

Book Reviews



Gorman, Michael. *The Enduring Library: Technology, Tradition, and the Quest for Balance.* Chicago: ALA, 2003. 157p. \$35 (ISBN 0838908462). LC 2002-151679.

In the past few years, Michael Gorman has published several books and articles that address the hype about technology and the notion that libraries and librarians have no future. He has been an articulate and combative defender of traditional library roles and values, arguing that they are still reliable guidelines as we face current and future challenges. His latest book continues in that vein. The book's eleven chapters are grouped into four sections: "Libraries and Communications Technology," "Reading and the Web," "Library Work and the Future of Libraries," and "Overcoming Stress and Achieving Harmony." Gorman begins with the "Santayanaesque" premise that we "must understand the past, our place in relation to that past, and the lessons it can teach us if we are to deal with the present rationally and without fear." His examination of the evolution of communications demonstrates that new technologies were causing our predecessors at the beginning of the twentieth century to ask the same questions about the future of libraries that we are asking now. Gorman urges us to keep this perspective in mind and not overreact to apocalyptic claims about the new digital age. As he states in another chapter, "If librarians and others persist in seeing the advent of electronic documents and resources as the Second Coming of Gutenberg and if we continue to behave as if we are in an exceptional and transformational time without basing that belief and those actions on a clear-headed examination of reality, we could provoke an unnecessary cataclysm." Gorman contends that digital media will not replace other media and make libraries irrelevant but, instead, will "find their place and level in society and

will be incorporated into the ever evolving library."

In considering the nature and impact of the World Wide Web, Gorman concludes that for the good of society, librarians should promote literacy and integrate into library programs only what is worthwhile on the Web. Electronic resources, in his view, are contributing to the decline in literacy that is found especially among young people. He is impatient with the library profession's tendency to focus on minimal reading and Internet navigational skills instead of a more advanced reading ability that improves the mind and better facilitates lifelong learning. And given his extensive background as a leader in the effort to achieve universal bibliographic control, it is not surprising that Gorman rejects the belief that in order to bring bibliographic order to the enormous Internet, we should content ourselves with something less rigorous, complex, and expensive than traditional cataloging. He insists that full cataloging for electronic resources is far preferable to metadata approaches such as the Dublin Core because "no bibliographic database of any significant size could possibly work if filled with Dublin Core records containing random data without vocabulary control and standard presentation." However, he acknowledges that the vastness of the Internet makes it impractical to catalog fully everything on it. Gorman speculates that a "cataloging pyramid" system might be created, in which there could be varying levels of bibliographic control depending on the importance of the resources. Full cataloging could be reserved for resources that merit it (presumably based on the criteria in a library's selection policy) whereas enriched Dublin Core records with vocabulary control in certain fields could be applied to somewhat less-valuable resources and uncontrolled Dublin Core records

could be used for a third level. Finally, at the broad base of the pyramid would be the vast remaining Internet sites and resources that we would not catalog but, instead, would access using free-text search engines. But whether using a cataloging pyramid system or not, we will serve society best if we build “an internationally agreed data set, a set of agreements on international controlled vocabulary databases, interfaces between the artificial language of classification and the ‘natural language’ of subject headings, and a developed international MARC format.”

Along with cataloging, the heart of what Gorman calls the enduring library will continue to be reference service, particularly if it maintains “the vital person-to-person component that has typified reference service across our history. This is an age in which human values are under strain and human contact and sympathy become more prized as they become more rare.” Further, the information overload from which we all suffer, thanks in large part, but not exclusively to digital media, makes the role of reference librarian more important than ever. He concludes his chapter on reference service with the reminder that it “is crucial to the library’s struggle to improve democracy and to bring knowledge and information (free of specific charge and free of value judgments) to all who ask.” It is critical that we defend this goal in the face of the increasing commodification of information and the encroachments on fair-use rights.

After his ruminations on reference and cataloging, Gorman proceeds to analyze what he regards as the greatest future challenges for librarianship: the malleability, selectivity, exclusivity, vulnerability, and superficiality of electronic resources. Although all five challenges arise from the nature of electronic communication and its inherent shortcomings, not all can be mitigated by librarians alone. What librarians can do, according to Gorman, is pursue and apply research findings that will directly improve services to library users. He proposes that the profession’s research agenda include:

- addressing the electronic resource preservation conundrum;
- finding the best ways to create and maintain what he calls the bibliographic control web;
- creating a system that electronically disseminates and archives scholarly literature at the article level in order to break away from the current serials pricing crisis caused by bundling high-use and low-use articles into expensive periodicals;
- promoting and improving reading in a digital age;
- determining how best to apply computer technology to publishing;
- reducing the library services gap that exists in our socially and economically stratified society;
- improving library education by identifying and teaching what Gorman calls “core competences.”

Gorman’s final two chapters deal with the individual librarian’s need for a personal and professional life that is balanced and harmonious. Librarians must cope with the dangers of information overload and the ethical challenges of a profession that Gorman believes “is a manifestation of having a ‘right livelihood’—one based on values, service, and selflessness; one that seeks to help others and avoid harm to others; one that aspires to the qualities of clarity, compassion, universal friendliness, and selflessness.” But Gorman is quick to point out that selflessness is not the same thing as self-sacrifice, and he devotes several paragraphs to the problems created by self-sacrificing librarians: personal burnout, enabling exploitative administrations to continue underfunding library personnel budgets, and responding first to every e-mail, fax, or telephone call at the expense of fulfilling more urgent responsibilities. Regular readers of Gorman will recognize his writing style immediately. He is clear and straightforward, curmudgeonly at times, acidly witty, and merciless when dissecting opponents’ viewpoints. An amusing example is his response to William Arms’s contention that although “almost everything that is best about a library catalog service is done

badly by a web search service," yet Web indexing services are less expensive and more comprehensive than library catalogs:

This argument beggars belief. It would be far cheaper to have surgery performed by your brother-in-law Fred armed with a saw and instructions from the Internet than it would be to go to the Mayo Clinic (another institution with high labor costs). Also, once he got into the swing of it, Fred could probably perform many more operations than a team of surgeons at the Mayo Clinic.

Although some will complain that Gorman has a tendency to dismiss opposing opinions rather than dispute them, this reader finds that is true only when he has already addressed the issue elsewhere. Depending on one's perspective, Gorman is either infuriating or inspiring. I think this book is a much-needed antidote to the drumbeat from digital technology promoters. It is too bad we cannot make it required reading for university administrators, public library board members, and in what used to be library schools. It would be a sad commentary on our profession if most librarians do not feel energized and challenged by Gorman's vision of our traditions, values, and opportunities.—*W. Bede Mitchell, Georgia Southern University.*

Libraries in the Information Society. Ed.

Tatiana V. Ershova and Yuri E. Hohlov. Munchen: Saur (IFLA Publications, 102), 2002. 172p. 58 EUR; 43.50 EUR for IFLA members (ISBN 359821832X).

This is a slightly anomalous volume. It is not the proceedings of a symposium, conference, nor other organized intellectual event nor is it a general anthology on a broad topic. Rather, it is "an attempt to bring together works relating to the change role of the library as a social institution in the emerging Information Society, which were prepared by IFLA participants during 1998–2000." The authors were IFLA participants, but not all the papers seem to have been presented at IFLA. There is no index and only a very general page-and-a-half introduction. Styles and formats of papers vary considerably, ranging from

case studies to very abstract approaches. Finally, the editing is not all what it might have been. Some papers appear to have been written by writers for whom English is not their primary language, with slips (such as omitted articles) that copyediting should have fixed.

However, there is much of value in the volume. In the most general sense, the very randomness and wide range of the various papers mean that there is almost certainly something of interest to almost any librarian contemplating current issues in our profession, even if that same range means no reader is likely to find all the papers useful. Few, if any, new issues are raised here—if for no other reason than many writers are summarizing work published or presented previously for the benefit of a worldwide audience. The fact that it is an IFLA publication, of course, means that one value for North American readers will be encountering experiences and perspectives from countries less frequently reported to us. The global and summary nature of the book also means that it is a good source for "factoids" and illustrative statistics. For example, South Africa aside, Internet-connected computers in Africa jumped from "around 290" to "almost 10,000" from 1995 to 1998; Rutgers University saw a 23 percent drop in reference questions from 1996–1997 to 1998–1999. And with respect to larger context, the reviewer, who paid for library school with a World Bank consulting job, noted with shocked interest Qihao Miao's observation, when writing about the important role for "Public Libraries [in] the Global Knowledge Revolution" that "there is no significant presence of public libraries in the knowledge-related activities by the World Bank."

In general terms, the volume offers discussions of differences between, and also inside, regions and countries with respect to library access in general and access to electronic resources in particular. A perhaps-unavoidable result of the underlying problem is that many papers refer readers to Web sites and other electronic tools not all readers will be able to use.