

Winter 2-15-2004

# Librarians Are the New Polymaths

Mark Y. Herring

Winthrop University, [herringm@winthrop.edu](mailto:herringm@winthrop.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.winthrop.edu/dacus\\_facpub](http://digitalcommons.winthrop.edu/dacus_facpub)

 Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

---

## Digital Commons Citation

Herring, Mark Y., "Librarians Are the New Polymaths" (2004). *Dacus Library Faculty Publications*. Paper 37.  
[http://digitalcommons.winthrop.edu/dacus\\_facpub/37](http://digitalcommons.winthrop.edu/dacus_facpub/37)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Ida Jane Dacus Library at Digital Commons @ Winthrop University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dacus Library Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Winthrop University. For more information, please contact [bramed@winthrop.edu](mailto:bramed@winthrop.edu).

and-goings? Or a workshop? A gallery? A Fortune 500 suite? A place you could possibly mistake for an electronics showroom? Does it appear that the occupant slept there last night? Then a flat or a bachelor's pad. Very clinical, perhaps, a physician's office?

Always there are clues as to how the business will go. Is the vendor offered some workspace, a table or so much as a desk edge? Or, is laptop actually balanced on lap? This could be a little difficult. Is the office set out like a nice waiting room, with interesting objects to look at, a coffee table, coffee, coffee table books even? Well, things could go better here, but it might take awhile to get going. Are all of your competitors' calendars and other giveaways on prominent display? Definite bad sign. Does the office resemble a paper recycling depot, hazardously crammed with imbalanced towers of books, files, photocopies, printouts, catalogs; stacks of bibliographic slips

accounting for most of the color spectrum and several world languages; with desk, tables, chairs, and bookshelves long overmatched and much of the floor called into duty to control overflow? Probably best not to expect fast action here.

To be fair, most librarians are remarkably hospitable, to the point that vendor reps in need of a favor are often enough, say during a break in the day's agenda, offered use of the librarian's computer, telephone, desk, even the entire office. They make their offices a good place to meet, whether to exchange gossip or actually to start some business. It does not go unnoticed among vendors, whose own offices as often as not are modest setups, that many librarians have pretty nice offices, spacious, bright, technologically up-to-date, ergonomically outfitted, aesthetically attuned. They're proud of their offices. And why not be?

For a vendor there is no more intimate customer moment than when a librarian says please come into my office and sit down, then with a touch of drama closes the door and turns to you.

Now what, you think, in a flash turning over in your mind you and your company's entire history here. Are we in trouble? Are they giving us all their business? Usually neither one. Big library decisions are rarely made or delivered in person by one individual. More often, these come out of official committees, groups, meetings; the vendor may have been present at some of these official meetings, usually held in a conference room. And the subsequent decisions are delivered officially, by email or letter. But a briefing on library politics or personalities, a caution about ongoing negotiations from a librarian who might favor your company or from one who favors someone else, these moments of confidence require the closed office door.

Who knows, in the years ahead maybe every forecast for libraries will come true. The patrons at distance, the reference desk virtual, all periodicals online, backfiles discarded, books digitized, shelves of no use. What will be left for bricks and mortar? The café, maybe. But, no doubt, the offices. 🐾

## Little Red Herrings

by **Mark Y. Herring** (Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University) <herringm@winthrop.edu>

### Librarians: Today's Polymaths

"Small and slender, with dark hair and olive skin dramatically set off by light green eyes, **Belle Greene** had an extraordinary allure...." So begins a chapter in **Jean Strouse's** magnificent *Morgan: American Financier*, a compelling look at **John Pierpont Morgan**. **Morgan** may have been America's richest banker; doubtless, he was one of America's last great barons. **Morgan** was not only in the same league with **Vanderbilt**, **Carnegie** and **Rockefeller**, but also in a league of his own. Indeed, at one point he "bailed" out **Carnegie** during one of **Andrew's** more troubled times. He also warded off what would have become America's Great Depression long before 1929. In 1907, **Morgan** averted market disaster and lost millions — tens of millions of his own dollars — in the process. Some think the market crash in 1929 would have passed without incident had **Morgan** been alive.

But who is **Belle Greene** and what in the world could she possibly have to do with librarians? **Greene** was the daughter of **Richard T. Greene**, the man whom **W.E.B. Du Bois** dubbed one of "America's most gifted black intellectuals," and representative of **Du Bois's** "talented tenth." Interestingly, both **Belle** and her father have separate entries in the *Dictionary of American Biography*, but under different names, and with no cross-referencing.

**Belle** became **Morgan's** librarian when he lured her away from **Princeton**, where she worked for the princely sum of \$40 a month. For the royal sum of \$75 a month, **Belle Greene** became **Morgan's** rare book librarian. **Belle** had a life-long love of rare books and excelled in the process. She soon took over **Morgan's** acquisitions and it is to her, and her intelligence,

that we owe **Morgan's** famous incunabula of *Gutenberg Bibles* and other such notables.

**Belle** was her own woman and kept her own counsel. "Just because I *am* a librarian," she is reported to have said, "doesn't mean I have to *dress* like one." Ouch! She wore couturier gowns and jewels to work. Ah, what a sense of style to note with ardent pleasure to our own laid-back (and sometimes laid-off) sartorial style, or lack thereof. **Belle** became "the soul of the **Morgan** library." Her sense of humor and indomitable wit out-smarted most who thought they knew more.

For example, she smuggled a number of rare items into this country for **Morgan** by letting examiners find less important things "with great seeming hesitation." On one such occasion, **Belle** let the examiners find several unimportant items while she remained, as she put it, "very indignant." The smug examiners walked away with their catch never knowing they had fished in the wrong pond. Unknown to them were a painting, three bronzes, a special watch and other items she brought back to her boss, the very items for which the visit had been made in the first place. When **Morgan** saw her haul, **Belle** reported to a friend, "he & I did a *war* dance & laughed in great glee."

When I read over these words not so long ago I thought of the number of times I have to explain what I did for my life's work. I haven't smuggled anything, but I have been called upon to do any number of legal and ethical jobs not precisely encompassed by the word "librarian."

When asked what a librarian does, I have taken to the prosaic these days by copying what **Chesterton** said when asked why he wrote so much: "To aid the Divine gift of Language and Letters to outlive us all." Perhaps this is a vision of grandeur, especially since many librarians find print so *de rigueur* these days. So just what is it we librarians do?

It's a fair question. On academic campuses, we fall between two chairs, between faculty on one hand, and administrators on the other, at times becoming one, the other, or both, depending on the matters facing us at the moment. There are even times we don't really know which we are, as any review of the literature will reveal.

So what do we do? At times we librarians, to offer a short list, are managers, planners, system designers, leaders, supervisors, mediators, resource allocators, writers, researchers, scholars, speakers, fund-raisers, subject experts, budget analysts, grant writers, statisticians, consultants, computer troubleshooters, entrepreneurs and more. Oftentimes it's hard to put a finger on what we do because different contexts require us to become different things at different times. The point is, we often become *what we have to become* in order to get the job done.

I can't really recommend smuggling, but you get the picture. Librarians, like **Belle Greene**, do whatever it takes to aid the divine gift of language and letters to outlive us all. 🐾

