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## Back Talk-Serving Serendipity

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# Back Talk — Saving Serendipity

Column Editor: **Jim O'Donnell** (University Librarian, Arizona State University) <jod@asu.edu>

When I was ten years old, I wanted to read **Mickey Mantle's** autobiography: *The Mickey Mantle Story*, by *Mickey Mantle as told to Ben Epstein, with a Foreword by Casey Stengel* (1953). I knew I would someday play center field for the **Yankees** and wanted to study the **Mick's** secrets. (I'm still available if they need me.) I had the run of the **Post Library at White Sands Missile Range** in New Mexico after my parents explained to the librarians that it was ok for me to check out any adult books I wanted. (Thank you, **Miss Tolson**, for being so accommodating.) Every week for two years on my library prow, I went by the Biography shelves and looked under the Ms, ever hopeful, always disappointed. It never dawned on me that the book had gone missing and would never appear.

That was my first experience of the frustrations of browsing shelves. I've spent a good part of my life since with the joys and the frustrations of browsing and now, like many, find myself just spending less time, joyful or frustrated. How can we think about this familiar, challenged cultural practice?

Yes, serendipity happens when you browse. You find things you didn't know exist. But other stuff happens too. You can plunge into an unfamiliar subject and get a snapshot of what we know about it. (Minus, of course, the books that are checked out at the moment, which may be the most current, the most generally helpful, and the most popular.) You can survey known territory to detect what's new — with, again, the risk that the novelty is most likely to be off the shelf.

What can't you do? If you bear in mind that well over half of our library acquisition budgets will be spent on journals, not monographs, you won't see any of that other material. Increasingly the print journals themselves won't be there, and the content of journals is an order of magnitude more difficult, even when present, to browse than monographs might be. You can't browse special collections and archives. And of course you can't find what your library doesn't own. There are limits.

So how long does this model sustain itself? What does it depend on?

First, it requires us to keep our main collections together on publicly available shelves. That's problematic both for the huge increase in what we have on our shelves (more than doubled in the last thirty years) and for the increasing number of items that don't show up in print form — either unavailable in that form or chosen for e-purchase by libraries deliberately. Remember that many of our greatest libraries are already shelving appreciable portions of their collections off-site and thus unbrowsable. (The less popular materials usually? Well, but mightn't the less popular be just the ones that most benefit from random scrutiny by the curious?)

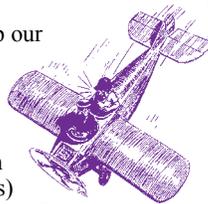
Second, it requires us to send into the stacks on a daily basis curious and fearless students and faculty with time to spend there and the habit of shelf-browsing built up over years. How is the supply of that population doing? Does this generation of students have the habit, the curiosity, the fearlessness that my generation did long ago? There was nothing so magical to me as the stacks of my first great research library, when every shelf was heavy laden with material I couldn't imagine finding in any other way. The eyes of our young, on the other hand, are jaded by knowing both too little and too much.

Third, it requires us to pass over lightly the unavoidable fact that many, many, many people who might reasonably benefit from a good shelf browse will never have that opportunity by virtue of their physical location. As an adolescent, I was one of those, in a town where even if I had looked very hard I could not have found books printed in the Greek alphabet or Latin books that weren't either church books or school books. Now I'm a classics professor — because I had the good fortune to get to a special place. Checking my privilege, I ask what we do for my adolescent self's modern equivalent? We're pressed that way *particularly* because even institutions with great research libraries

now offer degree courses to online students far from our buildings. (At ASU, the last time I checked, about 25,000 of the latter.)

So what do we do? Easy to say, harder to do: build online browsing tools one or two orders of magnitude more powerful than anything we have today, and at the same time reimagine completely the in-the-building experience of a print collection. At ASU we're pushing on both fronts and I hope to write about both in coming months. Browsing is powerful and necessary — and challenged as never before. Browsing deserves immense respect as cultural practice — and our best efforts to rescue it from oblivion.

Oh, did I ever get to read the **Mick's** confessions? Well, when I was thirty, I was tottering to the checkout line at the Ithaca (NY) **Friends of the Library** booksale, one of the great cultural institutions of our age. I was heavy laden with a tottering double armload, but I had time to look at the 25¢ table just before the cash register — and there it was! I sprang for it. Only when I got home did I look at the flyleaf: "**To Pete — Best Wishes — Mickey Mantle.**" Autographed. (I may yet change my name to Pete.) Last time I saw a similar copy on **AbeBooks**, it was going for \$3,500. Attentive browsing does pay off sometimes. 🍷



## Rumors from page 65

partnerships, great author care and consistently superb customer service." At the same awards ceremony, **EOP** was also awarded the **ProQuest Academic & Professional Publisher of the Year Award 2017**. **Tim Williams** is Managing Director. Congratulations!  
<https://www.e-elgar.com/>

**Tom Gilson** and I just got off a conference call with **Keith Webster**, Dean of Libraries **Carnegie Mellon University** and **Daniel Hook**, Managing Director, **Digital Science** about their new collaboration to create the 21st century library. With the goal of championing new forms of scholarly communication, **Carnegie Mellon** is creating a number of research platforms that will work together to enable innovation and provide opportunities for interactive research among the university's researchers. As part of this effort, the university is building out an ecosystem of support, processes and tools that underpin the full research lifecycle from ideation to dissemination. <https://www.cmu.edu/strategic-plan/goals/strategy/21st-century-library.html>

Just off phone with **Charleston Conference directors!** The theme of 2017 will be **The Past is Prologue** from **The Tempest!** The Directors also endorsed the slight date change of the **2017 Conference**. See you in Charleston Monday, November 6 through Friday November 10. [www.charlestonlibraryconference.com/](http://www.charlestonlibraryconference.com/) 🍷

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