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The Peripatetic Browser--A Book Review of Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Book Store by Robin Sloan

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Book Reviews — Monographic Musings

Column Editor: **Debbie Vaughn** (Adjunct Instructor, College of Charleston) <vaughnd@cofc.edu>

Morris, Vanessa Irvin. *The Readers' Advisory Guide to Street Literature.* ALA Readers' Advisory Series. Chicago: ALA, 2012. 978-0-8389-1110-5. 168 pages. \$48.00.

Reviewed by **Debbie Vaughn** (Adjunct Instructor, College of Charleston)
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My professional library experience has been limited to the College of Charleston. As such, I never had much of an opportunity for readers' advisory, nor for exploring the street literature genre. **Vanessa Morris' *The Readers' Advisory Guide to Street Literature*** makes me want to change all of that. As a reader, it has prompted me to add a number of titles to my "Want To Read" list on **Goodreads**. As a librarian, reading **Morris'** guide prompted me to hop into WorldCat and take a look at the number of libraries holding not only her title but also a random selection of the titles included in her book. It also made me think about — as other reviewers have noted — public service, collection development, and the patrons served by libraries; and those who possibly are not current patrons but who might be, given different public service and collection development practices.

Like other RA books, **Morris'** guide offers index lists of titles by reader group, monograph

type, etc. However, I feel that the value of **The Readers' Advisory Guide to Street Literature** lies in **Morris'** exploration of the background and characteristics of street lit; her suggestions for RA interactions and even RA displays; her recommendations for collection development, booktalking, and even shelving street lit; and her ideas for promoting street lit through book clubs, field trips, and other venues.

Morris approaches her guide—and her profession — with the belief that librarians must be readers not only of books (such as street literature) but also of patrons and of libraries. She writes that librarians "are not the only experts in the stacks. The patrons have much to teach us, too" (xxiii). This thought reminds me of an article that College of Charleston librarian **Burton Callicott** and I wrote about the concept of "broccoli librarianship," a phrase penned by **Candice Benges** and **Janice Brown** from the **University of Southern California**. Broccoli librarianship is the idea that what *librarians*

feel is important to patrons *should* be what is important to patrons because it is "good for them." In our article, **Callicott** and I explored how such a limited view can undermine Web usability studies; obviously, though, its harmfulness is not limited to user testing. **Morris** might not use the phrase "broccoli librarianship," but she certainly cautions against failing to educate ourselves about and advocating for the interests of our patrons rather than what *we feel* should be promoted. **Morris'** guide is a testament to patrons learning from librarians learning from patrons.

I, too, hold close the notion of a cycle of learning among librarians, patrons, and the larger community; perhaps this is why I am profoundly captivated by **The Readers' Advisory Guide to Street Literature** and I suspect you will be, too. It should be required reading for those in public library systems as well as high school librarians, library school students, and even English/literature secondary education students. 🌱



The Peripatetic Browser — A Book Review of Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Book Store by Robin Sloan

by **James N. R. Walser, LTC, EN** (U.S. Army) <raymondwalser@gmail.com>

Mr. Sloan's first novel takes place mostly in the joyous fantasy world of San Francisco where everyone is young, geeky and good-looking. After being laid off as a Web-page designer for a start-up bagel company, Clay Jannon takes a night-shift job at a mysterious bookstore managed by **Mr. Penumbra**. Once he has started, Clay is quickly drawn into a mystery involving a secret society of bibliophiles. The plot is well-paced, and the writing style is succinct and fun.

A highlight of the tale is the glimpses it provides into the inner workings of the Google Campus at Mountain View. Here, employees line up for free tailored and vitamin-enhanced gourmet meals while discussing weighty issues. During the visit, the reader learns something of Google's management structure and is treated to a Faustian conversation about Old Knowledge, defined as everything recorded before the invention of the Internet, and Traditional Knowledge, which Google already appears to have. The characters chat about their desire to get all knowledge into a giant database in order to solve the world's problems. The visit culminates with a scene of a helpless book being rapidly scanned in a specially developed Google scan-



ner. **Mr. Sloan's** description of the scanning is touching, and he does make you feel sorry for the book. Fortunately, it is only an old visitor logbook from **Mr. Penumbra's** book store and not anything important.

Look beyond the basic plot, however, and the book does raise some interesting questions about the nature of books, why bibliophiles collect them, and why physical books might not be completely replaced by eBooks. As the story progresses, the reader discovers that most of the books in **Mr. Penumbra's** store are written in secret code that the bibliophile club members must decipher in order to solve a grand, antique puzzle. The nature of this puzzle suggests the secret society may consist of book readers who wish they were computer programmers. As most bibliophiles know, there is no need for a good book to be written in code. It already is — words. Bibliophiles enjoy books not just for the way they smell or feel but also for the knowledge they contain. Book-reading is a discovery process.

This highlights a potential conflict between "Googlers" and bibliophiles. The bibliophile is not wholly concerned with the book as a physical object but rath-

er what it contains. Of course, there are certain physical books that have a greater value because they are of historical interest, contain beautiful illustrations, are especially rare, are signed by the author, et cetera. But how can the true seeker of knowledge, the true lover of literature, be sure that the book he or she downloads to his Kindle or iPad is the complete and original book? How does one know that elements of the book have not disappeared in the transfer? That a profound thought or a beautiful turn of phrase has not been lost? This may be the true debate. Googlers are mostly computer programmers who are concerned with getting books into their database in the quickest way possible so that they can be rapidly searched. One might even be tempted to accuse Google of being mercenary because the majority of the profits at Google come from these searches. However, the quest for knowledge is not just about getting an answer to a question immediately or cracking a code to solve a puzzle. It can also be about the discovery process in and of itself. Reading a good book brings many surprises. Only those who truly love books know this. Until eBook publishers can certify that not one word of the original has been omitted, it is likely that bibliophiles will continue to collect and read paper books. 🌱