

# 'Tain't So, Mr. Michener

Last year International Paper Company started a double page spread, "Send me a man who reads," which featured easily recognized personalities. The thrust of each spread was aimed at reading, writing, and communication skills normally learned or reinforced in school. You may have seen these spreads in one of the national news magazines, or other popular journal.

In one of the recent spreads James Michener gives advice on "How to Use a Library." Mr. Michener avers that he has a long liking for libraries, that two have been named for him, and that he married a librarian. These qualifications apparently are adequate for International Paper Company to represent him as an authority on library use. They did call the library "the most helpful service in your community."

Mr. Michener advises three basic steps to learning how to use the library:

1. learn to use the card catalog
2. learn to know the reference librarian
3. learn to use *The Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*.

His four personal hints are also useful

1. take full notes
2. or ask about photocopy facilities
3. keep a record of call numbers, and
4. learn the coverage of the reference collection

All of this is good information and encouragement to the upper elementary through college freshman age group. But, Mr. Michener's discussion of the card catalog shows that he is parroting something he learned a long time ago, and that he did not verify. Specifically he stated that "The card catalog lists every book in the library by: 1. author; 2. title; 3. subject."

Now, Mr. Michener should not be attacked for the innocent mistake of repeating a popular truism. How many practicing librarians cut some of their composition teeth on the *Harbrace College Handbook*? My copy is the third edition, and it bears a 1941 copyright. It reports that three types of catalog cards exist, and that in "most libraries each book is listed once according to its author, again according to its title, and yet again according to its subject or subjects." (p. 394, emphasis added). 'Tain't so, Harbrace and Michener.

I have not taken time to trace the origin of this kind of misinformation. The extent of it, however, is the kind of myth which surrounds libraries and some librarians. The expectation which it creates leads to the frustration voiced in the lament of the student who reports "I looked in the catalog and I couldn't find anything about..." or in the query of the harried librarian, "Did you check author, title, and subject possibilities?" Even some librarians do not fully realize that all books do not have at least three entries in the card catalog.

In the International Paper Company spread James Michener is pictured checking a card catalog. The caption on the photograph says "Every time I go to the library I make a beeline to the card catalog. Learn to use it. It's easy."

I am grateful that International Paper Company has included libraries in its series of advertisements. Their intent is to focus on the value of reading better, writing better, and ultimately communicating better. Their effort is laudatory.

But, librarians have a responsibility, too. We have the responsibility to be sure we communicate better, or at least more accurately. Isn't it about time we tried to tell the whole truth about the card catalog?

Jonathan A. Lindsey