



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“It looks like the ‘transformation’ we seek for libraries and librarianship may turn out to be more of a ‘deskilling’ of library jobs than an enhancement of the profession.”

-The first sentence in “Blatant Berry: The Vanishing Librarians” by John N. Berry III, from February 15, 2008 *Library Journal* (libraryjournal.com)

John Berry’s “Talkback” piece is short, strongly worded and definitely worth reading. The gist of it, however, is that he is concerned the once professional responsibilities of professional librarians are “being dumbed down into the duties of retail clerks or the robotic responses of machines.”

He mentions, too, that libraries are doing away with circulation and reference desks, and both in-house catalogers and librarians who choose the library materials. Instead, he says, there are wandering librarians and “destination” libraries that “resemble the cookie-cutter design of the grocery stores.” He bemoans the use of the word customer instead of library patron, which is what most of us call those who use our libraries.

All of these issues are valid and I am glad he has written about them. I don’t think there is one that I haven’t read about, experienced or discussed with other librarians. Yet I can’t help wondering how many

public libraries Berry has visited in the last few years. Of the many I have seen, few of them seem to have changed much. True, self-checkout machines are now common, but I’m not sure that’s a bad thing. Otherwise, most of the libraries - at least in the small and larger cities I have visited - have two desks, helpful staff and people to talk to. Whether these are credentialed or non-credentialed librarians, I don’t know. It can be difficult or impossible to tell them apart, even though Berry seems to feel it is critical only credentialed librarians be called librarians.

This is not to say that there aren’t library systems that have been altered or even transformed. Many of the comments following Berry’s article refer to personal experiences with the bookstore model of a public library. One librarian calls the new approach “depressing and soul-crushing.” Another shares concerns on the use of non-credentialed staff. Yet another writes about the “trendy” but

continued on page 2

dangerous path of being ‘popular.’”

It is easy to be worried about libraries. But we are not simply large rooms full of popular materials. We are driven by the desire to provide thoughtfully selected materials, services and programs in a non-judgmental atmosphere. We have mission statements and we try to live by them.

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ians roam up and down in an effort to seem more approachable or have greeters or online reference or centralized ordering. For some libraries, these may be good ideas, for others they may not. We will make mistakes and we may stray from our missions, either inadvertently or because it seems like a good idea at the time or it

I believe this is a transitional time as we face the challenge of adjusting to new technologies and shifting expectations from our public. Fortunately, this is something we excel at: We have been meeting the information needs of communities for a long time. Sometimes we may go too far in one direction, as some trend passes through and we try it on. We may change what we call our library users or have our librar-

worked for another library.

Because we are focused on the needs of our individual communities, though, ultimately we will choose what works for those we serve and we will serve them well. Public libraries will continue to be places people come to get friendly, professional assistance in finding the excellent materials, services or programs they need.