

7-1-1994

# Has the American public library lost its purpose?

Gordon B. Neavill

Wayne State University, neavill@wayne.edu

Daniel F. Ring

Oakland University, Rochester, MI

Helaine Dauphinais

Thompson Public Library, Thompson, CT

---

## Recommended Citation

Ring, D. F., Dauphinais, H., & Neavill, G. B. (1994). Has the American public library lost its purpose? *Public Libraries*, 33(July/August), 191-196.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/slisfrp/67>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Library and Information Science at DigitalCommons@WayneState. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Library and Information Science Faculty Research Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@WayneState.

**Feature Editor:** Ellen Altman.

**Managing Editor:** Sandra Causey Garrison.

**Contributing Editors:** Sue Adams, Karen M. Bohrer, Jean T. Curtis, Judith Drescher, Micki Freemy, Fran Freimark, Mark E. Lewis, Norman Maas, Mariana Mabry, Donald Sager, Richard T. Wells, Diana Young, Fay Zipkowitz.

**Editorial Assistants:** Helene Woodhams and Kathleen Hughes.

**Advisory Board:** Claudia Sumler, Chair, Camden County Public Library, Voorhees, New Jersey; Don W. Barlow, Westerville Public Library, Westerville, Ohio; Kathy A. Fredette, Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library, Topeka, Kansas; Barbara Webb, Fairfax County Public Library, Fairfax, Virginia. Ex Officio: Pat Woodrum, Past President, Tulsa City-County Library, Tulsa, Oklahoma; Tom Frels, Chair, PLA Publications Committee, National Endowment for the Humanities, Washington, D.C. Executive Director—George Nosedian, PLA, 50 E. Huron St., Chicago, IL 60611; (312) 280-5752.

**PLA President:** Judith Drescher, Memphis/Shelby County Public Library, Tennessee.

**Public Libraries** (ISSN 0163-5506) is the official journal of the Public Library Association, a division of the American Library Association. It is published six times a year at 50 E. Huron St., Chicago, IL 60611. Second-class postage paid at Chicago, Illinois, and at additional mailing offices.

**Subscriptions:** Subscription price: to members of PLA, \$22.50 a year, included in membership dues; to nonmembers: U.S. \$50; Canada \$60; all other countries \$60. Single copies, \$10. Membership changes of address should be sent to: Membership Dept., ALA, 50 E. Huron St., Chicago, IL 60611. Nonmember subscribers: Subscriptions, orders, changes of address, and inquiries should be sent to Public Libraries, S&S Computer Services, Inc., 434 W. Downer, Aurora, IL 60506.

**Postmaster:** Send address changes to Public Libraries, 50 E. Huron St., Chicago, IL 60611.

**Advertising:** Stuart M. Foster, Advertising Sales Manager, and Dolores L. Lapointe, Advertising Coordinator, c/o Choice, 100 Riverview Center, Middletown, CT 06457, (203) 347-1387. Acceptance of an advertisement does not constitute an endorsement by PLA.

**Production:** Production is handled by ALA Production Services (David Epstein, Eileen Mahoney, Dianne Rooney, Bruce Frausto, Daniel Lewis, Suzanne Roe, Josephine C. Sharif, Beverly Thymes, and Donovan Vicha).

**Manuscripts:** Send feature articles and letters to the editor to Ellen Altman, 1936 E. Belmont, Tempe, AZ 85284. See the January/February issue for instructions. Unless otherwise noted, all other items should be sent to the managing editor, Sandra Garrison, PLA, 50 E. Huron St., Chicago, IL 60611.

**Indexing and Abstracting:** *Public Libraries* is indexed in *Library Literature* and *Current Index to Journals in Education (CIJE)*. Contents are abstracted in *Library and Information Science Abstracts*.

**Microfilm copies of Public Libraries** are available from University Microfilms, 300 N. Zeeb Rd., Ann Arbor, MI 48103.

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

©1994 American Library Association

All materials in this journal are subject to copyright by the American Library Association and may be photocopied for the noncommercial purpose of scientific or educational advancement granted by Sections 107 and 108 of the Copyright Revision Act of 1976. For other reprinting, photocopying, or translating, address requests to the ALA Office of Rights and Permissions, 50 E. Huron St., Chicago, IL 60611.

# Public Libraries

Volume 33, Number 4

July/August 1994

Ellen Altman  
Feature Editor

Sandra Causey Garrison  
Managing Editor

## Feature Articles

**Has the American Public Library Lost Its Purpose?** 191  
*Daniel F. Ring, Helaine Dauphinais, and Gordon B. Neavill*

**Survey on Services to Multicultural Populations** 197  
*Lee Olivier, Robert Belvin, and Sylva Manoojian*

**The American Merchant Marine Library Association:  
The Public Library of the High Seas** 205  
*David M. Hovde*

**State Agency Use of Planning and Role Setting for Public  
Libraries and Output Measures for Public Libraries** 211  
*Nancy Milnor Smith*

## PLA News

**Message from the President** *Judith Drescher* 213

**News from PLA** 217

**Section News** 221

**Calendar** 219

## Regular Features

**Editorial** *Ellen Altman* 181

**Field Notes** *Sue Adams, Contributing Editor* 182

**Professional Views** *Donald J. Sager, Contributing Editor* 185

**Readers Respond** 227

**Reviews & Notes** *Fay Zipkowitz, Contributing Editor* 229

**P.S. Products/Services** *Mark E. Lewis, Contributing Editor* 232

**Index to Advertisers** 227

The Public Library Association is a division of the American Library Association,  
50 E. Huron St., Chicago, IL 60611.

The cover was designed by Jim Lange, Jim Lange Design, Chicago.

# Has the American Public Library Lost Its Purpose?

*Should Sex be available at the public library? The issue of Madonna's book and the real purpose of the public library rages on in this three-way debate between a critic of "give-'em-what-they-want" selection policies, the director and trustee of a small public library, and a library historian.*

## Defending the Intended Mission

An enduring topic in the library press is the debate about purchasing titles which some consider trash for public library collections. A recent example is *Sex* by the entertainer Madonna. It has been suggested by some library directors that the selection of such a book is proper because the purpose of a library is to help people to make their own decisions on provocative books and materials. I have been a librarian, both public and academic, for about twenty years. I have read fairly widely in the field of American public library history, and I challenge anyone to demonstrate that public libraries were created to allow people to make up their minds about provocative books. People may indeed have their minds awakened and opened as a result of reading, but that is hardly the purpose of the public library.

Public libraries were created for a variety of reasons, not all of them of an educational nature. Many mechanic, subscription, and public libraries, particularly in New England and the Midwest, were founded to serve the reading and educational needs of a rising generation. But it is also true that public libraries were founded for reasons that

Daniel F. Ring received his B.S. and M.S. in history from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and the M.L.S. from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Ring is a reference librarian at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan, and author of several articles on library history and librarianship.



Daniel F. Ring

had nothing to do with education or opening minds.

The revisionist school of library history, as developed by Michael Harris, has argued that social control was the preeminent reason for the founding of public libraries.<sup>1</sup> Libraries were tools of the elite to control the lower classes. Historical scholarship has generally supported such revisionist interpretations.<sup>2</sup> However, I can still see merit to another viewpoint—that libraries were created to serve an educational function, even if they were not created for strictly democratic, humanitarian, and educational reasons. I am reminded of a dialogue that historian Anne Firor Scott constructed to examine the frailties of revisionist history in general:

But it seems important to note that the virtues women hoped to promote through education were precisely the ones they themselves sought to live, which means that the individual goal was moral behavior and the social goal was a virtuous society. "Aha," says the critic, "you have just admitted that the middle-class women were trying to impose their values on the poor." To which one can only respond, yes, to be sure—but with the purpose not of keeping them in their place but of helping them cease to be poor.<sup>3</sup>

Scott makes an important point in asserting that reformers, and this in-

cludes the public library movement, were interested in changing people and changing behavior. Whatever the motivation for founding public libraries—social control versus education, self-improvement, or humanitarian reasons—libraries had an educational mission.

Richard Krug, a former director of the Milwaukee Public Library (1941-1974), emphasized the educational mission of the library by listing its objectives in a hierarchy of services: education, supplying information, aesthetic appreciation, research, and recreation. The educational purpose of the library was reflected in its holdings. Milwaukee, of course, was not unique. During the 1920s and 1930s many public libraries viewed themselves as a people's university. Such rhetoric was inflated and libraries did overestimate their influence, but one cannot study public library archives without coming to the conclusion that libraries served a very important educational function.

In the past thirty years, public libraries have lost much of the zeal for the library as an educational setting. Instead of "Books, Information, Services," libraries offer a variety of services that have nothing to do with books: compact discs, movie videos, cassettes, records, pictures, and puppets. Librarians' convictions about things that matter have

Submitted August 1993; accepted November 1993.

eroded, leaving the field open to those with other interests and desires.

Librarians themselves are no longer voracious readers, no longer Ortega's "master of the raging book." And thus, willy-nilly, they order eight copies of books by Judith Krantz—they give the public what it wants, they pander to the public. It's not a big step from Krantz to *Sex*. But if *Sex*, why not *Hustler*? What does the "Boy Toy" have that makes her more suitable for observation than some trollop from any men's magazine? If *Sex*, why not *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*? Try to get the latter book at your public library.

I believe that the primary purpose of a public library must be educational. By educational, I mean personal change, self-improvement, growth, knowledge about the universe, the human condition, the world around us, an improved level of civil discourse, and what Pierce Butler has called the "promotion of wisdom in the individual and the community."<sup>4</sup> Yes, the reformers were naive in believing that reading the canons would change the behavior of roustabouts and roughnecks. But a public library with an educational bent did make a difference even to a person from a dysfunctional family who was curious and desirous of knowledge. For example, James Jones, author of *From Here to Eternity* and other titles, was grateful for the presence of a Carnegie library in Robinson, Illinois, and spent many hours under the tutelage of a librarian reading the canons. I'm glad that he did. Although not educated by Eastern literary standards, he became educated and education, as Joyce Cary observes, "forms character. It gives form and direction to the emotions."<sup>5</sup> He became a different person as a result of his interactions with the library.

Angelo Bertocci, the son of Italian peasants who became Bowne Professor at Boston University, has recounted his first experience with the public library. "With the discovery of the public library, reading became not only my regular recreation but almost my occupation." He remembers his school days as an unending routine of "classes from 8:30 a.m. to 1:45 p.m.; study in the Carnegie-endowed main public library near the high school until 5:00 p.m."<sup>6</sup> The library was a partner in the educational process.

On the European scene, Walter Laqueur, author of numerous books, credits the Breslau, Germany, Municipality

Library as being one of his three "universities."<sup>7</sup> I'm sure that the experiences of Jones, Bertocci, and Laqueur were not unique. In this time of lowered educational standards and achievements, the public must reassert its traditional role as an educational provider.

What does my prescription mean in terms of service? It means away with the stuffed animals; away with the CDs, records, and cassettes (even classical records must go); away with movie videos; and away with the pictures. Fiction acquisitions of the Steele and Krantz genre should be cut back. Tasteless books such as *Sex* should not be purchased. If these measures affect the door count, then so be it. Public librarians today would do well to emulate the hierarchy Krug had for the Milwaukee Public Library. It would make the necessary cuts all the easier.

I am aware of the nostrums the give-'em-what-they-want crowd will trot out: that Jones, Mailer, Jong, Hemingway, and Lawrence all made abundant use of sexual language and sexual imagery. Yes, they did, but the primary purpose of their novels was not sexual titillation but conveying life as it was in certain cultural contexts, such as barracks culture. They were artists and wrote art, what Cary has called the "bridge between souls . . . not only men's minds but their character and feeling."<sup>8</sup> In what wise way can it be said that a view of Madonna's privates constitutes art? It is not art, but what George Kennan has called an "unintended expression of a serious artistic and intellectual poverty—a desperate effort to draw attention to one's self by pornographic illustration or suggestion when other and more significant means of doing so are beyond one's capacity."<sup>9</sup>

And no, I am not an elitist either—if by elitism it is meant that the public library must serve as some kind of avatar of good books that reflect a narrow cultural perspective. It is the librarians who order *Sex* that are the elitists: "Here, community, take another dose of trash; let us witness our faith in intellectual freedom."

*Sex*, and kindred titles, is a problem that will not go away. Last year it was Madonna, but this year it is Howard Stern's *Private Parts*. Stern, bad boy radio talk show host turned author, is now appearing—almost completely undraped—on the cover of his new tome. It's gratuitous nudity, coldly calculated to attract attention—but, is it the pub-

lic's intellectual prerogative to see quite that much of Mr. Stern?

The public library system in Fairfax, Virginia, was recently featured on a segment of National Public Radio's news program *All Things Considered*. The issue: the governing board's decision about whether to maintain the library's subscription to *The Blade* (a periodical geared to the homosexual population in the Washington, D.C., area) or bow to patron demands for its removal. (To accommodate both sides the library spent over \$1,000 to buy titles on "overcoming" homosexuality. *Ed.*)

These are just a few recent incidents of the clash between the rampant sexuality portrayed in the mass media and the public's own sense of propriety, which leaves the library in a quandary regarding the purchase of these materials. It seems to me, however, that many of these problems could be avoided if public libraries reclaimed their educational function.

To argue that a public library has some bounden duty to give the public what it wants reduces the role of the librarian to that of a coachman who must go now in this direction and now in that direction. Further, it debases the idea of librarianship as a profession. Worse yet, it creates a need where none existed. There was no need to order *Sex*. Librarians habitually pick and choose titles all the time. Like it or not, we exercise self-censorship (read discretion, judgment) all the time. On the matter of judgment, Pierce Butler's advice is again salutary:

... when a fourth-rate novel, that he himself would not deign to read, falls under local censorship, two lines of thought are open to him. Thinking as a layman, he may recognize only that the freedom of the press has been invaded and in protest fight for the circulation of that particular book, thereby perhaps bringing himself and his library into a frustrating dispute among the many members of the community. Or, thinking as a librarian, he may regard as paramount the attitude of particular civic leaders and the public toward library censorship in general and so endeavor to improve the occasion by circulating literature that will promote a sensible, discreet, and prudent attitude toward this highly controversial subject.<sup>10</sup>

There is no need, in the name of intellectual freedom, to purchase every or any piece of trash that appears, just because it is associated with media-

hyped notoriety. "But it is in the nature of human beings to discriminate," writes art critic Robert Hughes. "We make choices and judgments every day . . . It's the same in writing and in the visual arts. You learn to discriminate. Not all cats are the same in the light."<sup>11</sup>

Librarians should not circle the wagons in defense of librarians who got into trouble because they added *Sex* or kindred materials. They fished in troubled waters. Not having the ballast of a philosophy on the role of a public library, they instead make intellectual freedom their philosophy. But intellectual freedom is not license. George Orwell once wrote, "Just pronounce the magic word 'art' and everything is OK. Rotting corpses with snails crawling over them are OK; kicking little girls on the head is OK." Substitute intellectual freedom for art and it would appear that proponents of *Sex* want to enjoy what Orwell referred to as "benefit of clergy"—the idea that artists can say and do anything they want.<sup>12</sup>

Librarians, no less than artists, cannot do whatever they want in the name of intellectual freedom. Intellectual freedom is not an excuse to purchase unalloyed trash. Not all "taboos on sexual representation are made to be broken," writes Hughes, "and that breaking them has some vital relationship with the importance of art."<sup>13</sup> Librarians would do well to heed this advice as they go about their work as it will save them and their communities much anguish.

## References

1. Michael H. Harris, "The Purpose of the American Public Library, a Revisionist Interpretation of History," *Library Journal* 98 (Sept. 15, 1973): 2,509-74.
2. John Calvin Colson, "The Writing of American Library History," *Library Trends* 24 (1976): 7-22.
3. Anne Firor Scott, *Making the Invisible Woman Visible* (Urbana, Ill.: Univ. of Illinois Pr., 1984), 285.

4. Pierce Butler, "Librarianship as a Profession," *The Library Quarterly* 20 (Oct. 1951): 246.
5. Joyce Cary, *Art and Reality: Ways of the Creative Process* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1958), 51.
6. Angelo Bertocci, *Teacher from Little Italy* (Washington, D.C.: Legation Pr., 1990), 25-26.
7. Walter Laqueur, *Thursday's Child Has Far to Go: A Memoir of the Journeying Years* (New York: Scribner's, 1992), 358.
8. Cary, *Art and Reality*, 10.
9. George Kennan, *Around the Cragged Hill: A Personal and Political Philosophy* (New York: Norton, 1993), 9.
10. Butler, "Librarianship as a Profession," 247.
11. Robert Hughes, "Art, Morals, and Politics," *New York Review of Books* XXXIX (23 Apr. 1992): 26-27.
12. Michael Sheldon, *Orwell: The Authorized Biography* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1991), 392.
13. Hughes, "Art, Morals, and Politics," 24.

## Stewardship— Influenced by Price

Thompson is a small (pop. 8,668), rural town in Connecticut's far northeastern corner. Never an especially wealthy community, Thompson—like much of the industrial northeast—has been hard hit by economic recession. The impact of a poor economy is particularly felt by institutions like the public library, which in Thompson is supported exclusively by tax revenue. Its funding is constantly threatened, but the library is valued by Thompson's residents, and in 1992 they overwhelmingly supported the construction of a combined library and community center, to be built with the aid of state and federal (Library Services and Construction Act) grants. Scheduled to open this spring, the long-awaited facility will replace the town's dangerously obsolete, ninety-plus-year-old original library.

Helaine Dauphinais has been a public librarian for twenty-three years. She is Director of the Thompson Public Library in Thompson, Connecticut.



Helaine  
Dauphinais

Providing a consistently high level of service for an appreciative community in spite of budget constraints is a constant concern for Thompson Public Library Director Helaine Dauphinais and the library's six-member board of trustees. As is the practice in much of New England and New York, Thompson's trustees are elected in the town's general election, and serve six-year terms.

At the request of Public Libraries, Thompson's library board took up the provocative issues of Madonna, intellectual freedom, the purpose of the public library, and the opinions of Daniel Ring at a recent meeting. You will see by the comments of the trustees—most of whom worked for years to achieve the goal of a new facility—that a library serves many purposes in the community, all of them too important to be dismissed.

What follows is Dauphinais' report

on her library board's pragmatic conclusions, and her own reflections on public library management in a small town.

Is Madonna's book *Sex* the kind of material that a public library ought to acquire? Absolutely! Should it be acquired by the Thompson Public Library? Absolutely not!

The Thompson Public Library Board of Trustees had strong feelings about the appropriateness of purchasing Madonna's book for our collection. All agreed that the book has no place in our library—but for reasons very different from those of Mr. Ring.

As a trustee, I'm really convinced that the library has an obligation to address the reading interests of the entire community. I favor freedom to read . . . people should be able to find on the shelves the things they feel are necessary. It doesn't

mean we have to run out and buy every bit of material that we find personally objectionable . . . but I certainly wouldn't want to be responsible for censoring someone else's reading.

Although most of the trustees considered Madonna's book objectionable ("I certainly wouldn't go out and buy it on my own."), they found the concept of censorship more distasteful:

We are a public library and I feel . . . we should not censor. Personally, I don't want to look at those things. But that doesn't mean that somebody else might not want to . . . I don't think we should censor.

want it, and whether it would be used often enough to warrant the expense. If I had thought there would be a public demand for the book I would have bought it, but I know the users in our conservative, rural New England community. I think three times about any book that costs more than \$40 anyway, especially one for which there's no demand. The trustees did not disagree. "It just bothers me to spend that kind of money . . ." said one. Another noted, "Small libraries don't have budgets to support frivolous spending, as would be the case with . . . Madonna's volume. Leave such purchases to the big guys."

budget is cut, there are some things we can't have, and some things we'll have to do."

She went on to ask if the book couldn't be gotten through interlibrary loan, which of course it can. In Connecticut patrons have access to all library materials whether owned by their local libraries or not.

Should a library's sole purpose be as an educational institution, to the exclusion of all other functions? Most trustees viewed this single-minded aspiration as excessively lofty, somewhat exclusionary, and generally off-base:

*Of course the library is educational!*

Something I've said all along, and I think some of us will agree, a library opened to the public offers a wealth of knowledge. For instance, some people are not able to travel, so they come to the library and travel via books. People can't afford magazines so easily now; we buy 144 different issues, and if it's their pleasure to come and read them, that's fine. It's not strictly for education. It's for enjoyment and education. You're learning and enjoying.

I think the best thing that's happened to our [new] library is that it's connected to the community center. The library *should* be a community center. . . what a great place for people to come in, read a book, or just look out the window.

It was interesting that the group's discussion of their vision of the library's multifaceted role in the community evolved into an enthusiastic brainstorming session about new kinds of programs and services we'll be able to offer once we're in our new building (this particular evening they talked about instituting story hours for elderly patrons who are visually impaired). We clearly feel we have more than just one purpose, and our new building will help us fill all of our community roles much more effectively.

The Thompson Public Library has spent decades in a small, cramped, dusty building lacking even the most basic amenities like parking and handicapped access; it is removed from the center of town and there is no public transportation. Despite this, our statistics grow steadily. I attribute this growth to the friendliness and competence of our staff and to our collection. While our money for books and materials is less than adequate, I try to use our budget wisely and purchase according to the anticipated needs of the commu-

---

**If I had thought there would be a public demand for the book I would have bought it, but I know the users in our conservative, rural New England community. I think three times about any book that costs more than \$40 anyway, especially one for which there's no demand.**

---

A lone dissenter on the board expressed a degree of affinity for Mr. Ring's article, declaring himself "troubled that small libraries like that in Thompson too frequently compromise their roles as gatekeepers of community standards, and as arbiters of good taste, literary merit, and intellectual excellence. . . . The issue isn't censorship. It's what our small community library is all about. And, yes, it's also about money."

In fact, it was money that was at the heart of the matter as far as everyone was concerned, and money quickly became the focus of the group's discussion, as it frequently does when we meet.

I had several reasons for not choosing Madonna's book, and I explained them: with a spiral binding the book won't circulate long before it falls apart and the pages rip; the copies are numbered, which smacks of commercial appeal to collectors—our mission is not to collect for the sake of collecting; I saw no review of the book that I can remember (I buy most of our current materials from recommendations of book reviewers in library literature); and, finally, it was much too expensive.

Had I read a review I would have first considered whether anyone would

Howard Stern's book, *Private Parts*, is not in Thompson's collection either, even though someone has requested it. One board member asked if I normally include all books requested by patrons in my book order. I explained that, although this had been my custom, I no longer do it because it's become too expensive; escalating book prices have also made me far more cautious about buying additional copies of high-demand materials. To compound the problem, recent cuts to the library's budget have reduced my book allocation and require me to be more selective than ever.

The trustees sympathized with this point—we are supported solely by tax dollars, and our annual operating budget must be approved by the town's selectmen, its board of finance, and, finally, by residents themselves at the annual town meeting. The trustees and I spend months of each fiscal year carefully planning our budget and our strategies for maneuvering through the grueling process. Our funds are meager and hard fought, and we have to spend them carefully. One trustee noted: "During the budget hearings we discussed this, and we said then that if the

nity. When choosing materials for the collection, I keep the library's statement of purpose in mind: "... to provide cultural, educational, recreational, and informational resources and services to meet the needs of the community."

Without a doubt, one of a public library's purposes is education. People are lifelong learners, regardless of whether they are enrolled in formal educational institutions. They are lifelong learners whether or not they are even aware that the pursuit of information is an educational process. In our

library, books on diet, health care, car repair, gardening, hobbies, and crafts are highly circulated, as are books on employment issues such as finding a job, coping with the workplace, and time management. By providing these materials we fulfill our educational mission; we also fulfill it by supporting the curriculum of the local schools and by providing learning materials to students when their school libraries are closed.

Still, education is only part of our mission. A public library that ignores the cultural and recreational needs of

its patrons does so at the peril of abandoning pleasure readers to the mercy of bookstores and clubs, and restricting their reading to what they can afford of the materials those stores choose to stock.

The purpose of a public library is to provide what the public wants with as wide a range of material as possible. Public libraries will not attract patrons if they do not offer the resources people want and will risk becoming obsolete.

## "... Bar Out Nothing Because It Is Strange"

**D**ebates over the purpose of the public library are as old as the public library itself. Many of the debates involve an affirmation or rejection of the values of the genteel tradition, with its emphasis on reading for purposes of education and moral improvement, its revulsion against themes and content associated with modernism, and its fear of allowing people full freedom to make cultural choices for themselves.

According to Dee Garrison, nineteenth-century librarians tended to belong to the new gentry elite, "a new urban, middle-class group of professionals, literary gentlemen, and some businessmen whose commitment was to genteel standards as prescribed in the print media."<sup>1</sup> Public librarians in 1876, she notes, were committed to "a moral resurrection.... In speech after speech the newly organized librarians extolled their mission and set forth their professional credo. Although the primary purpose of the library was clearly educational, the function of the library as a social stabilizer—a motive that had played so large a part in British library development—was clearly also present in American minds."<sup>2</sup>

The first generation of public library leaders had come of age before the Civil War when "many Americans were filled

Gordon B. Neavill is Associate Professor in the University of Alabama School of Library and Information Studies. He chairs the Planning Committee for Library History Seminar IX, "Libraries and Philanthropy," which was held at the University of Alabama in the spring of 1995.



Gordon B. Neavill

with faith in the perfectibility of men and institutions."<sup>3</sup> They believed in education as the key to progress, and they assumed responsibility for taking patrons by the hand and guiding them to worthy books while trying to shield them from the baleful and seductive influence of books they regarded as ephemeral and morally doubtful. Fiction and light reading in general were suspect. Fiction was rarely excluded from public libraries altogether, but many librarians tried to limit its influence. A number of libraries in the 1890s sought to improve reading taste by means of the "two-book system" that permitted readers to borrow two books at a time as long as one was not a novel.<sup>4</sup> Many early public library leaders felt especially threatened by the rise of mass culture, which circumvented the library and undermined their influence and control.

The second generation of public library leaders were beginning to break away from the genteel tradition, and some of them were in open revolt against it. "In the years just prior to World War I," Garrison writes, "public librarians found it less necessary to justify their existence through reference to their position as self-appointed censors of public morals."<sup>5</sup> John Cotton Dana, librarian of the Newark Public Library,

spoke out in support of the library's recreational function and "believed that the library should present the whole range of human thought."<sup>6</sup> Libraries, he wrote in 1909, should "bar out nothing because it is strange, no doctrines because they are heresies."<sup>7</sup>

But the genteel tradition never entirely disappeared, and its themes continue to be raised in debates over cultural values today. Controversies surrounding Madonna's *Sex* provide a good example. Personally, I don't think the book is worth getting excited about. It's a trifling, insignificant document, created, as far as I can see, solely to attract attention and keep Madonna in the public eye. I find it distasteful and boring, but not at all provocative. The photographs are silly and contrived, and the text is little more than mindless babble. The most interesting thing about the book is how it's been hyped and marketed. The sealed metal container in which it's sold is a stroke of genius. It suggests that the content is too lurid for public display and neatly heads off the danger that prospective customers might lose interest before they reach the cash register.

*Sex* has created a stir here and there, but it hasn't attracted the kind of deep-seated antagonism that exhibitions of the work of Robert Mapplethorpe have

inspired. A book devoid of substance or passion is hard to take seriously; it may be offensive but it's not threatening. In contrast, Mapplethorpe's photographs are the product of a powerful and original artistic vision. His view of contemporary life can be deeply disturbing, and his work challenges, threatens, and extends our existing sense of the world. Librarians who point to Madonna's *Sex* as an example of their commitment to intellectual freedom risk little and, in my view, trivialize intellectual freedom. They would do better to make sure that Mapplethorpe's work is widely available; the best collection is *Mapplethorpe*, published by Random House the same year *Sex* appeared. In fact, our record in this regard is pretty good. According to OCLC, holdings of the far more expensive *Mapplethorpe* outnumber holdings of *Sex* by more than three to two. And *Mapplethorpe* remains an active title while *Sex* has already peaked: holdings of *Mapplethorpe* increased by sixteen OCLC locations during the first three months of 1994, compared with only two for *Sex*.

Whether public libraries acquire *Sex* is a purely local decision. Its acquisition can be justified on the basis of Madonna's celebrity status and the media attention the book has received, but nothing inherent in the book makes it a high priority purchase, and no library needs to apologize for not having it. The sexual content is a nonissue. Libraries are part of the society they serve, and they can't adhere to norms significantly different from those prevailing in society as a whole. *Sex* is published by a major trade publisher and distributed openly through mainstream book outlets. It would be foolish for libraries to reject it because of its sexual content, no matter how horrifying that content might be to the founders of the public library movement or to those who still cling to the values of the genteel tradition.

The provision of recreational reading has been an important and well-established part of the public library's func-

tion for nearly a century, yet the library's educational function remains of fundamental importance. Most libraries try to strike a balance between recreational materials, many of which are of transient interest, and materials of enduring significance. The public library should be a place where anyone can pursue almost any interest or explore the canonical works of various cultural traditions. There are canonical works that should be available in public libraries even if they circulate rarely, simply because people expect to be able to find them there. It would be disconcerting to find *Sex* in a public library but not a collection of John Milton's works, for example. The public library has an obligation to serve the interests of everyone in the community, not just the majority. Circulation figures can't be the sole criterion for selection and retention.

The library's educational function is related to another goal of the nineteenth-century founders of the public library movement that remains relevant today: the growth and intellectual development of individuals. Public libraries aren't likely to transform society, but they can and do provide the setting and tools for individual growth and even, on occasion, for something approaching moral resurrection. Some of the most dramatic transformations have taken place in prison libraries. The discovery of books is presented as a turning point in the autobiographies of such figures as Malcolm X and *Washington Post* journalist Nathan McCall.<sup>8</sup> For the most part it wasn't lightweight books that opened new worlds for them, but books of substance and enduring value. Malcolm X mentions W.E.B. Du Bois' *Souls of Black Folk*, Will Durant's *Story of Civilization*, Mahatma Gandhi, Herodotus, and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. McCall cites Du Bois, Ralph Ellison, Kahlil Gibran, Ernest Hemingway, George Orwell, Robert Penn Warren, Richard Wright, and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.<sup>9</sup> The experiences of Malcolm X and McCall vindicate at

least some of the values of the nineteenth-century founders of the public library.

The nineteenth-century librarians of the genteel tradition were wrong in their fear of reading for no purpose other than sheer enjoyment and in supposing that people could be led, pushed, or bullied into serious reading. They were also wrong in what one suspects was a tendency to select and favor readers whom they thought deserving of their guidance. The important thing is for public libraries to provide as wide a range of materials as possible, discard preconceived notions about what people want or need, and open their doors to the world. Then all that is necessary is to allow what Ralph Ellison calls "the unstructured possibilities of culture in this pluralistic democracy"<sup>10</sup> to take their course.

## References and Notes

1. Dee Garrison, *Apostles of Culture: The Public Librarian and American Society, 1876-1920* (New York: The Free Pr., 1979), 10.
2. *Ibid.*, 36.
3. *Ibid.*, 42.
4. *Ibid.*, 91.
5. *Ibid.*, 100.
6. *Ibid.*, 95.
7. John Cotton Dana, "Three Factors in Civilization," *Public Libraries* 14 (1909): 44; cited in Garrison, *Apostles of Culture*, 95.
8. Malcolm X with the assistance of Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Grove Pr., 1965); Nathan McCall, *Makes Me Wanna Holler* (New York: Random, 1994).
9. "The Culture of Street Violence, by a Survivor: Nathan McCall Talks to Erica Gadler about His Life on the Street, in Prison, and in the Newsroom," *At Random* 3, no. 1 (Winter 1994): 45-49.
10. Ralph Ellison, "The Little Man at Chehaw Station," in *Going to the Territory* (New York: Random, 1986), 30. This is a wonderful essay that should be required reading for every public librarian.