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Kicking a Gift Horse in the Mouth

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Op Ed — Little Red Herrings Kicking a Gift Horse in the Mouth¹

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Yes, of course, I know the expression is “Don’t look,” but our collective professional behavior makes “kicking” the more operative and appropriate verbal. More about this in due course. As an expression, “Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth” comes to us from the Latin, *Noli equi dentes inspicere donare*. Some argue **Jerome** said it first in 400 A.D., in which his words, very nearly our Latin literally translated, ran, “Never inspect the teeth of a gift horse.”² Others contend **John Heywood**, a singer, playwright and musician in the courts of **Henry VIII** and **Mary I**, put it in print first in 1546 in his rightly famous book of proverbs (“No man ought to looke a geuen hors in the mouth”). This proverb and many of his others are still in use today.

Brewer, whom I trust implicitly on such things, argues that when a gift is made, it’s best not to “inquire too minutely into its intrinsic value.” Equivalent expressions exist in French, Spanish, Romanian, Russian, Polish and Italian, and I’m sure other languages wherever horses, or horse-like creatures, roam. Native speakers of Russian, Spanish, Romanian and Polish often miss the English because in their languages “mouth” is “teeth or tooth.” The expression originated with buying a horse in which the buyer might examine the teeth to determine the horse’s age, from which, according to **E.D. Hirsh**, we also get “long in the tooth,” referring to the age of a person or thing. That’s because the age of a horse could be ascertained by how much the gums had receded from the teeth, and so how “long” the teeth appeared. Should a “gift horse” be given you, it’s impolite to look at its teeth. To do so would not only be rude but also insinuate that you thought the gift inferior.

Perhaps all this is why the Scriptures admonish us that it is more blessed to give than to receive. None of us receive a gift very well. My brothers cannot get a gift from me without also wanting to repay it immediately. It’s probably why we don’t eat out all that often because we’re like a **Seinfeld** episode where whoever pays fends off all the others Jujitsu-like trying to repay it, dollar bills flying everywhere. My dear mother-in-law (and I

mean that sincerely, not tongue-in-cheek — she gave me only the best wife in the world) may very well be the second worst at receiving a gift. Buy her lunch and she repays with a Lamborghini. The dubious distinction for the world’s worst gift-horse getting, however, is our profession. How so?

The **Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program** awarded this year alone 31 institutions grants, totaling just over \$20 million dollars. Since this grand program began in 2003, the **Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program** has awarded more than \$100 million dollars to recruit and train the next generation of librarians. One-hundred million dollars. Ponder that for a moment. In short, the **Laura Bush Program** has saved this profession, at least for now. Had the program that bears her name not come along, it is likely that librarianship would have flagged, then petered out by the end of the next decade. By 2012 it is estimated that well over half of working librarians will either retire or be preparing to do so. Without the **Laura Bush** program, it is certain that very few young people would have given librarianship a first thought (much less a second or third) that many (**ALA** chief among them) have tried to make a subsidiary of **Google**.

The **Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program** has over the years provided educational opportunities to library students and staff to strengthen libraries, supported school library media programs and increased the number of librarians, archivists and library and information science professors. It has also increased diversity in the workforce to better meet the needs of all users of every type of library. If you use a library, if you work in one, if you prefer public libraries over private ones or special

libraries over academic, it doesn’t matter. This program has made certain that, at least while **Bush** is in office, library services will be better, more robust, and more likely to make it to the next generation. None of the presidential contenders — Republican, Democrat, Libertarian or Green Party — have even mentioned librarians, much less indicated where this program will go next, if it goes at all.

When she announced this multimillion dollar program in 2002, **Laura Bush**,

herself a librarian, saw it as a way to help recruit “a new generation of librarians.” It has done so in spades.

Since 2003, it has funded almost 3,000 master’s degree library students, nearly 200 doctoral students, over 1,000 professional students and more than 5,600 continuing education students. It has also supported a major national study on the future of librarians and librarianship in the workforce. It has helped update the skill sets of current librarians and library staffs, improved graduate schools in library and information science through curriculum development in strategic areas, and provided empirical studies for recruiting and retaining librarians to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

But that’s not all. The program has also helped the profession meet the need to conduct important research on library and information science professions, and advance the work of new faculty in library and information science by supporting early career development for both untenured and tenure-track faculty. While a particular research project in the early careers program should be the faculty member’s research area, it does *not* have to be restricted to research on the profession. Eligible institutions may be a library or parent institution (such as a school district, municipality, state agency, or academic institution responsible for the administration of a library). This includes elementary or secondary libraries and archives, public libraries, college and university libraries or even private ones. Library science schools can of course make application as can digital libraries, library agencies, library consortia (whether local, statewide, regional, interstate or international). Strikingly, so too can permanent library associations that serve libraries or library professionals on a national, regional, state or local level and engage in activities designed to advance libraries and the library profession. Grants range from a low of \$50,000 to a high of \$1 million. Other matters obtain and interested parties can check out the gory grant details at the **Institute for Museum and Library Services Website** (www.ims.gov).

So, how has this \$100 million been greeted by our profession? How has this grand gift-horse and veritable savior of our profession been treated in our library press?

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Near Virtual Silence

That's right, \$100 million has been, essentially, handed to us to infuse new blood into our graying and some would say, dying, profession and we have greeted it with our hands over our mouths. The usual suspects, such as those on library juice (<http://www.libraryjuice.com>), have nothing at all good to say about the program. Some contend that the program is really the **Higher Education Act of 1965, Title-B, Fellowship Program** resurrected. If true, why, until this program, was our profession like the Cheshire cat, but with only its *frown* remaining? One would engage any substantive disagreements (as opposed to hysterical screeds), but there simply aren't any. These are, however, partisan-political ones, and often of the wing-nut variety regularly found among the far left and the far right.

It would be one thing if our profession took equal opportunity shots, but it doesn't. During the **Clinton** administration I often read near hagiographic assessments of what the **Clintons** had done for libraries though I could find no programs that really benefited us and certainly none that supported our profession into the next generation. Of course many who were then swooning over the **Clintons'** every move are, today, **Obama** supporters and excoriating the **Clintons** almost mercilessly. How soon they forget. I should not be surprised, of course, because our profession has been racked by such partisan political nonsense since the late seventies.

It's too bad, too, because the **Bush** administration deserves both respect and loud applause, at least on this matter. Our profession has been quick to criticize almost all Republican administrations for just about anything and slow and shame-closed to give credit when appropriate. Given our reaction to this one so far, don't be shocked if the next one ignores us altogether, and with good reason.

In any event, I could not let pass the opportunity to give three cheers to the **Bush** administration and I do so now. Disagree if you will about the war, taxes, the budget and so on. But be fair. When something good comes our way by whatever hand, give credit where credit is due. I for one am not looking this gift-horse in the mouth. 🐎

Endnotes

1. Full disclosure: the author is a member of the IMLS board. Neither he nor his institution has, however, ever received an IMLS grant. **Dr. Herring** contributed to this article in his personal capacity. The views expressed are his own and do not necessarily represent the views of Institute of Museum and Library Services or the United States Government.
2. For references for the following, see, **Hirsch, E.D.** *The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*. "Gift-Horse." Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993 (newer version repeat the same information.); **Brewer, Ebenezer Cobham.** *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*. "Gift-horse." Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1822. (newer version repeat the same information); **Martin, Gary.** "Gift-Horse." *The Phrase Finder*. <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/117000.html>, accessed 20 July 2008. **Ammer, Chritine.** "Look a gift horse in the mouth." *The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997.

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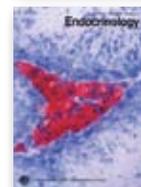
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to the Day," by **Noam Cohen** www.nytimes.com/2008/08/25/business/media/25orwell.html?_r=1&ref=orwelldiaries.wordpress.com

And speaking of blogs, the industrious **Eleanor Cook** (Assistant Director for Collections and Technical Services at East Carolina's Joyner Library) has a blog on the **ATG News Channel**. She lets us in on happenings in her new position which we told you about in June (v.20#3, p.1). www.against-the-grain.com/d/blog/199

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