

BOOK REVIEW / CRITIQUE DE LIVRE

Last one out turn off the lights: is this the future of American and Canadian libraries? Edited by Susan E. Cleyle and Louise M. McGillis. Toronto: Scarecrow Press, 2005. 227 pages. ISBN 0-8108-5192-X.

Libraries should be like Chapters? Don't be so 1999. These days, libraries have to be like the whole mall. So say contributors to this vigorous collection of new essays edited by Susan E. Cleyle and Louise M. McGillis. Nineteen pieces by 23 Canadian and American authors make for a variety of voices and perspectives. Some names and viewpoints are familiar, including Roch Carrier, Roy Tennant, Irene E. McDermott, and John Tesky, but *Last one out turn off the lights: is this the future of American and Canadian libraries?* includes new voices and many new ideas. Unfortunately for readers of the *Journal of the Canadian Health Libraries Association*, the volume is not so wide-ranging as to have any sustained discussion of special or health information librarianship.

The title of the book is more alarmist than the content. Few of the authors view the shift from print to digital and from acquisition to access as either comprehensive or likely to render librarians redundant. The best essays are brimming with optimism, as they scout new directions for the profession. Amanda Etches-Johnson waxes enthusiastic for blogs broadcast through Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds, while Irene McDermott's passion is for cell phone-based reference, though she admits that it is not yet practical for clients with complex queries.

More than half of the collection deals with fallout from the digital revolution. Melody Burton considers how consortia-based access to digital resources is producing mono collections throughout North America (among other issues), while John Tesky calls on librarians to get on with new configurations of library services, including one-on-one and group sessions on information literacy. Ruth E. Kifer describes how one American library reacted to dropping gate-counts by breaking the library system in two, offering both a relatively traditional, research-oriented "quiet" library and an open-concept, mall-like information centre with computers, media collections, comfy chairs, lots of meeting spaces, and a food court down the hall.

Last one out suffers somewhat from the lag that accompanies print publication. The blogging phenomenon has taken off so successfully that it is odd to read about "the recent buzz surrounding weblogs (or blogs)" (p. 31). Recent? And it is positively bizarre to have a pair of authors make like anthropologists as they describe the strange behaviours of online communities. Apparently, these consist of people "with common professional practice interests who 'meet' virtually". In days to come, these communities "will be very fluid, coming and going to meet current needs" (pp. 179–80).

The weakest sections are those that address post-MLIS (master of library and information science) certification and

the future of library associations. Though the essays on the digital revolution are vibrant, combining proactive advice and perceptive analysis, these sections are enervated amidst the thin air of rarefied theorizing. The exceptions prove the rule. Alison Nussbaumer's stirring call for librarians personally to take charge of their development and the rejuvenation of their profession, rather than wait for the pie-in-the-sky solution of certification, is grounded in a career of doing just that. Similarly, Barry M. Bishop's engrossing description of how the "can-do" philosophy of the Texas Library Association has created a growing and engaged membership contrasts with the pointless generational stereotyping that plagues the other essays on associations. People are people; we would do well to look at how best to champion the needs of our peers and clients rather than take shelter amidst inconsistent assertions of why one generation is more likely than another to participate in associations.

It is not too partisan to suggest that, by failing to address special or health information librarianship, the editors have missed exciting recent developments in our profession. For example, the emergence of evidence-based medicine has left health information librarians grappling daily with how to execute sufficiently comprehensive searches across open-access and fee-based databases, using disparate controlled vocabularies, and throughout the unindexed Internet. Similarly, the ballyhoo about librarians teaching information literacy is mere noise to special librarians charged not with educating their clients but with presenting datasets precisely tailored to the exact needs of a project.

But it is petty to criticize a book so sweeping and thought-provoking for what it does not do. *Last one out* offers intelligent engagement with urgent issues, presenting multiple perspectives, persuasive analysis, and potential solutions. Reading this book as a barometer of the profession, we have moved beyond the fear that digital resources will render obsolete either physical libraries or human librarians. It is now apparent that our new opportunities far outweigh what we have lost. And at least we no longer will be told to "be like Chapters". It is not a bad thing to have libraries emulate malls rather than suburban bookstores. The mall represents consumer choice and, in its open spaces, echoes this collection's great refrain — offer choice or go bankrupt. Libraries must meet the ever increasing demands of varied searching, reading, and learning behaviours, behaviours determined by available technologies, academic disciplines, and modern culture. We do not have the luxury of declaring that our mission is impossible; libraries will thrive by being all things to all people, and die when they fail.

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