

# Job <sup>of a</sup> Lifetime

Danielle Mizzy

## Adventure, mystery, romance, and LCSH!

If you like adventure, mystery, romance, and the subtleties of Library of Congress Subject Headings for genre fiction, then working at Ohio's Bowling Green State University's (BGSU) Popular Culture Library (PCL) might be your job of a lifetime. The PCL, established at BGSU in 1969, is the largest facility dedicated to the acquisition and preservation of research materials on post-1876 American popular culture. Nancy Down has been popular culture cataloger and reference librarian since 1996.

### A natural progression

In 1989, Down started out in main cataloging. "I had only worked with the [Popular Culture] collection a little on special projects," she said. "My background is in English literature, but I was interested in genre literature. We had started doing subject analysis

of fiction when the OCLC/LC Fiction Project began adding subject and genre headings. I always enjoyed analyzing fictional literature and the genres, and translating that into subject headings."

When a new PCL position was added in 1996, Down applied. Two months later, she joined the four other permanent staff of PCL, which occupies the fourth floor of BGSU's Jerome Library.

There was a lot to learn in her new position. "When I first started, it took me a couple years to feel really comfortable with the collection. The challenge of our collection is that it's very wide ranging. We have all these different categories: calendars and pin back buttons and greeting cards and post cards and mail order catalogs, among many others. Beyond the books and magazines, I had to spend a lot of time in the back going through all the little special collections."



The Jerome Rollers, a newly formed library drill team, performing in the Bowling Green State University (BGSU) Holiday Parade. Inset: Nancy Down, BGSU popular culture cataloger and reference librarian.

### A passion for providing access

For Down, cataloging and reference are two closely related facets of providing access to a closed stack collection. She is "really proud of the cataloging access we provide. In a library like ours, where there is no browsing, the computer is your way into the collection. The more access points you have, the easier it is

for patrons to find what they're looking for."

One of the things Down finds most rewarding about her job is "when you can connect patrons with what they're looking for. I have had people say, 'It's really great that you do subject analysis because I was looking for mysteries that have this particular feature to them, and I can find them using the subject headings.'"

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Reference is challenging with such a diverse collection and a diverse set of users. The collection supports the work of undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral students as well as faculty in popular culture and American culture studies. In addition, Down pointed out, "We get a lot of calls from people who have been referred to us by other libraries, international visiting scholars, calls from people who are doing TV programs, and a number of calls from journalists who are writing articles. Their deadline is usually 'today at five.' We do get some agencies, like advertising agencies, requesting images, and it's a challenge to find ones that are not in copyright to give to them.

"A lot of our requests involve research," she continued. "You have to work with people more because they can't just go to the shelves and get their materials. You often get to help them in ways that they would never come and ask you at a traditional reference desk, maybe help them in ways that they didn't even know were possible."

### **Nancy Drew has nothing on Nancy Down**

After talking to Down, you realize that providing reference for popular culture questions is every bit as demanding as any other subject specialty, and was even more so for her in the beginning. "I don't think I ever read very much popular literature," she confided. "When I started working at the PCL, I began reading mysteries. I probably shouldn't say this, but I don't really watch television or go to a lot of movies, so it really challenges my reference skills sometimes to ask the right questions to figure out what people are talking about."

Over the years, many of the questions Down has received required real detective work. "A lot of people think any question that they feel is popular culture we must have something on," she stated. "Why barns were painted red, the history of the cream pie in America, the history of parades—it can go all over the board.

"The one I recall the best was a woman who remembered her grandfather reading her an article from a detective magazine. She knew the magazine title, but she couldn't remember what year,

though she thought it was within a certain range. She could remember what one picture looked like but she didn't know the author, title, or anything." After looking through several years of the magazine, she actually found it, to the delight of both the woman and the Wyoming public librarian who had referred the question.

### **Amazon as selection aid**

Two years ago Down assumed responsibility for selecting new books. "There used to be an approval plan but it wasn't working, so I had to start from scratch," she explained. "The type of books that we collect are somewhere in between being primary sources and secondary. Books on TV shows like the *Sopranos* or *Friends* are not scholarly critical analyses. They're not the type of things you get catalogs or choice cards for like you do in traditional collection development.

"When I went to library school, I would never have imagined that I would be using Amazon.com as my chief development tool. I haven't discovered any other way to find these types of materials, and it gives you an idea of what is popular with people and what people are reading.

"They're also challenging because they go out of print fast. You usually have to order them right away. Some of them never even get printed, they're just anticipated. I feel very happy that I inherited the collection development. When I see people using the things I've ordered, I feel like I must be heading in the right direction."

### **PCL on parade**

On November 30, 2002, Down, along with seven other BGSU librarians, took their community outreach program to the streets, literally. The Jerome Rollers, a newly formed library drill team, performed in the Bowling Green Holiday Parade. The Rollers drilled with book carts decorated as reindeers, each deer representing a different genre. The music library settled on Elvis while PCL went with a Western entry, dubbed "John Wayne deer."

Never let it be said that academic librarianship is all work and no play! ■

## **Popular culture cataloger and reference librarian**

### **Where:**

Popular Culture Library  
Bowling Green State University  
Bowling Green, Ohio

### **For more information, visit:**

<http://www.bgsu.edu/colleges/library/pcl/pcl.html>

# Discover

A black and white photograph of a man's face, looking directly at the camera with a focused expression. He is holding a large, blue-tinted magnifying glass over his eyes, which are significantly enlarged and appear to be looking through the lens. The background is plain white.

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