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# Read any good (suggestion) books lately?

By Donald Altschiller

Reference Librarian  
Harvard University and Northeastern University

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*A great way to inform, advise, and amuse students.*

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**A**re we paying for the *Quayle Quarterly*? If so, why?"

"Yes, a little humor in our lives is important and Mark Russell was too expensive."

The preceding written exchange is not atypical of the often lively dialogue between library user and librarian found in the suggestion book at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government (KSG). Kennedy School students do not lack opinions, a quality refreshingly matched by the library staff. After all, who says the customer is always right?

The *Quayle Quarterly* (which bills itself as the only publication in the world devoted to the life of

Library suggestion books usually contain a range of complaints and comments from patrons: the photocopier doesn't work, the library is too hot or too cold, and please buy this or that book. Invariably, the librarian's response is polite, responsive, and well, er, boring. To be sure, the KSG librarians are also polite and responsive but, at times, Malcolm Hamilton, the librarian of the KSG, responds a bit feistily—especially when the complaint is repeated for the *n*th time.

When a few users complained about excessive noise and food in the library, he gently responded: "I personally tell anyone I see to eat (and talk) elsewhere. I will remind them again."

But the complaints persisted. Apparently, some students (America's future political leaders, it should be noted) passively assumed that the problem could be corrected only by others. Mr. Hamilton had a different idea. "We're doing our best," he wrote, "but we don't always see the food or are not close enough to the problem. You are being trained here as a manager/leader. Exercise some of the techniques you're learning by telling those who bother you, to knock it off. Tell them that you'd appreciate if they continue the conversation elsewhere. Assert yourself! Stand up for your rights—with your fellow students as well as librarians."

However, the KSG suggestion book contains few such necessary lectures. Rather, it is a forum for suggestions, frequently punctuated by lightheartedness and also some arcane exhibitions of political correctness. When Rand McNally printed a U.S.

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*When the hot water supply was shut off at a Texas library, one witty wag complained and then signed his name "Cool Hand Luke."*

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J. Danforth Quayle) evoked other contentious comments. "Much as I dislike Vice President Quayle, is the *Quayle Quarterly* really the best way to spend \$20 when so many important journals are unavailable?" The reply was succinct: "Which ones, at \$20?" The response concluded with an FYI: "By the way, the *Quayle Quarterly* only costs \$12."



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atlas containing only 47 states, one activist student penned the following exhortation: "To show solidarity with the people of North Dakota, South Dakota and Oklahoma, please do not purchase Rand McNally's latest atlas." Occasionally, students set themselves up for clever rejoinders. One student whined: "Of all the libraries on campus, only Countway Medicine carries the *Utne Reader*. This is nearly incomprehensible to me." The wry riposte: "We'll get a copy and find out whether it's incomprehensible to us, too."

"Could the library subscribe to the *Reader's Digest*?" suggested one student, adding pedantically, "It is, after all, the largest selling magazine in the world." Mr. Hamilton quickly returned the volley. "One of the reasons it sells so many copies is that individuals buy their own copies. *TV Guide* is the largest selling magazine in the United States and people don't ask us to buy that."

Library suggestion books have been called "institutional forms of grass roots populism" by John Kupersmith, a Texas librarian. Sometimes, though, people offer comments that exceed the concerns, indeed the walls, of the library. "Why have they changed the shower heads in the men's locker room in the gym?" wrote one perplexed student at Carnegie-Mellon University. Another waxed metaphorical: "Why am I at Carnegie Mellon? Does the question get answered by the Philosophy Depart-

ment?" But most comments deal with quite real issues. When the hot water supply was shut off at a Texas library, one witty wag complained and then signed his name "Cool Hand Luke."

Library users are not the only ones who enjoy the opportunity to air their views. A patron, for example, complained about the condition of furniture at the KSC.

"Is there any way that the armchairs in the Library could be cleaned more often? They look uninspiring." To which the librarian responded: "We never thought of the chairs as inspiring! Nevertheless, we'll see what can be done about cleaning." And he or she then concluded with a reflection: "I wonder how they get so dirty?" ■ ■

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### Witty suggestion book comments sought

Does your library's suggestion book contain some priceless gems? Share them with *C&RL News* readers. *C&RL News* will publish selected comments as small fillers on a space available basis. Send your comments to: Suggestion Books, *C&RL News*, 50 E. Huron St., Chicago, IL 60611; bitnet: U38398@UICVM.