

Book Reviews

Briscoe, Peter. *Reading the Map of Knowledge: The Art of Being a Librarian.* Grand Terrace, Calif.: Palo Verde Pr., 2001. Limited edition. 27p. \$5 (ISBN 096348981X).

Now I know why I can't read everything: There are too many books to read, even in English, and I have to read in my field and I have to be known to read in my field.

In "On Being Well Read in an Age of Information Overload," the first of the three essays that make up this slim monograph, Robert Briscoe, associate university librarian for collection development, University of California, Riverside, notes that in 1990, more than 700,000 titles were published worldwide, with one-fifteenth of them published in the United States. More important, Briscoe points out that "A book is never published in a vacuum, but constantly makes reference, implicitly or explicitly, to other books. It spins a web of bibliography with allusions, quotations, criticism, and commentary ... Bibliography is a true type of knowledge—not ersatz—and a necessary precursor to knowledge of a subject." He quotes the Pareto Principle, based on the thoughts of J. M. Juran, that "in any series of elements to be controlled, a selected small fraction, in terms of numbers of elements, always accounts for a large fraction, in terms of effects."

All of this appears to be a prologue to the second essay, "Rings of Knowledge, Another Way of Seeing the Library." In this essay, the author describes the various rings of recorded knowledge, noting that classification schemes organize physical volumes—a neutral and objective process—but that users, including the librarians, have the subjective problem of choosing exactly what to consult and read. The focus of this essay is the revelation that the literature on a particular subject consists of concentric rings that in-

clude tools made up of encyclopedias and indices that guide the user to the texts themselves, which comprise the canon of literature and its archive. The rings of knowledge are illustrated graphically on the cover of this work.

The first two of the three essays in this publication are, essentially, interesting observations of a librarian, observations that are perhaps designed to be read by nonlibrarian library users. But the meat of this work, at least for practicing librarians, lies in the third essay, "On Being Worthy of the Name," the "name" being, of course, "librarian." This third essay is basically a plea to librarians to read and is directed at bibliographers and reference librarians. It includes the author's assertion that "The most important thing that a librarian does is help people find good books to read" and, by extension, that the librarian must have read those books. Briscoe avers that many librarians do not have reading "on their lists." By this, he appears to mean reading the publications that librarians point users to, although he states that librarians "often do not read a daily newspaper" and asserts that what librarians seem to like about electronic publications is the lack of necessity to *read* them.

Well, there are librarians and there are librarians. Dermatologists are not brain surgeons, but they are doctors. As with doctors, librarians have a common denominator: knowledge and service. The breadth and depth of that professional knowledge is logically related to the kind and level of service provided. How each practitioner acquires and applies professional knowledge is determined, on a functional level, by professional responsibilities. And just as there is no single, all-encompassing body of knowledge for medical practitioners, so there is none for library practitioners.



Read? Briscoe appears to suggest that librarians need to read voraciously and constantly in their fields in order to maintain and expand their knowledge in the service of their patrons, and then he posits the question of how an employed librarian can find time to read and continue learning without guilt (if one buys into such a concept; I don't) and without feeling like a thief of time. He does not really answer his question, nor does he clarify why it is that he believes that librarians do not read. I suspect that many library administrators expect the same of their staff that Briscoe expects of librarians—that they will read onsite and off, doggedly pursue, even as “homework [Briscoe's word],” the definitive answers to reference questions that they encounter daily, and maintain physical and intellectual contact with books. Yet, increasingly, bibliographers and reference librarians are expected to continue in their primary duties while teaching; taking on bibliographic instruction; writing grant proposals; managing projects; soliciting gifts; sitting on committees; participating in (and organizing and chairing) local, national, and international workshops and conferences; spending countless hours in HR training as new administrators attempt to put their own stamps on the libraries; doing outreach; responding to new programs and initiatives that they were not informed were coming down the pike; continuing their education; and writing and publishing.

Read? Yeah, we also read. But I find that the best librarians, the most well rounded and the most interesting, are those who read outside their fields so that they can function as informed and intelligent, not to say interesting, human beings. No doubt most of them—most of us—do read, but we do it on our own time, not on the library's time, and not necessarily when the administrators are watching us to see if we do, indeed, read.

Briscoe correctly states that, like faculty, the most important thing librarians bring to their jobs, their careers, is their personal knowledge. But unlike faculty,

who generally teach a few hours a week and take sabbaticals, spring break, semester break, Christmas break, and summers off, librarians have to acquire and expand their knowledge while working thirty-five to forty hours a week and trying to have a life. And we do it.

But I wonder why Briscoe thinks librarians don't read. Does he question them? Does he watch them? He states that when he sizes up another librarian (and why does he do that?), one of the things he wants to know is whether that librarian depends on the library for knowledge. When that librarian leaves the library, “is there a book under his arm? It's the bookish habit that matters.” If my supervisors asked me, outside a social situation, if I read or what I'm reading or whether my books come from the library, they might be surprised at my vehemence in refusing to let them in on my private, off-duty, unpaid social and intellectual life. But they would not ask me.

Briscoe is right, of course, that librarians need to read to keep up with their professions and to carry out their duties. Most professionals need to, and it can be assumed that they do. But none needs to be known to read in order to be “worthy of the name.”

This is a thought-provoking pamphlet that many librarians might find a jumping-off point for thinking about what they understand their place to be in the library profession. For the nonlibrarian, it is important that this pamphlet be understood to be just one librarian's view.—*Raymond Lum, Harvard University.*

Casson, Lionel. *Libraries in the Ancient World.* New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Pr., 2001. 177p. \$22.95, alk. paper (ISBN 0300088094). LC 00-11668.

I recommend this delightful history to any reader with an interest in the classical world. Perhaps only a veteran such as Lionel Casson, Professor Emeritus of Classics at New York University, could produce a book that wears its learning so lightly. In this age of the 500-page behemoth, what a pleasure to read a book that