
Guess You Had To Be There

Lisa Dalton and Laura Davidson

Dragnet Fan

Anyone in the community may use the library's telefacsimile machine for a fee. Before I could ask the unsmiling police officer who walked in how I could help him, he intoned, "Just the fax, ma'am."

Then he grinned, "I always wanted to say that!"

Speaking of Dragnet

This downtown library is sometimes frequented by a rough clientele, and the library staff tries to watch patrons whose behavior seems suspicious. For example, the staff was alerted to watch one man who appeared to be selling drugs to children in the library. After surreptitiously following him about the library, one of the staff members saw the suspect head for the locked restrooms. All suspicions were confirmed when he pulled out his *own key* to the men's room and went in.

The police, next door, were summoned. They waited outside the restroom for the criminal to emerge. The door opened...and out walked the undercover cop detailed to watch the suspicious characters frequenting the library.

Too Obvious

The young man was completing a magazine's literary quiz and came into the library for help with the last two questions. He asked the librarian for the books that would answer number four and number six. Question four, "Who was Peter Pan's enemy?," listed a) Captain Kidd, b) Captain Hook, and c) Captain Courageous as possible responses. Believing that everyone knows the story of Peter Pan, the librarian named Captain Hook.

Question six read, "The ship *Bounty* was famous for a) its strawberry cheesecake, b) its

shuffleboard deck, or c) its mutiny." Feeling a little guilty for answering the first question outright, the librarian hesitated.

"I'll tell you the title of the book, but you figure out the answer."

The man agreed.

"The title is *Mutiny on the Bounty*."

The fellow considered, then said doubtfully, "Well, it's either the mutiny or the shuffleboard deck. Let me see the book."

Zoo Animals

When the library staff introduced automated circulation to the community in 1983, they printed date due slips with pictures of zebras, whose black and white stripes are analogous to bar code patterns. These distinctive date due slips continue to be useful.

One of our library assistants checks out books for an elderly neighbor, and returns the books when the neighbor has finished reading them. Once when the books came back late, the lady apologized, "I couldn't find the giraffe."

Beg Your Pardon?

The library was unusually noisy as the gentleman stood at the reference desk quietly asking for the book on cholesterol by a Dr. Arthur Lean. Amused by the appropriate surname, I turned to the online catalog to identify the title. Author searches—Lean, Leen, Lien, Lene—were unsuccessful, so the patron reluctantly agreed to look at other books on his subject.

The first book we found was *Count Out Cholesterol* by Dr. Art Ulene.

"That's the one," the gentleman whispered happily.

It's a Calling

"I have a question. If somebody is a professor of library science, what does that mean?"

"It probably means he teaches library science in a university."

"Yes, but what is library science?"

"Well, it's the study of librarianship."

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"You mean, people study how to make *index cards*???"

"Not exactly. It's the study of the history of libraries, of how to select and buy books that will really be used, and how to answer questions."

"Why...who would want to study *that*?!?"

Muddling along

All aspiring librarians are taught that there is an art to the reference interview, that many times the patron has garbled information and they, as high practitioners of the art, must not only find the right answer, but the true question.

The woman before me appeared to demonstrate a classic case of the garbled question. She had a note from her daughter with "King Fernando of Castile" written on it. After a preliminary search in biographical sources, I realized that we were looking for information on Ferdinand, Isabella's husband. The biography I found about Ferdinand confirmed my hunch. "No," the mother said as she rejected the book, "My daughter wants a book on this man—Fernando—not 'Ferdinand.'"

I was floored—all that brilliant deduction and no appreciation at all. Worse, she announced that she had to leave, but would return for the information on the *right* king later.

Mother and daughter returned at five. Ignoring me, she approached a second reference librarian, perhaps hoping for a more reasonable assistant. Since my colleague and I had discussed the encounter earlier, she was forewarned. Patiently going through much the same process, she explained to the child that Fernando and Ferdinand were the same king, showing how they lived at the same time and in the same place, and discussing the American habit of Anglicising foreign names.

The little girl seemed to accept the concept, but the mother was unconvinced—and growing angrier. "Well," she threatened, "I guess I'll just have to call the principal tonight and tell him that my daughter can't do her assignment because no one in the library will give her any information on King Fernando."

We protested, but what could we do? The library was closing; nobody was satisfied. Cowed, we realized that library school had let us down. You may ungarble the garbled question, but you labor in vain to unmuddle muddled mothers.

Tax Transformation

Much of the year, Mr. Colley is a troublesome but fairly harmless drunk, known to library staff as the man who mixes drinks in the water fountain. He is regularly ejected for disruptive behavior—being very loud, bothering other patrons, passing out in the restroom....

But from February to mid-April, Mr. Colley sobers up and, wearing a red knit cap, stakes out a table in the back of the library where he conducts his tax assistance service. The change is complete. Not only does he not drink, but he is very quiet, even when working with a "client." And his customers are notable for their normalcy, just average citizens. Tax season, which usually brings out the worst in us, positively transforms Mr. Colley.

But She Isn't There...

Like many college libraries, the Averett College library is named for an early benefactor of the college—Mary Blount, in this instance. The library shares a parking lot with a girl's dorm. Recently the spaces nearest the library were set aside for library patrons only. Battle was engaged, since the girls regard the entire lot as theirs. The library's biggest weapon, towing, resulted in a stream of angry young women heading for the director's office.

Recently, an irate coed marched to the circulation desk. With fire in her eye, she *demand*ed to see Mary Blount. Calmly nodding toward the director's office, the student assistant said, "Second door on the right."

Hatching Out

The call came in the middle of the after school rush. The lady phoning in wanted to know the temperature and length of time needed to incubate an ostrich egg because she wanted to hatch the one she had just been given. After much searching, I found a wildlife encyclopedia which explained the process, and I relayed that information to her and returned to the clamoring hordes of students.

About six weeks later, long after the question had been forgotten, the lady called back. "Well," she said, "the egg just hatched—now, what do you feed baby ostriches?" I was unable to find information about the care and feeding of baby ostriches, and referred the patron to the North Carolina Zoo. I heard later that the ostrich died.

I'm Nobody. Who are You?

In some libraries, the distinction between professionals and support staff may be overemphasized.

The paraprofessional in the Documents Department answered the phone. The caller identified himself as a librarian from the Reference

Department and asked, "Is anybody there?"

"Well," the employee replied, "I'm here, and Nancy's here, and Joy, Lucy, and Richard are here."

"No, I mean, is anybody there?"

Just as politely, the paraprofessional repeated the litany of who was available.

"No!" exploded the exasperated librarian. "I need to talk to a professional—isn't anybody there?!"



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