



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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"The night is freezing fast,

To-morrow comes December;

And winterfalls of old

Are with me from the past"

-A.E. Housman, 1859-1936

Public libraries are democratic institutions: We all know this. But what does this mean? To me, it says that a library offers equal access to all – not just free books, but also access to newspapers and magazines, as well as computers. A library is an equalizer, funded mainly by public money, and that is democracy at its best.

But as this funding becomes tighter and as the demand for access has evolved into much more than reading material, questions constantly arise about the purview of a public library. For instance, is it really appropriate for us to provide access to the Internet for email? Some people would say no, just as it is not our responsibility to provide free telephone calls or postage. After all, they say, we are about access to information and not about communication.

This is a good point and it is easy perhaps to slip this direction when it comes to considering how to spend money on libraries. Also, some libraries

have fees for various services, including pay printers, borrowing books from other libraries and even using computers or the Internet. Most libraries charge fines for overdue materials, sometimes as much as \$1 a day for videos and DVDs.

In fact, a few months ago when I visited a library in North Carolina, I picked-up a library brochure and was surprised to see the list of fees for various services. Visitors were charged \$10 a day to use the Internet, there was a fee for placing reserves, and non-residents of the county were charged an annual fee to use the library. It made me think again about our mission as librarians and how that fits in with the need to remain financially stable.

I think any kind of fine or fee weakens our mission. I realize these kinds of decisions are being made in other areas of public welfare all the time, health care and education in particular. And I also realize

they may be necessary. When I recently looked at other libraries’ budgets, I found that fines were an important source of revenue for many of them. Libraries are always short of money – it is one of the ironies of our society that libraries are greatly appreciated and constantly used, but they must struggle for the necessary funding. Because of this, they have found ways to provide the services people want, but at a cost. A cost, that is, to both the library user and the democratic ideals of libraries.

The inequality of this bothers me, even though these decisions don’t touch the core of what we do. It is still possible to take home hundreds of dollars of library materials by simply getting a free library card – and this is incredible. But I think there should be some places where income doesn’t matter; places where you get exactly the same service no matter

who you are. And I think that place should be a public library.

Today’s book review is from James and the book is *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* by Philip K. Dick. This book, which inspired the movie *Blade Runner*, is “not only for science fiction fans. It chronicles a couple of eventful days in the life of Rick Deckard, an officer trained to ‘retire’ the criminals among a race of Androids almost indistinguishable from humans.” One word James would use to describe the book is “dark” and he recommends it because “it could be seen as a comment on society, but I like it because it is just really funny.”