

A REVIEW OF A REVIEW:  
HOW DOES BOB USHERWOOD REALLY FEEL ABOUT  
*RENEWING PROFESSIONAL LIBRARIANSHIP:*  
*A FUNDAMENTAL RETHINKING*  
BY BILL CROWLEY?

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If you think that a reviewing a book about the future of librarianship and information science would result in a simple endorsement or condemnation, then you should read Bob Usherwood's review of *Renewing Professional Librarianship: A Fundamental Rethinking* by Bill Crowley. Crowley's book is about the ongoing subsumation of the library function under the more business-like information science label, and he decries what he sees as the American Library Association's marginalization of professional library curriculum in favor of the sexier "information science" model, as well as some practitioners' self-conscious denigration of their own profession. Usherwood makes several critical comments in which he challenges the author's style, tone, and conclusions; however, one must peruse the entire review to determine the critic's ultimate opinion of this publication.

Usherwood challenges Crowley's suggestion that Robert Leigh's 1950 *Public Library Inquiry*, because of connections this document makes between education and communication, fostered "information science successors to achieve their contemporary dominance within ALA-accredited professional education."<sup>1</sup> The critic states that "this is a matter of conjecture..."<sup>2</sup> However, in referring to this citation in the context of the complete paragraph, it appears that the author did not actually make this assertion here, but merely stated his belief "that such a study might profitably address whether Leigh's theorizing about librarianship's connection with communication may have inspired his information science successors..."<sup>3</sup> In other words, I believe that Crowley merely suggests that the relationship between education and communication be further studied, but he does not suggest that the link actually exists at this

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1. Bill Crowley, *Renewing Professional Librarianship: A Fundamental Rethinking* (Libraries Unlimited, 2008), 108.

2. B. Usherwood, "Book Review: *Renewing Professional Librarianship: A Fundamental Rethinking* by Bill Crowley: 2008, Westport CT: Libraries Unlimited, 174pp, 25.95, ISBN 978 1 59158 554 1," *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science* 41, no. 3 (8, 2009): 185.

3. Crowley, *Renewing Professional Librarianship*, 108.

point in the book. This particular criticism is literally inaccurate, however, it should be noted that Crowley does earlier state, “many of the contemporary problems facing libraries, particularly public libraries, are the long-term, negative legacy of libraries taking the ‘information turn’ advocated by Robert D. Leigh and his research team.”<sup>4</sup> Perhaps this statement might have better served Usherwood in support of his criticism? Usherwood correctly questions Crowley’s assignment of responsibility to Leigh by adding that Crowley himself links the terms “...reading and other forms of communicating...”<sup>5</sup> in his own proposal for redefining library science.

Does Crowley express emotion and strong negative opinions throughout his book?

Usherwood claims the author “is at his most entertaining, if not always at his most rational, when he presses the pedal marked polemic, becomes angry and names and shames individuals and institutions.”<sup>6</sup> The critic observes several instances where Crowley undermines his own arguments when using exaggeration or selective presentation; and correctly notes that John Leslie King is particularly a target of rather pointed barbs. Is this criticism warranted? Crowley does, indeed, accuse King, who in 2005 was Dean of the University of Michigan’s School of Information, of making threats that “will drive elite institutions out of the system, a withdrawal that will bring about the destruction of the ALA accreditation structure.”<sup>7</sup> The author asserts that King, as a member of a self-proclaimed elite university system, has the ability and the means to disregard the ALA accreditation standards in favor of the newer developments of the information science dominated curriculum, as well as to influence the standards of lesser institutions.

Crowley’s tone in evaluating King’s 2005 presentation “Stepping Up: Shaping the Future of the

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4. Ibid., 107.

5. Ibid., 132.

6. Usherwood, “Book Review,” 186.

7. Crowley, *Renewing Professional Librarianship*, 116.

Field” to The Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE) is somewhat scornful and judgmental as he uses the terms “pernicious,” “virtuoso presentation,” “attack,” and “That Dean (now Vice Provost) King would feel entitled to instruct an ALA president and tens of thousands of his library supporters to . . . go away and mind your own business”<sup>8</sup> thereby painting a picture that brings to mind an academic Darth Vader. One can almost picture the ‘Dean King’ standing in his dark, flowing cloak shaking his finger at a crowd of meek librarians who tremble in fear at the highly-educated imposing figure whose pronouncements hold sway over their very livelihoods! Usherwood is correct in noting Crowley’s judgmental tone; in fact, at times one feels that Crowley allows emotional opinions about individuals who hold differing positions to overshadow what one might expect to be a more objective tone.

Another example of Crowley pressing “the polemic pedal” is where he points out that beginning in 1928, the first library PhD programs could not provide a PhD level faculty because they simply did not exist<sup>9</sup>, however, he also states that the selection of available faculty at these programs consisted of a “deliberate absence of scholars with extensive library backgrounds.”<sup>10</sup> The use of the word “deliberate” leads the reader to believe that there was a supply of appropriately qualified faculty, but that they were purposely overlooked (by whom?) in order to place unsuccessful applicants from other disciplines. The author goes on to point out that by 1950, when the idea of information science began its ascent, that the “faculty teaching in the ALA-accredited programs tended to lack doctoral degrees and had been hired more on their experience in libraries and effectiveness at teaching than any research ability.”<sup>11</sup> One might

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8. Ibid., 117.

9. Ibid., 113.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid., 110.

wonder whether the growing ranks of professional librarians should have provided some antidote to the encroaching change from communication to information science by producing their own appropriately educated and experienced faculty, and Crowley does later place this responsibility upon the membership of the ALA.<sup>12</sup>

One must read Usherwood's entire review to find the critic's final opinion rendered in which he notes that Crowley's readers "will be stimulated, enraged, and/or engaged."<sup>13</sup> Are Usherwood's criticisms warranted? Yes, Crowley does enrage and engage. Is this provocation deliberate? Of course it is! During his 2007 presentation to the British Columbia Library Association he declares:

To restate the purpose of this presentation, I am here today is to get you thinking about the future of libraries and professional librarianship. It is early in the afternoon but I hope that some in this audience will leave the room livid, absolutely outraged at what I have to say. If that reaction encourages you to look at your beliefs about libraries and professional librarianship, whether to confirm or change them, then I have done my job.<sup>14</sup>

Clearly Crowley intends to provoke his audience as a means to encourage discussion and to explore the issues raised in his book, and this motivation is also understood by Usherwood as he advises library and informational professionals to read Crowley's "rumbustious text and, where they feel he has made a valid case, take up his challenge to do something about it."<sup>15</sup> Usherwood does offer criticism, yet these comments simply add credibility to his ultimate endorsement of this scholarly, and, sometimes entertaining book.

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12. Ibid., 145.

13. Usherwood, "Book Review," 186.

14. Bill Crowley, "Don't let Google and the Pennypinchers Get You Down: Defending (or Redefining) Libraries and Librarianship in the Age of Technology" (presented at the British Columbia Library Association 2007 Conference, Burnaby, BC, April 27, 2007).

15. Usherwood, "Book Review," 186.

(Note: Used Zotero for footnotes and bibliography)

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