



From the Editor

Sex and the Collections

by David F. Kohl

It seems unfair that something as important and wonderful as sex should also be so complicated and tricky to deal with. Yet that is the case, without dispute and beyond all doubt. But being in the business of collecting, preserving, and providing access to the key documents of the human experience, sex is an issue that it is impossible for librarians to ignore. I am not referring to the profession's pronouncements regarding boy scouts, gays, or filtering which may first come to mind when sex is mentioned, but much more directly and fundamentally the issue of sexually explicit materials, actively selected, preserved, and made available by the library.

We may take some comfort, perhaps, from the realization that ours is not the first generation to wrestle with sex and collections. I recall some years ago reading with bemused interest the advice to builders of Victorian library collections that it was unseemly to shelve books by male authors next to those by female authors. I wondered at the time if an exception might be allowed for the Brownings who were, after all, married. Presumptuous thoughts, indeed.

My first real initiation into the issues of sex and the library collection, however, came from Earl. Earl was a quiet, elderly gentleman in charge of Special Collections in one of the libraries employing me early in my library career. Twice a day, he would amble out to the front library steps and smoke an unfiltered Camel cigarette. Upon finishing his smoke, he would carefully put out the cigarette and then shred the butt, spreading the fragments over a section of lawn. It was a habit, he explained to this naive librarian, he had developed during World War II when he was operating in a military unit behind Japanese lines. The idea was to leave no evidence behind that would allow your movements or location to be tracked. I was impressed by his practical wisdom.

Some weeks later during break in front of the library, I had asked Earl what the strengths of the Special Collections were.

He listed a number of collections and some rare and valuable volumes and then, as a kind of afterthought, mentioned that the library possessed a full run of Playboys, which were housed in the "cage," a locked enclosure that was the special province of Special Collections. When I expressed dumbfounded astonishment that an academic library would have a collection of Playboy magazines, Earl calmly replied that they represented an important, if controversial, part of our culture, not unlike the full run of Sears catalogs that the library owned. This was a telling point with me since a year as a Social Science reference librarian had amazed me with how valuable a reference tool a historical collection of Sears catalogs was. (Somehow my library school professors had missed mentioning such a resource.) Realizing that a teaching moment had surfaced, Earl took this innocent in hand and provided me with a tour of the "cage" where the library treasures were securely kept. The old, rare, and valuable books I expected; many of the other volumes, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, *Tropic of Cancer*, *Naked Lunch*, and the like, I did not.

When I asked Earl why these newer books were kept with the old and precious volumes instead of in the regular book stacks, he seemed slightly embarrassed for the first time. The problem, he said, is that not everyone would use them for academic purposes, and besides, he continued, not everyone is in agreement that we should have these things. It is a compromise, he continued with a shrug, like a lot of things in life. I suddenly realized that his embarrassment had nothing to do with the materials, but with the attitudes of the library patrons and university administration that required him to keep the materials in a "cage" if he was to be allowed to collect them.

As my library experience grew to encompass a number of libraries, I began to realize that Earl had been explaining to this second-year librarian an important message about the ambiguity that necessarily exists when principle runs into practical administrative reality. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say when administrative reality has to confront possibly multiple and contradictory principles. On the one hand, it is an important principle that a library have free and unfettered hand in collecting,

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preserving, and facilitating access to all kinds of materials necessary to provide full and unfettered support of the research and teaching agendas at a college or university. It is also, however, a matter of principle for many people in our culture that certain types of sexual material are demeaning and offensive. Yet another principle in our culture affirms that institutions should not subject their employees to harassing or demeaning working conditions—one such environment can be working with sexually explicit materials where employees may feel uncomfortable, offended, or even physically threatened. And finally, although not a principle, there is always the possible bludgeon of administrative, legal, or legislative action as exemplified several years ago by the commotion at SUNY New Paltz over a conference with a sexual theme and more recently in Taiwan by the situation of Professor Josephine Cheun-jeu Ho. It is a complicated thicket for a reasonable person to struggle through.

In this issue, we have an article that I hope will encourage us as a profession to continue a clarifying dialogue on exactly how far we should go and how active we should be in collecting, preserving, and providing access to sexually oriented materials. If nothing else, the article shows for better or for worse how far we have come in publicly expressing our human sexuality. We are certainly a most inventive species in this regard. But whether

the fundamental issues have changed, seems to me more problematic. As quaint as *Lady Chatterley's Lover* now strikes us, it provoked a firestorm of controversy as late as the 1960s. Perhaps less has changed than we think. So let us consider, debate, and decide how we should proceed—keeping in mind both the issues of principle and those of administrative necessity. And let us not forget that we are not the first librarians to tread this tricky path nor is this the first time we have had to come to terms with the issue of sex in the collections.

As editor-in-chief, it is my sad responsibility to bid farewell and best wishes to Mark Cain as column editor for *Managing Technology*—a responsibility he carried out with wit and insight for the past year. A change in job responsibilities has shifted his professional focus elsewhere. Replacing him, I am pleased to announce, will be Paula Warnken, who serves as Associate Provost of Information Resources at SUNY Cortland. As an experienced librarian who also brings years of experience as head of automation, I think we can be assured that the *Managing Technology* column will continue to be in good hands. Her inaugural contribution and self-introduction debuts in this issue. I am very pleased to welcome Paula to the ranks of our feature editors.

As always, I welcome your thoughts and observations.

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