

The Enduring Library: Technology, Tradition, and the Quest for Balance. By Michael Gorman. Chicago: ALA, 2003. xiii, 157p. \$35; \$31.50 members (ISBN 0-8389-0846-2).

Predicting the future is always a tricky business. In *The Enduring Library*, Michael Gorman—academic library director, cataloging guru, and (since publication) ALA president-elect—does not actually set out to practice divination, but he does confront the question of whether libraries and librarianship have a future. Of course, he has done that before in *Future Libraries*, but in that book the question seems more hypothetical, the scenario more speculative, the danger more remote.¹ In the meantime, the rise to ubiquity of the Web and its concomitant search engines, the beginnings and the promise of large-scale digitization of paper-based archives, and an economic downturn putting greater pressure than usual on public institutions (at least in the United States) have emboldened prophets of the virtual library and thus given the question a new urgency.

As if in response, Gorman de-emphasizes the cataloging (pun only partially intended) of anti-library attitudes and their exponents, a hallmark of *Future Libraries*, in favor of a more historical and philosophical approach. He contends that recent technological developments in librarianship represent one stage among many in an orderly evolution, rather than a cataclysm, and by setting changing means against a backdrop of much more slowly changing ends, he makes his position credible. Advances in communication and library service at the beginning of the twentieth century are shown to induce the same sort of vertigo, the same sense of loss and apprehension librarians experience today. Gorman also asserts the continuing value of the human record built up over time, even in the face of new technologies and new media, and in

spite of the claims of some of their enthusiasts, such as William Arms (whose essay “Automated Digital Libraries: How Effectively Can Computers Be Used for the Skilled Tasks of Professional Librarianship?” receives a withering critique). Perhaps most effective is Gorman’s use of one of his other works, *Our Enduring Values: Librarianship in the 21st Century*, to good advantage in a chapter relating present-day reference service to each of the “core values” posited in that book.²

Gorman is less convincing when he tries to use the distinction between new tools (or media) and new iterations of familiar tools (or media) to advance his position:

The idea that the replacement of typewriters by word processors and LPs by CDs are examples of old technologies being killed by new technologies verges on the inane. Word processors are essentially electric typewriters with capabilities that exceed those of the IBM Selectric typewriter by about the same degree as the Selectric’s capabilities exceeded those of a Remington typewriter of the 1920s. The CD displacing the LP is less significant than the flat-disc sound recording displacing the wax cylinder and the wire. Modern automobiles are equipped with a multiplicity of electronics and computer capabilities. That does not make my 2001 Chevy Malibu a new technology displacing the Chevy Bel Air of the 1950s. Each of these examples is a refinement within a particular technology, employing electronics and computers.

Presented as an argument against the notion that virtual libraries will make traditional libraries obsolete, this statement muddies the waters at best; in all the examples, the new has supplanted the old for most purposes. Gorman does much better, on the other hand, in spotlighting the gap between claims and requirements for the “universal digital library”:

There are many reasons why we are as far away from that universal digital library as we are from intergalactic space flight, and many of the obstacles to its achievement cannot be overcome without unknowable and incredible innovations in technology and the expenditure of unthinkable sums of money. To pursue the space metaphor, it is as if we talk and write incessantly about trips to Alpha Centauri and act as if such trips were imminent. All the while we are doing the library equivalent of scratching around in the nearer parts of the solar system that is the reality of human space exploration. It is good to reach for the stars, but not when it is at the expense of thinking about real terrestrial problems and issues. (96)

Here he bolsters powerfully his case against starving traditional library services to feed experiments in technology. This is a recurring theme of the book and one aspect of Gorman’s consideration of the future. Others include: the non-uniqueness of the present time, which means we can apply lessons from the past; the importance (and the decline) of reading and higher-order literacy; society’s (and the library profession’s) fascination with networked electronic information sources; and preservation and transmission of recorded knowledge as the major task of librarianship.

Transmission, incidentally, includes bibliographic control, to which Gorman devotes a chapter addressing the achievements and the continuing value of cataloging as well as proposing a common-sense approach to cataloging the Web. Another chapter analyzes the nature of the Web and electronic documents in general,

again with an eye to how they might be given some intellectual organization. Here Gorman calls for the mapping and enumeration of Web documents and the development of a taxonomy for them as prerequisites to incorporating the Web into library services. That these proposals, as well as the library research agenda presented in another chapter, are essentially big ideas briefly sketched, with few, if any, suggestions for implementation, may disappoint some readers, but it befits the overall level of discourse in this book.

As already noted, many familiar themes related to the state of librarianship are considered in *The Enduring Library*. After a general assessment of the profession, emphasis falls in turn on communications

technology (past and present), reading and literacy, the Web, traditional services, future challenges, and research needs. But to a large extent, each topic is presented in terms of its relationship to the others. The multiple themes recur and interact, conveying a rich sense of how the various tasks of and challenges to librarianship affect one another.

The overarching theme, however, is the concept of balance. Gorman's overriding concern in this book is that the future needs libraries and that libraries can secure their future by finding a way to balance and integrate traditional services and new technologies. While his point of view (marked by an acute awareness of threats to literacy and culture) is evident throughout (and forcefully and

colorfully expressed, as in the quotes above), he is obviously seeking to balance the past with the future. The theme of balance extends to personal and worklife issues, with the final two chapters offering counsel on information overload, stress, and personal and professional values.

For librarians, there can hardly be a more stimulating professional read than *The Enduring Library*.—Gregory Wool (gwool@iastate.edu), Iowa State University, Ames

References

1. Walt Crawford and Michael Gorman, *Future Libraries: Dreams, Madness, and Reality* (Chicago: ALA, 1995).
2. Michael Gorman, *Our Enduring Values: Librarianship in the 21st Century* (Chicago: ALA, 2000).