



## Thoughts from this Special Librarian

I've always worked in a one person library. I like the freedom and independence and the challenge of creating order out of nothing – or out of utter chaos. The more I work in this field the more I learn and the more I realise how many skills this one person should have to operate effectively. I look back to the complexity of my first library, a mining consultancy, where I quickly learned that special libraries need to keep track of who paid for what resource, so that if part of a company is sold off then the relevant part of the library goes too. I inherited a library with a myriad of collections that were organised in different ways, depending on whether they were in the public domain or internal corporate, as well as whether they were published in parts or not. I've gradually become more adept at pulling the disparate bits together into a cohesive collection – until a new medium turns up to challenge the policies and procedures that I'd naively felt were simple and comprehensive.

Within an organisation the special library is seen as an entity to remove if costs must be cut, or to be championed if it is perceived as an advantageous asset to an ambitious manager. The librarian's expertise is sadly too often overlooked by the greater players in office politics, or by those accountant types who see the survival of the business in purely monetary terms. In my experience these things are totally out of the control of the librarian, which always gives an interesting edge of uncertainty to the position.

Compared to academic and public librarians, a special librarian has a smaller collection, a lower number of customers, and a lower budget. Collection development and its marketing inevitably involve a closer involvement with users. Budgeting is not such a routine activity. You need to use subterfuge to find out who has a new project and tap into that funding as much as you can to fill those gaps in your collection and identify useful materials for that project. Marketing means gaining the confidence of the individuals in the organisation and, although ideally that should be the professional provision of exactly the right information in a timely manner, it can come just as easily by helping with school projects. The proud parent whose offspring produced a good assignment then considers asking for your help to the workplace – and you have one of your best customers.

I realise now that a special librarian needs to be able to combine the skills of all the information professionals.

- You need to be a librarian to understand the reference question and to present the information needed – it must not be too little or too much, and must be understandable and prompt.
- Records management skills are essential for ferreting through corporate information that is never organised by Dewey number or LC subject headings. Some of the material in your special library may be more suitable to file than to catalogue.
- Searching archives requires a different mind-set again. Management of archives seems to lie somewhere in between – and overlapping – both library and records.
- Museum practice can teach a great deal about a broader interpretation of items in the collection, and how to display and promote them.
- Conservation and preservation concerns apply to all these types of information – as do the plans for disaster recovery;
- You need to bear in mind the legal minefields of Copyright, Privacy and Freedom of Information;
- And stay on top of all the aspects of digitisation.

The special librarian has to be able to handle them all with aplomb.

I think that I now have a special library of the ultimate complexity – a local history collection.

Its basis is a small collection of books relating to the people and places of the City of Nedlands. There is not much material in the public domain about the history of individual communities, so I have to collect the information and provide some degree of interpretation. I encourage people to write or record what they know and these personal contributions can then be picked over to produce stories or reference lists to encourage more research. The people providing the stories need to be guided – and experts in writing memoirs and recording oral history are hard to come by. Librarians do not traditionally do interpretation; I feel rather wicked when I write my own summaries of municipal history or dairying to promote the Local Studies Library.

Individuals as well as a plethora of local government, business, and community organisations provide their records and archives in varying states of organisation and decay. These include photographs, certificates, trophies, maps, microfiche, and a whole range of objects that were never designed to be stored in the small space allocated to a library. Digital recording of these seems an easy way of making them available – if only it was that simple. If only I knew exactly what these things were, if only there was only one version of events, if only I had more resources...

I wouldn't have it any other way.

**Anthea Harris**  
Local Studies Librarian  
Nedlands Library Service  
aharris@nedlands.wa.gov.au