

TEN YEARS OF 'THE SOURCE'

: a look back by
David J. Jones

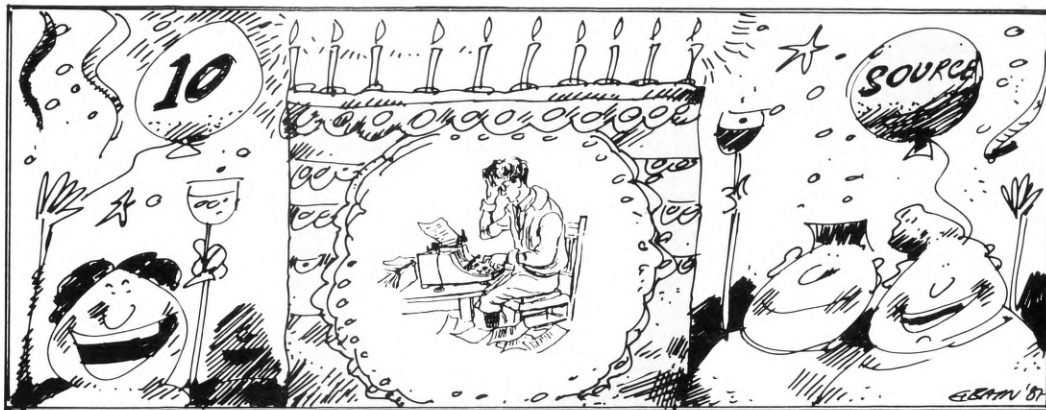
On April 1 1977, or, distribution being what it was, some days later, sharp-eyed readers of an earlier incarnation of the *Australian library journal* were introduced to a 'new regular feature' by the then (as always) optimistic editor, Adrian Read. The new 'column' bore, none too originally, the title of a long-running feature in *American libraries*, and consisted of six brief mini-reviews, serious in tone, but with one semblance of a joke.



In the beginning

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The response to this effort was not discouraging. At least it pleased the editor, who saw the column as a way of disposing of some of the miscellanea which he wasn't game enough



to throw out straightaway. But any idea that this column would grow into the size or in any way the form of its American counterpart soon vanished. The compiler's own preoccupations put paid to that. 'The Source' soon became infested with reference works, especially (as this New Chum was quick to stress) those of Australian interest, which he was desperately trying to get to know in his own library.

Those headings!

For the first few tentative issues, headings for the mini-reviews were supplied by Read, until Jones learned the art (?) of the excruciating pun and the trick of the double or even triple entendre. This was not always productive: it emerged that some readers thought the headings were the titles of the books reviewed, and this occasioned much head-scratching among library suppliers until the *modus operandi* of 'The Source' became apparent.

It is with embarrassment that I reread 'Fill 'er up, mate' (the heading for a book on Middle East oil resources), and 'Would you read about it' (an item on adult literacy). Headings were not only a source of confusion for library suppliers. One evening I received an irate call from one Ludwig van Beethoven, complaining that I had infringed his copyright in my heading 'Pure ALISA'. Fortunately most readers were more sedate in their reactions.

Being fair impressionistically

I have always tried to make my comments fair. Having launched six books into the perilous waters of 'library publishing', I have a fair amount of fellow-feeling for someone who has spent months or even years on a bibliography of discographies or a directory of directories of directories. It is so easy to pay scant justice to a worthwhile publication for the sake of a cheap laugh, or in order to try to display one's own supposed erudition. Quite frankly, with the amount of raw material which passes through my hands, the views I express have to be impressionistic. Were they not, you would still be waiting for the first column to appear.

The great Australian novel

This is not to say that I have always been in deadly earnest. On one occasion at least I have been downright naughty. In 1982, Irene Strachan, the first, but not the last, redoubtable custodian of *InCite* left the Association, and as a farewell present, I concocted a spoof review. Copy must have been hard to come by that fortnight, for the review appeared, deadpan, in *InCite*.

I had unwittingly stumbled on a market for a Great Australian Novel. More than one library ordered the book from their suppliers, on the strength of the review. Such was the credibility of 'The Source' that not even the formidable Daveen Temby's assurances to inquirers that the review was a spoof were enough to satisfy. 'But it has an ISBN,' was the plaintive response, 'So it must exist.'

I haven't yet written the Great Australian Library Association Novel — or any novel, come to that — but I can rest assured that, if ever I do, the necessary market research has already been done, gratis.

2 June 1978 may go down in the annals of 'The Source' as a red letter day. In the issue of that date the little man, appropriately bespectacled, hand to brow and finger poised on antique manual typewriter, surrounded by odd sheets of manuscript, first appeared with the column. I have become very fond of this forlorn and crumpled figure, which first saw light of day as an illustration in Manfred Michael's *Timpetill*. I am becoming more like him each day, although my typewriter is rather more modern, and the writer rather more ancient.



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The seven-year itch

By 1984 the column had reached the remarkable age of seven years, and Gordon Bain helped celebrate the anniversary with an inky birthday cake. The serious tone of the column was put aside momentarily and attention was turned to answering some commonly-asked questions. The following is some of what appeared then:

- Q.1 Is The Source compiler one person, or are there several compilers using one name?
- Q.2 How do you get raw material for the column?
- Q.3 How long does it take to produce the column for each issue? And how do you find time to do it anyway?
- Q.4 And why do you do it?
- A.1 Ask my analyst.
- A.2 Much of it materialises in a plastic tray marked David Jones at LAA House. Some finds its way through the mass of official mail at my place of work (please try to avoid that — the official mail, I mean, not

work). More still showers down like manna during meetings of the Editorial Board. Some actually reaches me at home — the sign of a true reference sleuth. One item was addressed to the Library Association of Australia, c/- David Jones Pty Ltd, at my home address.

- A.3 (a) About a fortnight, in my spare time, of course. (b) With difficulty.
- A.4 Because I enjoy it. I find it stimulating. And what feedback I receive tends to confirm my view that it is a Useful Thing to do.

Now I am ten!

And now 10 years have passed. Another cake. Another snuffing out of candles. A short speech of thanks to all those who have read me over the past 10 years, and who have sent me their unfailingly surprising and generally interesting works. A quick glance back, and an equally brief look forward: if you will still be there to read 'The Source', I shall still be here to write it.

Hung, strachan and quartered revisited — or the Godfather meets an AACOBS' policy statement

Novels with a library setting or containing a vignette of a librarian are not that uncommon.

Irving Wallace's *The seven minutes* has a key character who is far from the stereotypical librarian, but a librarian nonetheless.

David Lodge's *Vatican roulette* (early printings were entitled *The British Museum is falling down*) is largely set in and around the old lady of Great Russell Street.

Erle Stanley Gardner's *The case of the perjured parrot*, Anthony Burgess' *The Doctor is sick*, Brendan Behan's *Borstal boy*, all have librarians or libraries in them, treated with humour, or with sympathy or at least neutrally.

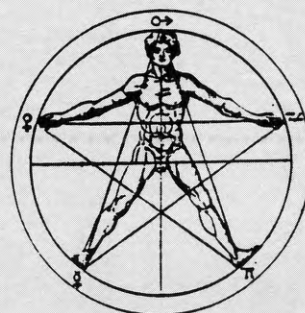
Never have I come across a novel set in a library association, however, and reading Axel Banarsidass' *Death by association* was an eerie experience. The novel is a highly-disguised depiction of real people and real events, written from the viewpoint of an editor struggling against the odds to produce a lively newsletter against a backdrop of a small but vociferous group demanding a heavy journal with a more cerebral approach.

In the early stages of the novel this unscrupulous lobby group floods the association's offices with 'scholarly' articles, does everything in its power to dry up the source of topical and general interest news and organises a massive campaign of critical letter writing.

This frenzied novel reaches a climax with the fire-bombing of the association headquarters by intellectual radicals disguised as superannuant cataloguers and the Wagnerian end of the editor and her most loyal columnist. This is not, however, a pessimistic novel, and the Hegelian quality which it has about it sets it apart from the general run of contemporary writing. It is powerful, utterly convincing and for sheer action makes the *Godfather* look like an AACOBS policy statement.

Death by association by Axel Banarsidass is published by Bungley and costs £7.48 (ISBN 0 70925 142 0).

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