

The Community of the Book:

An Academic Library Perspective

by Rhoda K. Channing

When I was asked to contribute to this issue of *North Carolina Libraries* on a topic which resonates within me as within most librarians, the phrase "paragenetic repository" immediately came to mind. A few years ago, Professor Emeritus Charles Allen of Wake Forest used this phrase in a talk to library staff. As a biologist, Professor Allen used a scientific term, but broadened the meaning to include transfer of information beyond genetics. He pointed out that libraries, as the repositories of our cultural artifacts, made it possible for human beings to learn from people who were unrelated to them, and who may have lived hundreds of years earlier in far parts of the globe, and whose language differs from their own. Only humans can transmit culture beyond genetics and the limits of space and time. What is the vehicle? It is the printed word, preserved primarily in the form of the book. This is an amazing concept, and in our roles as the keepers of the book, is a high calling and a grave responsibility! Who would wish to deny that through literature we are exposed to the minds and souls and perspectives of the great thinkers through the ages! And exposed as well to the frauds, hoaxes, and misconceptions of the others whose works have crept onto our shelves!

In academic institutions, more than any others, these thinkers and doers of the ages are kept alive through class assignments, discussions, and interactions. Each term, students meet Plato and Aristotle for the first time; en-

counter Aquinas, Luther and Confucius; debate Keynes and Malthus; and experience life through the writings of the existentialists, the Elizabethans, and the slave journals. Each class forms a community that exists for the semester, but which has a life of its own that continues beyond those brief meetings. How many of us have committed to memory phrases with special meanings for us from the works of Shakespeare, Milton, Martin Luther King, Jr., Austen, or other favorites? Their impact affects us for life. The community of the book, in the classroom context studies and analyzes, reads and evaluates criticism of the works under study, and shares insights among members. Edwin G. Wilson, former Provost and much revered professor of English at Wake Forest University, and other faculty members as well have told me that each time a work is studied in class, the teacher sees something new, aided in part by the "value added" through student discussion. Students and faculty members alike are learners in the process of developing and assimilating the worthwhile items to be found in the books we provide. If there is such a thing as "progress," it seems likely that it comes about through the community of readers, using the basis of ideas carefully preserved from the past; evaluating, affirming or discarding these ideas; and then combining them with the ideas of others, perhaps from different disciplines, and adding the original contributions of the reader.

The product of this complex process is often a book or a journal article! It is, after all, what our faculty and

graduate students do — use the collections to formulate theories and do extensive research to refine them, verify or refute them, and then publish the results. In preparation for this essay, I examined four scholarly works, all published in 1995. I chose these books because they happened to be shelved near my office and 1995 was visible on the spine labels! To examine the bibliographies used by the writers is to be awed by the exhaustive efforts to gather information and interpretations. Without academic libraries, many of the sources used would have been unknown to the authors, or if known, unavailable, because many of the sources are old and highly specialized materials which would never have been acquired, or, if acquired, would very likely have been weeded in other types of libraries. Most of the journals would be found only on the shelves of fairly large academic libraries, carefully bound and covered with a film of dust.

A welcome acknowledgment of the role of libraries and librarians often appears in scholarly publications. For many scholars, one library, however large, is inadequate to reach the archival and primary sources necessary for completeness. Helmut Walser Smith, whose *German Nationalism and Religious Conflict: Culture, Ideology, Politics, 1870-1914* was published in 1995, says, "The research for this book is based on a number of archives and libraries throughout Germany and the United States." He names two dozen archives and libraries in Germany, and especially the academic research libraries at Vanderbilt and Yale in this country.¹ His twenty-

four page bibliography attests to his thoroughness. Michael Grant, author of *Greek and Roman Historians: Information and Misinformation*, used the writings of 61 ancient Greek writers and 60 ancient Roman writers as source material for his book. He also lists over 110 modern writers, mostly writing in English, but also in Italian and French, in his bibliography.² It is my best surmise that he found these volumes in university libraries. Howard Meredith's *Dancing on Common Ground: Tribal Cultures and Alliances on the Southern Plains*, University Press of Kansas, shows extensive use of a wide variety of sources — interviews, oral history collections, manuscript collections, government documents, 135 books, articles, and doctoral dissertations — to provide the basis for his conclusions. Many of his sources were found at the Universities of Tulsa and Oklahoma.³ Without collections in academic libraries with strong interest in Native American history, could he have written this book? *Geographies of Exclusion: Society and Difference in the West* is David Sibley's latest contribution to scholarship. His bibliography includes 239 references to scholarly books and journals.⁴ We all know that many journals exist only because there is an academic library market which supports them. The same is true for many scholarly press books, which are printed in relatively small runs and are no longer guaranteed to remain in print very long. The academic library, by acquiring these resources and holding on to them even in the absence of immediate use, can make it possible for the community of scholars to flourish.

The growth in inter- and multidisciplinary studies and collaborations has been a most interesting and instructive one to watch. In an academic setting, it leads to unexpected discoveries of parallel and intersecting work which adds enormously to the student's ability to make connections. I have always believed that the one element which indicates the value of a liberal arts education is the ability to

make the connections between what one learns in history and philosophy and science with what one sees in art, literature, and politics — and vice versa. The reader who can put what he or she is learning in the context of current information, other points of view, and related subjects has begun to understand the world.

David McCullough is an historian who has won a Pulitzer Prize, two National Book awards, and the National Book Foundation Medal. The *Winston-Salem Journal* of March 10, 1996 quoted McCullough at a National Press Club function as saying, "The fabric of our

way of life is in jeopardy because we are losing our national memory." His particular complaint was the lack of exposure to history courses in the schools. His only optimistic note was the existence of a good system of libraries.⁵ Our national memory is in the paragenetic repository called the library.

In *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Lawrence Biemiller writes about a young African-American poet, Carl Phillips.⁶ Biemiller observes that Phillips's poems contain references to Yeats, an Irish poet, and to Li Po, a Chinese poet. There are allusions to Ophelia, Fra Lippo Lippi, and Langston Hughes. How would his poetic imagination have been fed without access to mythology, drama and literature in the library? In March, I happened to have a conversation with Dr. Olasope Oyelaran, a scholar in charge of International Programs at Winston-Salem State University. We discussed this essay, and I was interested to learn that Dr. Oyelaran will be teaching the works of the African writer Chinua Achebe, one of which gets its title from a Yeats poem. It was a book which conveyed that poem from Ireland, like a seed borne by the wind and dropped to take root on a distant place. Perhaps someday all the digitization projects now getting started will provide the access to the wealth of information currently held in our academic institutions, but it will not be in the next several decades.

In the classroom and in the library, students examine, explicate, and enjoy

or deplore the texts they are required to read. They learn from each other, as each adds a slightly different perspective. More and more demand is placed on academic libraries for group study rooms, where students tackle assignments collectively. Whether we call this the Community of the Book, the Community of Readers, or the Community of Scholars, it is fostered and developed in academic institutions and their often over-



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looked academic support units, the libraries. Perhaps it is fanciful to suggest that the Community of Scholars is a virtual community, beginning with the first analysts and critics who published their views and continuing and expanding to each successive generation studying the same problems and original texts, but informed by the earlier works. The students browsing in the stacks, even working individually, become members of this community as soon as they begin to review the words of those who preceded them. It is a subtle indoctrination into the world of scholarship.

The well-known scholar Jaroslav Pelikan is one who has thought deeply and read widely about the role of the university in society. He revisits John Henry Newman's nineteenth century work, *The Idea of a University*, with his own 1992 volume entitled *The Idea of the University — a Reexamination* (Yale). Pelikan has much to say about the role of the university library which is relevant to the topic of this discussion: "Whenever, after an era of mass amnesia like the present, the search for cultural identity becomes, as it must again, a search for cultural and spiritual roots, a new generation will turn to these repositories ..." This follows "For it is only by 'the embalming of dead genius' in its libraries ... that the university can become a repository for 'the oracles of the world's wisdom,' and only by 'looking backwards' as 'a storehouse of old knowledge' that it can become 'a factory of new knowledge' and, as such, can 'look forward'." Pelikan extols the role of the university library as the 'scholar's workshop,' and stresses its centrality: "It is simply sober fact to say that no single institution in the contemporary world of scholarship has a greater bearing on the future of the university than the library, just as nothing in the history of the university has had

a greater bearing on its scholarship."⁹ My concern, as this is not a budget presentation, is not to belabor the importance of the academic library, but to use his writing to reinforce that Community of Readers and Writers which, too, is made of the quick and the dead. The study of literature, Pelikan says, to be understood in context, must include knowledge of what writings were read by the author.¹⁰ In some ways, I could describe this as a "vertical" virtual community!

With the links possible over the Internet, the "horizontal" growth of the community is enhanced, and contemporaries can share information and ideas. Again, academic institutions are advantaged in that they are the most likely to offer direct Internet access to every member of the academic community, so that college students and faculty are able to link to others with the same interest or need. These links, discussion groups, home pages, and more do much to broaden access and communication, but they continue to require the resources of the academic library for the pursuit, in depth, of the casual reference on the "Net." Many of our institutions offer public access to FirstSearch and the OCLC Online Union Catalog, giving our constituents immediate information about other resources on their topics and the libraries which hold these resources. It is then a small step to requesting and receiving many of these resources and using them to keep the cycle of reading and research alive. With the importance of resources sharing among libraries, there is a collective Community of Resource Providers undergirding researchers in each institution. In addition to academic libraries, major public libraries and libraries of all types and sizes contribute their unique resources, or sometimes those which are not unique, but

simply available.

Our challenge as librarians is to understand the nature of our users and their work, to help them locate the Community through our catalogs and finding aids as well as through their classmates, teachers, and peers. It is to support their Communities through our collection policies and preservation efforts and to encourage them to delve more deeply by providing inspiring spaces for exploration and attractive stacks for the serendipitous discovery. It is also important to find ways to reach our Communities and reinforce our contributions and legitimate calls for their support.

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