

Guest Editorial

“What Mighty Magic!”¹



In an interview on January 2, 2000, generated in part by her decision to retire in 2001, Miriam Drake, dean and director of libraries at Georgia Institute of Technology, talked about the things she wished she had accomplished while she was director². The first was to have built a new library; the second was to have had more funds for the library; the third was to have spent more time mentoring staff.

For many of us, Georgia Tech and its dean of libraries have been the beacon of light showing the way, implementing cutting-edge technology and seamlessly integrating and distributing electronic resources. To read that the “St. John the Baptist of electronic information dissemination” regretted not having met a few needs of the bricks and mortar age was enough to make one catch one’s breath. Was this true irony, or was this a visionary now checking into reality? A few months earlier, another library visionary, F.W. Lancaster, admitted publicly in *Library Journal* to having second thoughts about the paperless society. He pleaded for more “warm librarians” and acknowledged his fear that the profession has become preoccupied with technology to the detriment of its public service ethic.³

I myself have been questioning the profession’s preoccupation with all things digital. I daily walk the director’s tightrope of creatively trying to fund this enormous expansion of information in electronic form while still supporting the need for print materials and buildings to house them. Despite the need to aggressively provide access to electronic resources, particularly in the sciences, it is becoming clear to me that what my students and faculty are clamoring for is a buffing up of our library buildings to create a better place in which to study, and

lots more books and journals. Although I have only been in my current position (central university librarian at Southern Methodist University) since June 1998, the most commonly asked question from the student body has been: Can we keep the library open more hours? And we are talking about a library that already is open an average of 116 hours a week, from 8:00 a.m. until 2:00 a.m., with 24 x 7 access to the OPAC, hundreds of electronic resources, and an electronic reserve system. The faculty’s main concern has been to increase the library acquisitions budget and to focus spending where most needed to support their research.

In the fall of 1999, I asked my provost, Ross C Murfin, to write the lead column for our library newsletter. His column began: “When things get stressful in the office, my two assistants know what I am likely to say the moment an appointment or meeting is canceled: ‘I am going to the library.’”⁴ He proceeded to describe the magic of libraries, both “the way they smell ... and the peace and quiet that libraries contain.” This is a man who has all possible electronic resources at his desktop, knows how to use them and does, but chooses to come to the library when he needs to think, to get some white space. Downloading a copy of *Jane Eyre* to his Rocket eBook is just not going to work for him.

The provost’s column drew such a positive response from campus readers that it was picked up by *The Dallas Morning News* and again elicited a universally positive response from people who applauded both the poesy and truth of the provost’s statements.⁵ A recent article in the *New York Times* about the poet Anne Carson, Pushcart Prize winner and Na-

tional Book Critics Circle Award nominee, mentions her similar need to visit the library to inhale its magic. She is described as going to the public library about once a week for “accidental inspiration.”⁶

Many people regard technology as a kind of “magic,” both the white (good) and black (bad) kind. It does seem “magical” and incredible that we can search many libraries at once to locate the books we need, have articles delivered to our e-mail accounts, or search the text of Shakespeare’s sonnets for certain words or phrases in order to better understand his particular kind of magic. But there also is a kind of black magic at work as our e-mail files overflow with the minutiae of daily professional existence. We find ourselves struggling to create the time and mental space for thought, reflection, measured action—a day away from the office is penalized by two hundred e-mail messages upon return.

These days, I find myself working with many alumni who fondly remember the “old library” (now our special collections library). They come back regularly to see the library space changing and tell me stories of how men and women used to be segregated when studying, how the law librarian used to baby-sit for the lone married female law student. The first librarian at SMU was credited with naming the school mascot, Peruna, and, in 1919, sewed the “service flag” with gold stars representing the young SMU students who lost their lives in WWI. Will future alumni have such stories to tell if the “library” is distributed to a server in the computing center or issued to students in a jewel case when they register for class?

As part of our library strategic planning process at SMU, we conducted focus group sessions with students. The two main themes that came up again and again were: keep the library open longer and make it a more congenial and welcoming space. One exception to this rule, but still a positive comment on the value of the library as space, was a comment from one student who said that he really

liked to study in the old stacks. They were so uncomfortable and depressing that he was not distracted from his task.

Contrary to my earlier naive thinking that new technology might diminish library use, I see, instead, libraries increasing in their importance as places in academic communities. The first building of SMU’s ongoing capital campaign was a library building that linked the previously separate Science and Engineering Library with the main library complex. This building resulted in a renewed sense of the centrality of the library’s position as “the heart of a university” (inscribed inside the cupola of the new tower). The class of 1999 funded a plaza outside the library as its gift, with inscribed bricks and benches, as did the faculty and the Friends of the SMU Libraries. The need to access on-site collections is only one of many reasons why faculty members and students go to libraries. Our libraries serve as study halls, social gathering places, sites for cultural stimulation, and places to ease the spirit. Patterns of use continue to grow, not decline, as libraries enhance their reputation as the place to be, and as the pace of our work lives increases our need for such a haven. This trend is not limited to libraries. Bookstores such as Barnes & Noble and Borders have increased their sales by turning their stores into gathering places with cafes, easy chairs, and places to sprawl and read new books and magazines.

ARL’s Keystone Principles have attempted to address this sense of the library as place in time, a timeless place, by describing the academic library as “the intellectual commons for the community where people and ideas interact in both the real and virtual environments to expand learning and facilitate the creation of new knowledge.”⁷ Action Item #3 states that “Libraries will create spaces where people and ideas can interact regardless of format or location.”⁸

Perhaps when I am ‘old and grey and full of sleep,’⁹ I, too, will be looking back

and wishing I had done things differently in my library. But right now I go forward with more confidence to provide those nooks and crannies for quiet reflection. I am going to fill my library with as many books, journals and special collections as my budget will let me - storing up treasures for future use. Campus administrators should realize that this does not have to be an either/or situation but that a physical library space continues to be very important to many people for many different reasons. Who knows what "inadvertent

discovery"¹⁰ may be waiting for them in those old stacks?

One of the most recent paeans of praise to the book and libraries was written by William H. Gass in *Harper's Magazine*. Gass described the library's function as "the sustaining of standards, the preservation of quality, the conservation of literacy's history, the education of the heart, eye and mind." His libraries "are for life."¹¹ Let us make sure that ours are.

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Notes

1. William Shakespeare, *Othello*, 1602-4, Act I, sc. 3, li. 92.
2. *Library Hotline* 29, no. 4 (Jan. 31, 2000): 2-3.
3. F. W. Lancaster, "Second Thoughts on the Paperless Society," *Library Journal* 124 (Sept. 15, 1999): 48-50.
4. *Annotations*, 1, no.2 (fall 1999), p. 1.
5. *Dallas Morning News*, v. 151, no. 81, Dec. 20, 1999.
6. Melanie Rehak, "Things Fall Together," *New York Times Magazine*, Mar. 26, 2000, 36-39.
7. Keystone Principles. *ARL: A Bimonthly Newsletter of Research Library Issues and Actions* 207 (Washington, D.C.: ARL, Dec. 1999), 9.
8. *Ibid.*
9. W. B. Yeats, *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1956), 40.
10. *Annotations*, p. 1.
11. William H. Gass, "In Defense of the Book," *Harper's Magazine*, Nov. 1999, 45-51