Book Review:
“Quiet, Please: Dispatches from a Public Librarian”

By: Bruce Harpham

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This library memoir chronicles the journey of Scott Douglas from college English major to fully fledged librarian in Anaheim, California. Shot through with bitter humour, Douglas recounts the daily travails of working in a public library. Most of the book's content was adapted from a serialized series of dispatches on McSweeny's Internet magazine; Douglas has done well stitching this material together with other writing to construct an interesting memoir. At times, the book does have a certain ambiguous mix of truth and fiction but one suspects that it is mostly on the side of truth.

As a graduate student in the field, I was particularly interested in Douglas's comments regarding library school. With his fees paid by the city of Anaheim, he enrolled in a program at San Diego. His views of professional library education are strongly coloured by his prior library work in a way that does something to balance the great enthusiasm that many feel for this line of work. It is unfortunate that Douglas finds so little in his program to be professionally or intellectually rewarding. The title to the chapter on library school is indicative of his general attitude:
“Being the Part Where Our Hero Discovers That Library School Is Pretty Much the Most Absurd Thing Librarians Ever Invented and His Faculty Advisor is Kind of a Dick.” While one certainly imagines that the latter part of that title is an isolated and personal experience, not all of Douglas's negative impressions should be so casually set aside. Would this disappointing experience have materialized at a different library school? It seems unlikely – a much more applied and less scholarly focus would have fit his needs better.

The implied underlying message is that library school is little more than a time wasting credentialing process. The bitterness is on every page, with him noting at one point: “I felt out of place my first semester. I was twenty three in a school of thirty-five to forty year olds who all seemed to be in the midst of a midlife crisis in dire need of a career change.” (61) The typical LIS student, in Douglas's view, is either a recent college liberal arts graduate without clear career ambitions or somebody having a midlife crisis and using the program to switch into something new. These criticisms should give pause to those involved in the marketing and promotion of the information professions.

As graduation approaches, Douglas writes a letter to the dean of his program on graduation. He is full of suggestions to improve his program, but never receives a reply. Thus ends Douglas’s dissatisfying career in graduate school. He then returns to full-time work in the Anaheim public library.

While Douglas finds several aspects of public library work dissatisfactory, he does have some interesting views about the role of this institution in urban life. For some visitors to the Anaheim public library, it is an institution of last refuge to those who have nowhere else to go. This observation echoes the views expressed by Chip Ward in his much circulated Internet essay, “What They Didn't Teach You in Library School.” For example, there are poor families who come to the library to partake of the free or low-cost food it offers, as part of its efforts to entice people in. While these efforts are initially derided as a dereliction of the library mission by Douglas, he comes to admit that these services play an important social role for those in need of physical and social support. In addition to providing information, culture and recreation, the public library provides a space where people can enjoy some sense of safety and community.
There is little to inspire in this book and the constant bitterness can wear on the reader. The style probably worked somewhat better in the form of dispatches to McSweeney's, an online magazine which originally published much of the book's material. It can also be difficult to know how much of the memoir is exaggerated for effect, but one can only presume that there is considerable truth to this arrangement. One might also question to what extent Douglas can be held responsible for his disappointing professional experiences. After his discouraging and occasionally anti-intellectual experience in graduate school, one can understand being shaken.

In the end, one finds 'a literary civil servant' (Douglas's memorable description for public librarians) who simply tries to keep the peace and make life better for staff and patrons in small ways. Those considering a career in public libraries, providing you enjoy bitter humour and sarcasm, will find this book particularly enjoyable and thought-provoking. It is also a valuable contribution to the field which lacks memoirs that chronicle the experiences of ordinary librarians in depth.