

Maximizing The Use of Reference Books: A True Story

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It came to pass in the time of money troubles that Normal Ned sought information from the local public library. He dropped in on his way to work in order to quickly xerox what he needed. Time was very important to Ned on this day of days.

"Yes sir," he said to Mellow Fellows, the Reference Librarian on duty, "You have a terrific book that I've used before that lists all of the organizations I must contact before noon today. May I see it please?"

Mr. Fellows gulped and looked at his watch. He replied in a shaky voice, "I'm sorry, sir, that book was checked out overnight and hasn't been returned yet."

Normal Ned was still pleasant. "May I have Volume B? I can get just as much information from it."

Mr. Fellows gulped again and replied, "That book was also checked out and it hasn't been returned yet, either."

Normal Ned could have done any number of things at this point. However, he remained calm. He said, "I thought reference books had to remain in the library?"

Bryan's short answer to Dr. Loertscher presents another side of the question concerning the circulation of reference books. Gordon Bryan is currently Reference Librarian at Vigo County Library. He has a B.A. and MLS from Indiana University.

“Well sir, said Fellows, “We want to allow our books to be used as much as possible. It’s library policy.” Fellows offered this suggestion: “Perhaps you’d like to use last year’s edition? It’s fairly accurate.”

Ned replied with a quote he had heard or read somewhere. “Now really, librarian, are you advocating that I use out-of-date information for my homework/report/job/personal need/interest? Do you realize how much damage can be done when a patron uses an inferior resource?” He continued. “What happens when the book is late? Don’t I have a right to that source when I need it?”

Fellows fidgeted.

Ned also pointed out that the phone lines were often tied up when he phoned the library, and that parking space was difficult to find.

Fellows tried to hide the worry in his face as he thought of the false names with the phony addresses who had pirated the Chilton’s manuals to Florida during Spring break. He thought of the excuses concerning overdue reference books—car trouble, illness, forgetfulness. He felt like a truant officer at times. Oh, to work in an academic library with such built-in controls as fines, transcripts, credits, and graduation! He had no such controls here; his patrons answered his inquiries about late books with smiles and lame excuses.

Ned shocked Fellows back to reality. “I understand the purpose of your policy, but aren’t you always striving to serve as many people as possible with limited funds and sources? How many questions are answered out of that book I wanted?”

“Ten of fifteen on a busy day,” answered Fellows.

Ned was a practical man. “This means that one person can deprive 15 others from information. This means that if a book is overdue by one day, you have served 15 less people than you should have. Also, since we are in a college community, that source may be loaned to someone who doesn’t even pay taxes locally.”

“We try to serve everyboby,” answered Fellows.

Ned scratched his head and thought. “Maybe,” he said “by serving everybody you serve nobody at all. At least you’re not serving me.” Ned looked thoughtful for a moment and asked, “Have you ever read about a library with your policy changing it?”

Fellows was on sure ground here. “To my knowledge, nothing has ever appeared in *Library Literature* about it.” Fellows knew, of course, that 95% of what goes on in public libraries never appears in any library literatue. (try finding out about unions, low-level radiation, and flashers in *Library Literature*, he thought to himself).

Ned was obviously trying to be helpful. He said, "How about paperback reference books to save money?"

Fellows replied with more enthusiasm. "An excellent idea! But when will Ayer's Directory, PDR, and Grove's Dictionary ever come out in paperback?"

Ned was stubborn. "Well, I'm not too pleased to be paying for services which aren't available when I need them. By the way, sir, when you need a reference book during the day and it isn't available, what do you do?"