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Back Talk — The Most Beautiful Invention

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

The most beautiful invention in the history of library science has to be the call number sticker. Like most things, it has a long history, going back to the way manuscripts were labeled for easy retrieval in medieval monastic libraries and the tags placed on papyrus rolls at Alexandria. But the great advance came with the development of the call number and the sticker.

The sticker is the workaday piece of this beauty, depending on advances on adhesives and indelible writing materials, but the call number gets all the glory. The fundamental underlying idea of the call number is that every book in a library can have a unique identifying number that gives it a place on a shelf in a neighborhood where it feels at home. When no humans are around, the books shelved in call number order can have a fine old time, chatting up the neighbors, comparing notes about which users have checked them out, and wondering what young shiny volume will next edge into their row. When the humans do show up, the books all shush one another and try to look their best in hopes of making a new friend.

This all makes sense because of the patient and exacting work of designing catalog taxonomies and subject trees to make it relatively easy to assign numbers and intellectually sensible to see which books go with which when that is done. I wrote about the beauty of the library shelf a generation ago and I still go and sigh over some of the ones I've known for a long time. It doesn't matter what library I'm in, if they've got LC call number range BR65.A and following, I know that I can spend a happy half hour catching up with old friends and making new ones having to do with the works of **Saint Augustine**. I've been there before.

Of course, we've always known there are some challenges to putting a single linear taxonomy on all the books we own. My favorite paradox has to do with a great scholarly work of the 1940s, **Pierre Courcelle's** *Les lettres grecques en Occident de Macrobe à Cassiodore*. OK, the influence of Greek literature on writers in Italy, France, Spain, and north Africa in the fifth and sixth centuries isn't everybody's cup of tea and I'll just say you

don't know what you're missing. It's indeed a great scholarly work, so much so that it was translated into English twenty years after it was published and came out from **Harvard Press** in 1969 under the title *Late Latin Writers and Their Greek Sources*. All well and good until you find that a fair number of libraries decided the French version was about Greek literature and cataloged it accordingly, then looked at the English and were sure it was about later Latin literature and cataloged it so. Original and translation wind up in those libraries at some remove from one other, wistfully longing for their alloglottal cousin to no avail.

Things also get complicated with Byzantine history, which has to do with medieval Greek civilization and how it was run out of its headquarters in Constantinople (Istanbul). See the problem? Yep, Greece is part of what Americans think of as Europe, Turkey is part of Asia, and so Byzantine history gets divided between two continents — to say nothing of the works dealing with Byzantine culture in Slavic realms, which can land up in another range entirely.

But we've made do for a long time. Should we go on making do? Should the single taxonomy of the cataloging system always and everywhere determine how books are presented on library shelves? Visitors to the **Barnes Collection** art gallery in Philadelphia have some idea of the benefits that can arise when traditional taxonomies are upended and **Cézanne** gets hung next to dubiously attributed Renaissance landscapes. Are there ways we can shake up the shelves and let other forms of order work for us?

Technology is our friend here. We may not be quite there yet, but if, for example, every volume had its RFID chip that helped us remember what its call number should be and at the same time helped us know where it was actually shelved, then non-linear shelvings could still let books be retrieved with accuracy, while showing new configurations.

We're about to experiment with one such configuration at **ASU**. We are working with a major academic publisher to take a highly successful series they publish (comprising some

500 titles) and shelve a complete set, at least for a time, together in a high-traffic area of the library. The set happens to be well suited for the enlightened and ambitious general undergraduate reader. It's a good set to know about, a brand with real value for students looking for a particular kind of introductory work in many subjects. We hope to make sure students have a chance to get to know the brand, to keep it in the back of their minds for future use and meanwhile to experiment with using individual volumes that appeal to their needs or taste.

Our publisher partner (**Oxford University Press**) is entering the spirit of the experiment with a provisional deal for allowing full access to the eBook versions of all the titles in the series for a limited time while we track usage and see what we learn. We could advertise the series on our library website, of course, but not many students would pay attention. If the books are shelved in call number order in 500 different places in the library, the brand becomes invisible except to the very keen-eyed and assiduous reader. The eBooks alone have all the drawbacks of eBooks that **Charleston Conference-goers** and **ATG-readers** are weary of hearing me complain about, but they are ubiquitously available. (Ubiquitous? The sun never sets on the **ASU** library whose patrons logged into our website last year from 155 different countries.)

We hope that the combination of physical visibility and access with easy e-access to a complete series will put in the hands of our students and other users a tool they will actually get to know and like and use to a greater extent than could ever be the case otherwise. Knocking them out of call number order, even if only for a few months, may turn out to be good for them and good for our users.

If that experiment seems fruitful, what else? Can we imagine a more ambitious program of shaking up the stacks? Creating rich displays of, say, Italian history, literature, and art together for a time? Displaying our collection of graphic novels in a way that means users might actually find out that we collect them? (Try walking through the PN6700 range in your library and see if you even notice they're there, then think about how many students will find them there.) Reinventing the reference collection to connect print tools with information about congruent e-resources? And maybe most important of all: who else is doing things like this? What other good ideas are out there? 🐼

Column Editor's Note: Since writing this column and sharing it with a few colleagues, I've been reminded that the adhesive sticker is not an entirely innocent technology — if any technology is ever innocent! The practice of adding stickers to the outsides of books is at least disrespectful of the original cover and sometimes damaging. Could we do better now? — JO'D

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