

BOOK REVIEW / CRITIQUE DE LIVRE

The NextGen Librarian's Survival Guide. By Rachel Singer Gordon. Medford, N.J.: Information Today, 2006. 208 pages. ISBN 1-57387-265-3. CAN\$32.95. xiv, Companion Web site at <http://www.lisjobs.com/nextgen/>.

It could well be said that each successive generation of young people imagines it is coming of age at a truly portentous time. Today's young librarians are no exception. We've joined the profession at a time of flux, as technology is changing and challenging the role of librarians, and as shifting demographics and economics offer inscrutable omens on the prospects of a career in this field. For next generation librarians — those under 41 years old — and for their managers, Rachel Singer Gordon's *The NextGen Librarian's Survival Guide* offers a sensible approach to understanding how this generation of new librarians can join, shape, and enrich the profession.

The NextGen Librarian's Survival Guide is the latest offering by the Gen-X librarian and writer Rachel Singer Gordon, whose body of work includes *The Accidental Library Manager*, contributions to *Library Journal's* Next Gen column, the library job Web site Lisjobs, and a newsletter on career development. Gordon's publications range from the practical to the cerebral (her new blog is called Liminal Librarian), and the *Survival Guide* offers a bit of both, blending sensible career advice with a broader discussion of the demographic and social values that influence NextGens' career paths.

In her first chapter, the author outlines why the issues of next generation librarians are particularly worthy of attention today. Gordon lists the oft-discussed "graying of the profession", but she also cites other factors: the flatter hierarchy in many library workplaces means young librarians are entering management positions earlier in their careers, technical changes are continuing to transform how we manage information, and external forces are pressing librarians to demonstrate their value and relevance. Gordon argues that today's young librarians have unique qualities and values that library managers should take into account during recruitment, day-to-day management, and succession planning. Her last chapter, directed at library administrators, urges managers to pay attention to, include, and train this new generation of librarians.

So who are NextGen librarians? After acknowledging that generalizations about a cohort glosses over significant differences among its members, Gordon outlines the generations in today's workplaces. In Gordon's working definition, NextGen librarians are members of Generation X, born between 1965 and 1978, and Generation Y (also known as "Millennials"), born between 1979 and 2000. (NextGens follow the Baby Boomers (1946–1964) and the Veterans (1922–1945).) What characteristics define NextGens? Gordon offers some evidence-based generalizations: they are more ethnically and culturally diverse than preceding generations, more comfortable with new technologies, and more interested in work-life bal-

ance. Gordon also discusses the stereotypes of NextGens that work for and against them: NextGens are tech-savvy, they're enthusiastic, they have fresh ideas and energy; NextGens are not loyal to their employer, they aren't grateful for their jobs, they don't respect the experience of older colleagues, and they can have a misplaced sense of rebellion. Gordon quotes one librarian who wrote, "It's kind of hard for me not to be snarky about the whole NextGen librarian thing. For some people, it's all about fighting for your right to show up to work with Hello Kitty barrettes in your pink and blue hair and still be treated as an 'adult'".

Colourful quotations such as this are woven through the *Survival Guide*, enriching and informing Gordon's discussions. The first-person comments come from librarians who responded to one of two online surveys conducted in early 2005; one survey was for librarians under 40 years old and one was for those over 40 years old. Survey responses show that just as NextGens are subject to generalizations and stereotypes, so too are their (largely Baby Boomer) colleagues. Some NextGens believe that their Boomer colleagues are overly absorbed in their jobs, reluctant to change, uncomfortable with new technology, and sceptical of the abilities of NextGens. Other NextGens quoted by Gordon recognize value in older librarians' experiences and look for ways to bridge the gap that can separate generations within a workplace. That Gordon is willing to air these uncensored (and sometimes unpleasant) comments for the sake of better mutual understanding allows readers of all ages to gain a sense of how their colleagues think and feel and how generational stereotypes — justified or not — can inform our behaviour.

How can NextGens survive and thrive in the library profession? Gordon's writing, proscriptive and descriptive, guides NextGens along their professional development. The *Survival Guide* includes chapters on surviving library school, surviving the job hunt, surviving the entry-level job, and "Moving up", a chapter on career advancement. Gordon is frank about potential problems next generation librarians may face: your library school curriculum may not prepare you for the demands of the workplace, you may not get your dream job right away, your resume won't stand out unless you offer something more than an MLIS. Gordon contextualizes her advice by citing the demographic trends that influence the job market. She contends that the much-hyped wave of librarian retirements originally anticipated for 2010–2015 will likely happen several years later than predicted and that it's possible that these retirements won't result in more opportunities for young librarians (many of the jobs may not be refilled or may be restructured for paraprofessional staff). Gordon also cites an American Library Association (ALA) study showing that from 1983 to 2001, the number of graduating librarians tripled, creating tight competition for entry-level positions.

A notable strength of *The NextGen Librarian's Survival Guide* is the author's attitude; Gordon is enthusiastic about and committed to the profession of librarianship and encour-

ages her peers to follow suit. “You reap what you sow”, Gordon writes, “Get involved, get connected, give back to the profession”. A weakness of the *Survival Guide*, from the perspective of Canadian readers, is its almost exclusive reference to American studies, statistics, survey respondents, and organizations (the ALA and its New Members’ Round Table get many mentions). Canadian readers may wish that data from Canadian research, such as findings of the 8Rs Canadian Library Human Resource Study, were reflected in the book.

Regardless of whether librarianship is truly at a crossroads, individual librarians who want to “survive” and excel

in their careers can always make use of advice and insight. It’s likely that many librarians, and notably those under 41 years old, will find Rachel Singer Gordon’s *The NextGen Librarian’s Survival Guide* both validating and helpful.

Melanie Wise

The Canadian Lung Association
3 Raymond Street, Suite 300
Ottawa, ON K1R 1A3, Canada
E-mail: mwise@lung.ca