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The 800-pound Gorilla in the Room, or, How To Explain To a Non-librarian What a Cataloger Is

by Elizabeth J. Cox,
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We've all been there. You're at a party, and you've just met someone. You exchange pleasantries and introductions. Then you get the inevitable question: "So what do you do?" If you're like me, you start by saying, "I'm a librarian." Depending on the knowledge and background of your new acquaintance, she may ask for more details, such as, "Where do you work?" or the more dreaded, "Oh, so you get to read a lot of books every day, right?" But every once in a while, this person will wrench from you the fact that you are a cataloger, leaving you to explain exactly what that means.

When I first meet someone who is unfamiliar with librarians and what we do, I often find myself spending the first few minutes of conversation telling them what we *don't* do, i.e. debunking librarian myths. Here are some of the more common myths I have heard that relate directly to catalogers.

- "*We don't need libraries; everything is available on the Internet.*" Yes, a lot of information is available on the Internet. But who organizes the information on the web? And who decides if it is accurate or not? You have to know what to look for on a website to decide if the information is reliable. In the library, all the information has been vetted either by a trained librarian or by a journal or book editor. What do you do if you can't find what you need on the Internet? In a library, there are staff that are trained to find information, even sometimes on the Internet.
- "*Library work is boring.*" I rarely find myself bored at work, even if I spend all day cataloging. One minute, I am copy cataloging a map of the history of armed conflicts in the world. Later, I could be doing original cataloging on a map of Illinois from 1852. Then the next day I could be cataloging a collection of music scores or CDs. The variety of materials and subjects we handle daily makes life quite interesting. In addition to cataloging, I have responsibilities for fixing mistakes, serving on committees both in the

library and elsewhere, and doing research. I also write policies and procedures for the materials I catalog.

- “*Librarians like rules.*” Well, this is partially true, especially for catalogers. But that doesn’t mean that we don’t have some flexibility in doing our jobs, nor in creating catalog records. The rules create a framework for these records but usually allow the cataloger some discretion for local decisions. Many catalogers enjoy reading mysteries or doing puzzles, specifically because you have to figure out the problem.
- “*Librarians spend all day reading.*” No, we don’t spend all day reading. That doesn’t mean that we can’t or don’t browse the items that we catalog. Even if I am copy cataloging a book which has a decent record available, I still need to know what the book is about in order to make sure that good, accurate subject headings are used. This ensures that our patrons can find the item when they need it. That’s not to say that we don’t enjoy perusing the materials.

This last myth then leads into explaining what cataloging is and why we do it. I first ask if the person has ever used the library and looked at the online or card catalog. Most people have at some point in their lives, often in school. I ask them to think about the information in the catalog. I explain that catalogers create that information, called a record, to describe whether an item is a book, a CD, a map, or some other format. We include information to allow the user or patron to decide if this item fits his or her needs enough for them to actually get the item.

We include a lot of different information in the record that could be useful to a user. Subject headings are precise terminologies that bring together similar items under the same terms. A parallel question to everything being on the Internet, some people may ask why we still use subject headings when most people use keyword searching like with Google. As an example, a user is looking for a book on cars. Some people use the word cars, some use autos or automobiles; how would a user know which term to look under? If you do a keyword search for “cars” in an online catalog, you would probably get some appropriate items but possibly not everything the library has. You might also get erroneous items on railroad cars or the musical group The Cars. If you do a subject search for “cars,” it would direct you to “automobiles,” the

authorized term. In addition to deciding on one term to describe cars, we also give you direction to that term.

We also provide a physical description of the item. On a basic level, we tell you what the item is – a book, a sound recording, a map, etc. We then tell you the size, such as number of pages in a book; we tell you if the book has any illustrations or maps or if the sound recording is digital or analog; and we tell you how big or small it is. When you go to the shelf to look for the item, those descriptions can help. We do not, however, tell you what color the cover is.

Is it possible to explain completely to a non-librarian what a cataloger does? In a word, no. Even some librarians don't understand what catalogers do. However, by explaining in lay terms what we do and passing along this kind of knowledge, we can certainly make a start. Who knows? We also might attract people to the profession who hadn't otherwise considered it.

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Biography

Elizabeth Cox is the Special Formats Cataloger at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, where she is responsible for cataloging cartographic materials, serials, and music materials. She is currently a delegate for Illinet to the OCLC Members Council. In her spare time she likes to garden, read mysteries, and go to movies with her husband. She also enjoys spending time with (and spoiling) her six nieces and nephews and her ten-year-old kitten, Lucky.