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Passion of a Young Cataloger

By Junli Diao

I was often asked by my friends why I wanted to be a cataloger. I simply told them that it is because I like working with books, even the old and dusty ones. Being a cataloger was neither a choice for me nor a result of a sudden epiphany. Instead, it began with my curiosity about the hidden story behind the call numbers of books when I was working as a student assistant in the Education Library at Queen's University in Canada. With this curiosity, I walked across the threshold of the School of Library and Information Studies at McGill University in Montreal in 2004 and graduated in 2006. Eventually, after I worked in a few contract positions, I became a Chinese Language Cataloger at the Study of the Ancient World Library, New York University.

Many people look down upon catalogers. They assume that cataloging is merely nothing but a physical chore done by a group of fussy and socially introverted geeks behind the computer terminals: typing all day, counting pages and plates all day, and measuring books all day. I think that those who decry catalogers are jealous of our capabilities because we can do things that they are not able to do. I do not want to spend my time sitting at the front desk and being asked 10 times a day the same question, "Where is the library's washroom?" I admit that cataloging is not for everyone. Being a cataloger takes courage.

Cataloging is not a skill that some library administrators believe a three-day-trained monkey can master. No less than painting or fencing, cataloging requires skill gained through education, repetitive practice, and the investment of time, energy, and sweat. It also requires logical thinking and reasoning to provide the means for the discovery and the pursuit of human knowledge.

I liked watching the Aurora when I was working as a campus librarian for the College of the North Atlantic in Happy Valley-Goose Bay, Labrador, Canada. In Inuit mythology, the light spirits were imprisoned in the rocks. One giant hero cut the rocks open with a spear and set those spirits free. They fled into the air and became the spectacular Aurora. If the Aurora is the liberation of light spirits, cataloging is the liberation of books. Before being cataloged, library materials are invisible to the user and inaccessible to the public. Through the efforts of catalogers, they are set free—they become discoverable and accessible, allowing our users an entrance to a wide and enriched world of learning and experience. It is not merely a transfer of their physical locations from boxes and backroom. It is a transformation. Catalogers are the heroes. They remove the locks. They give books air and wings. They set them free.

I love cataloging. Cataloging is an art. Photography is an art of light, poetry is an art of words, mathematics is an art of numbers. Cataloging is an art of rules. Catalogers study and comprehend rule, and then interpret and apply them in a consistent manner. But we are the wise guides, not the obedient fools. No rules can replace a cataloger's experience and judgment. In this world of growing complexity and diversity, there are always some areas where rules cannot be evenly,

equally, or thoroughly applied. Sometimes we have to bend the rule, stretch them a little, or even break them with a compromise to meet users need or allow for local peculiarities. So much of cataloging is about the local environment.

Cataloging can be personal, too. Catalogers do not always accept the work done by others. Sometimes we would not even accept our own works in the second day after the cataloging is done! Personalized cataloging is neither a deviation from the rules nor a rejection. It is the demonstration of catalogers judgment. It is the insight that transcends reasoning and logic through the application of what looks good and right to a cataloger's aesthetic appreciation and philosophical sense. It is our second nature. It is the illumination in a storm. It is Alexander's sword penetrating the complexity directly into the simplicity. It is insight, inspiration, and clarification.

RDA: Resources Description and Access is around the corner. New cataloging rules in RDA become loose, flexible, and even ambiguous to fit in the changing landscape of library collections in this digital age. RDA is more like philosophical instructions for the content that need to be described and accessed. It emphasizes the goals of cataloging rather than dwelling on rules and crafting perfect records. Catalogers' judgment will be need more than ever in the era of RDA.

Today's library schools want their graduates to be hotter and sexier in the job market. It seems that they do no concentrate on the teaching of cataloging any more. Young catalogers, if you have the chance to work with a senior cataloger who can explain to you what colophon is or what a festschrift means, lucky you. Take the rule from her or his hands. It is akin to a holy object for catalogers, like Aaron's rod or Harry Potter's stick. Take pride in carrying on the heritage and be ready to expand your horizon.

Library users become Internet savvy and more demanding. Sophisticated discovery tools replace libraries traditional online public access catalogs. Information technology advances by leaps and bounds. Libraries are swamped in a tsunami of active online resources and digital contents. Cataloging has becoming a decentralized, collaboratively contributed, community-based, and social-networked group activity. All these changes can challenge a cataloger's traditional values and beliefs. However, an individual cataloger's endeavor of crafting complete and meaningful bibliographic records with love and care is still the foundation of bibliographic control in fragmented and chaotic library discovery systems. We create perfect records not for the purpose of being perfect. By doing so, we want books to have dialogue connected with their neighbors on the book shelf. We want records to synchronize the infrastructure of the database for efficient and effective information delivery and systematic presentation. We want to bridge the gap between resources and our users through providing generous contents and appropriate access points.

Budgets have shrunk, works has been outsourced, positions have been cut, and work has been devalued. Someone even announced that the catalogers' age was over. We were pessimistic, lost, and even struggling. But we are not nostalgic about our golden age when painstakingly created errors on the card with pencils and erasers. We are embracing and striding into this exciting and revolutionary era where innovation has surpassed tradition and legacy. We are thinking and creative. We are reinventing ourselves and we will thrive. We are catalogers. We are the hidden heroes.

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