces and goals to be techno geeks, it's so sad.... I say let's embrace what we are good at — getting the right book into the hand of the one who wants it." **Emily Izidor** worried about librarians who don't read because patrons "want to hear from professionals telling them what they personally enjoyed or personally read." She then added that some people use fiction to "get through the death" of a loved one, which supports the importance of bibliotherapy.

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An anonymous librarian had a perceptive observation about the differing importance of pleasure reading for children and adults. “Early literacy programs are important and, to get children excited about reading, programs are created to get kids reading for pleasure; however, once we pass the threshold into adulthood, the joy of reading is no longer a large concern.” She listed some programs to encourage adult reading, but they lack the educational focus of those for children such as *Battle of the Books* (**Faye VanRavenswaay**).

Only two librarians commented on the Pew Report, *Libraries at the Crossroads*, whose summary report about what Americans wanted from their public libraries did not include pleasure reading. (I quoted from this report in my first article.) **Cynthia Bierniek** replied that it included the statistic that “78% believe that libraries are effective at promoting literacy and the love of reading” though I will once again point out that at a certain point pleasure reading may not significantly enhance literacy for adults. A librarian who wishes to remain anonymous observed that “the Pew study reflects a more ‘high-minded’ view of what libraries should be doing. So it seems it’s not just librarians who aren’t bragging about pleasure reading, the study participants don’t seem to be doing that either.” The person also said that both librarians and the public may be taking pleasure reading for granted.

One of my key points was the fact that public libraries don’t take credit for their huge success and popularity in making pleasure reading available, one of the surest guarantees of their continued existence. Four librarians gave the following reasons for this. **Megan Buck** made three points: “I think voters are more likely to vote for a millage if they believe the library is providing opportunities for education and self-improvement that are not available (even for a fee) somewhere in the community.” The second is that grant funders “don’t care about how popular your library is; they want to know what ‘good deeds’ your library is doing and providing for the community.” Finally, “I think that people want to know that their tax dollars are going to contribute to the greater good — an overall improvement in society — an increase in education, safer environment for their children, or an overall equalization of the population.” **Cynthia Orr** expressed a similar concern that “public libraries over the years have been afraid to brag about providing best sellers and genre fiction because they felt vulnerable to critics who



would call that ‘trash’ or even ‘porn’ and possibly go after funding.” A third anonymous librarian is even more blunt: “Your article is going to claim librarians should try to convince local governments to support public libraries to provide little old ladies with Harlequin romances and old men with Westerns. The only recreation Americans are willing to support with tax money is sports.” **Amy Alcensius** provided a different reason. “Maybe we don’t brag or advertise about how we fulfill the need for pleasure reading because the readers in the community are already users and don’t need any more convincing.”

On the other hand, I concur with the more nuanced viewpoint from **Carlie Hoffman**. “I also think that the publicity has to do with the audience. When public libraries are publicizing to other libraries or to government and other funding entities, they tend to focus on being good stewards of tax dollars, economic impacts, and bridging the digital divide. When public libraries are publicizing to the general community, they focus more on recreational reading (and viewing and listening)....” **Darwin McGuire** confirmed this opinion when she said much the same thing: “We tailor our message to the audience. In our millage..., we will be emphasizing the popular services...” The decision to choose the message appropriate for the intended audience is one of the secrets of successful communication, especially in this case when both messages are accurate.

I will end with a few comments on the fact that the success of the library depends upon providing pleasure reading. **Deborah Battisti** said this well. “Folks who want information use us once or occasionally. Folks who want to read for recreation use us regularly; and it’s because ... they save money getting books at the library.” While several librarians said the library should give patrons what they want, **Kimberly Schaaf** said it best: “The main idea here is that if a patron walks away from the library unsatisfied because we didn’t have that best seller or movie, then they probably won’t come back. If they don’t come back, then where do we stand when the millage expires?”

To conclude, I wish to thank all those who responded to my request for comments. The librarians above provide additional insights on pleasure reading and mostly support my contention that pleasure reading is an important but often overlooked key function of public libraries. While providing pleasure reading may not be as “trendy” as 3D printing or maker spaces, it makes economic sense for the community and will play a critical role in assuring the continued existence of public libraries. 🌱

Pelikan’s Antidisambiguation — “Horses for Courses”

Column Editor: **Michael P. Pelikan** (Penn State) <mpp10@psu.edu>

“How many of those do you have?”

She was asking about the various tablet and pad-like devices stacked around the arms of my leather recliner. I did my best to appear to welcome the question. “Well, it depends,” I said, “on what I need to do at any given time.”

“This one’s my main at-home reading device,” I explained, holding up the Kindle Fire HDX 8.9. I held up the Kindle Voyage. “And this one’s for reading when I’m away from home.”

“What about that one?” she asked. “That’s my Android tablet,” I said, showing the Nexus 7, “It’s on cellular as well as wi-fi. And this one,” holding up the Samsung, “is my phone.”

“So four,” she said.

“Well, unless you include the Microsoft Surface, which is mine, or the Latitude

work-laptop with the touch screen, which is the university’s,” I pointed out.

“So six?” she asked. “Sure,” I confessed, “but that’s not that many, really. I mean, how many brushes do you use for your paintings?”

“It’s not the same thing,” she said, “I need those!”

So this is why she’s called an artist and I’m called a geek.

No one would really argue that an artist ought to be restricted to carrying a single brush, or that a photographer ought to be restricted to carrying a single lens — unless, that is, by choice. I might think it odd if the folks next to me at the opera hoisted up a pair of Oberwerk 25x100s, and it would certainly invite comment if, at the star party, you confined your observations to those you could make with

your opera glasses. And yet to carry multiple digital devices seems to give those around you a license to comment on, of all things, your perceived eccentricity.

Our eldest son is a Design major. He’s recently been talking to us about his Typography class. They’ve been exploring historical typography, typographic analysis, and typographic design. He’s loving it, and, with only the slightest prompting, is happy to demonstrate the gulf between what most people, even fairly literate people, know about type, and those who study it formally, with an eye toward becoming practitioners of type.

So recently I forwarded a couple of URLs to him. The first was toward an article (there are many) about Bookery, **Amazon’s** new

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