February 2007

People Profile: Jen Wolfe

Editor
editor of 15 books of science-fiction criticism, “the literature of science fiction is now considered worth examining by a broad range of literary scholars, in fields such as feminism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism, as well as experts in other disciplines, such as history and political science.”

Science fiction fanzines — usually low-budget, low-circulation, do-it-yourself magazines created by fans — are particularly valuable for documenting the close relationship between the genre’s authors and its audience. In these mimeographed or photocopied pages, leading novelists wrote candid letters to the editor and gave unguarded interviews discussing their works, writing processes, and publishers, while many of the fanzine writers and editors later went on to publish successful novels of their own. As a result, science fiction fanzines are a goldmine of rare primary source material. “When it is fully available to scholars,” explains Latham, “the Horvat collection will provide an invaluable resource for research into the history of modern science fiction and the formation of fan communities.” [emphasis most emphatically added] (1) The magnitude of the task of providing useful bibliographic access quickly became apparent. Horvat’s fanzines had languished in a storage warehouse for many years, unused and mostly unorganized. The small amount of staff time that Special Collections staff could afford to devote to the materials went towards the most minimal level of processing — sorting, de-duplicating, rehousing, and compiling a comprehensive title list for a finding aid — a project that’s only nearing completion almost two years later. As far as traditional cataloging in MARC format, that approach wasn’t even considered. The qualities that made the collection valuable — its relative comprehensiveness, the rarity of the materials and their nonconformance to standard publications — rendered it impractical for serials cataloging treatment, let alone the type of item-level treatment with subject access that would make it truly useful. Although the fanzine collection was open to researchers, the only way to find content on a specific subject involved a laborious process of digging through box after box, picking up individual issues and skimming the pages to see if they contained any relevant information.

**Boldly Going**

Elsewhere in the Libraries, a new department was being formed to centralize and coordinate digitization efforts both within the library and throughout the campus. The UI’s Digital Library Services debuted in January 2006, staffed by a program coordinator, a digital initiatives librarian, and a metadata librarian; the positions were filled with reassignments from the Libraries’ Information Technology, Preservation, and Technical Services departments. Seeking high-profile projects with which to make a name for itself, DLS selected the fanzine collection as a prime candidate for digitization.

In addition to the criteria described above, the materials held particular appeal since there was little chance of duplicating the efforts of another institution; according to the University’s subject experts, none of the few libraries with comparable collections had digitized their holdings. Furthermore, it was unlikely that the local digital collection at the UI would be made redundant by mass digitization initiatives such as Google Books, a factor that has quickly become a key consideration when working with published materials. An equally important reason for selection was the active use of the fanzines by faculty and graduate students, directing DLS efforts to a “just in time” rather than a “just in case” model. Such collaborations with academic departments support a primary strategic goal of both DLS and of the UI Libraries as a whole. As more and more students shun print information resources for those online, libraries wishing to remain a vital force on campus must find innovative approaches to serving their primary users.

Consideration of copyright restrictions has ruled out, for the time being, the digitization of complete issues of the fanzines, so DLS staff met with the faculty and graduate students conducting research with the materials to decide how best to make the collection more usable for science fiction scholars. They determined that any means of pinpointing search efforts would be most helpful, and that breadth was more valuable than depth — i.e., digitizing a larger number of items using a minimal approach was preferable to digitizing a smaller number using a fuller approach. The goal was to create a searchable database that would serve as an OPAC for the physical collection, saving time on the part of local researchers, saving wear and tear on the artifacts (and on Special Collections staff), and allowing at least partial access to the collection for a much broader audience. Based on this assessment and on consultations with Special Collections staff who were most familiar with the materials, DLS developed a plan for a science fiction fanzine digital collection that on paper appeared to comprise four simple steps:

- full color scanning of the covers and table of contents pages
- OCR (optical character recognition)

Continued on page 39

people profile

**Jen Wolfe**

**Metadata Librarian**

*University of Iowa Libraries*

<jenennifer-wolfe@uiowa.edu>

**BORN & LIVED:** Iowa, Chicago, St. Louis, Iowa, Seattle, Chicago, Iowa.


**PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES:** Experience Music Project, 2000-2003: digital collections cataloger for rock and roll museum.

University of Iowa Libraries, 2004- : cataloger in tech services, then metadata librarian in digital library services.

Blog coordinator for *ALA ALCTS Networked Resources and Metadata Interest Group*. Currently organizing bazaar sales and raffles to raise the $45,000 fee to buy my library’s way into the *Digital Library Federation*.

**FAVORITE BOOKS:** *Jane Austen*; mid-20th century young adult fiction about library careers (see http://www.jenew.org/home.html); *Kelly Link*.

**PET PEEVES/WHAT MAKES ME MAD:** Reactionarism, negativity; lack of vegetarian options.

**PHILOSOPHY:** Speed and efficiency trumps fullness of detail.

**HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS:** Further down the current path: shift in focus from creating MARC records for published materials to creating metadata records (of the non-MARC variety) for unique materials (special collections, institutional repository); *Worldcat* instead of local catalogs; automatic generation of metadata; incorporation of *Web 2.0* functionalities (user tags, ratings, recommendations); pressure from patrons for electronic access to everything.