

Sandy Speaks: A *Counterpoise* Interview with Sanford Berman

Interviewed by Kristin Hoyer

From an exchange of letters with Sanford Berman. His replies were received on 3 March 2005.

Counterpoise (CP): Were you surprised when the American Library Association awarded you honorary membership, its highest award? Do you feel ALA has supported you in the work you have done?

Sandy Berman (SB): Not entirely, since I'd been forewarned about the nomination. I confess, though, that nearly every time I get an ALA envelope in the mail, I wonder if it's going to be an oops!-sorry-for-the-mistake-but-please-send-back-the-award message. While there was no chance at the award ceremony to make an acceptance speech, I wanted to say something like this:

You do me a great honor today. Yet an even greater honor, both for me and all of you—the whole Association—would be to energetically promote and implement ALA's Poor People's Policy, which has essentially remained dormant since 1990, and to add to the "Personnel Practices" policy a clause affirming free speech for library workers.

Although happy for the recognition (especially when still fit enough to enjoy it)—and truly overwhelmed by the loud and loving ovation at the Orlando presentation—the truth is that a number of other people also deserve such affirmation and applause. Thus, without doing a humility trip, I want to now share the award with:

- The late Noel Peattie, Sipapu editor, UC-Davis librarian, poet, raconteur, reporter, printer, aesthete, social activist, philosopher, critic, publisher, sailor, cat-lover, and eccentric.
- Fay Blake, library educator, access-advocate, and unstoppable hell-raiser.
- Zoia Horn, the very embodiment of intellectual freedom and personal courage.
- Celeste West, *Synergy* and *Booklegger Magazine* editor, the most awesome, electric, and incisive voice ever in library literature.
- Five selfless citizen-activists who love books and libraries so much that they're willing to fight for them: Peter Warfield and James Chaffee (San Francisco), Fred Whitehead (Kansas City, KS), Fred Woodworth (Tucson), and Nicholson Baker (Maine).

Has ALA supported my work? Well, some of ALA has. Sometimes. SRRT colleagues have surely been supportive. So have people in EMIERT and GLBTRT. Once, for a brief, glorious period, the Subject Analysis Committee—under the leadership of an unusually responsive per-

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son—actually took important action on previously-ignored proposals to expand subject and genre access to fiction and other literary works, to expedite the creation and use of topical descriptors, and to eliminate remaining bias from Library of Congress Subject Headings. On the other hand, myriad letters to ALA executive directors and presidents, for instance concerning resuscitation of the Poor People’s Policy, advocacy for workplace speech rights, and—most recently—support for the National Coalition for the Homeless-crafted Bringing Home America Act have gone either unanswered or without follow-up action. And my personal ALA history, of course, began with a disaster: the refusal of the Association’s Publishing Services to print my *Prejudices and Antipathies*, a tract on the LC subject headings concerning people, without serious revisions in content and tone—even though ALA itself had commissioned the book!

CP: After your forced retirement from the HCL in 1999, you must have been angry. How do you feel about the Hennepin County Library now that the dust has settled? Do you feel they have disrespected your life’s work?

SB: Angry? Yes (when I allow myself to think about it, which isn’t that often). All I wanted subsequent to that forced retirement was two things:

- rescinding the unjust reprimand that disciplined me for expressing my professional views on AACR2 and allegedly opposing Hennepin County Library’s membership in OCLC (I didn’t oppose it);
- an apology for the humiliation and punishment inflicted on me. I never demanded reinstatement or monetary damages. Just a clean record plus a “We’re sorry.” But they simply couldn’t manage it, despite several requests. In fact, most later correspondence to HCL, typically dealing with cataloging, service, and collection issues (e.g., recommending local alternative press and ethnic, particularly Latino, publications for the magazine collection), were never answered. And three successive letters to a community newspaper simply asking about HCL’s activities regarding the USA PATRIOT Act elicited no reply whatever.

Did they “disrespect” my life’s work? Much worse than that: they literally demolished it. Perhaps two or so years ago,

the authority file and bibliographic database carefully, innovatively, and lovingly built over 2.5 decades, were totally destroyed, being replaced by strictly “standard” OCLC records and LC terms. (A “snapshot” of our earlier labor was captured on a disc only after a public outcry and clamor. It has yet to be made available, perhaps through the University of Illinois Archives, in an easily-searchable, interactive mode.) In the meantime, the director who presided over my expulsion and the later data-demolition

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left—voluntarily—for a warmer clime. And the cabal of upper-level managers who inspired and engineered the catalog destruction as well as my exile remain, to this day, secure in their positions. None of the three principals have ever, even privately, expressed any remorse or regret over what happened. On a less somber note, many frontline HCL staff, especially those who in the late ’90s formed the first-ever librarians union at Hennepin, were and continue to be, firm friends and colleagues. Hell, I lunch with 3 or 4 of them every week! And their AFSCME local succeeded in getting a “free speech” clause added to their contract. That’s gratifying.

Bottom line: I’m profoundly disgusted by HCL’s administration (which, incidentally, I believe was complicit in the wholesale removal of some 6 books by and about me, plus their online catalog records, a few years ago), but I highly respect the dedicated and imaginative HCL workforce.

CP: You have long been associated with the Social Responsibilities Round Table of the American Library Association. How has it changed? How do you feel about having future involvement in SRRT?

SB: I’ve been a SRRTer, with only a few interruptions, since 1973. It’s the only place to be inside ALA for those who oppose “business model” librarianship, replete with branding, naming rights, blockbuster-hyping, outsourcing, mindless weeding, endless management fads, and top-down governance, and who are actively concerned about the connection between libraries and democracy, social justice, and the environment. SRRT has historically functioned as ALA’s, if not the profession’s, conscience. Its *Newsletter* today, ably edited by Sally Driscoll, is better than it’s ever been (including my own 2-year stint in the ’70s). Some of its task forces have become so large and strong that they morphed into round tables themselves. That’s the genesis of GODORT, EMIERT, GLBTRT, and, I think, IFRT. So SRRT has definitely been a prod, a beacon, an incubator. The one task force I founded, dealing with what I have increasingly felt is the paramount issue facing society and libraries, poverty, has seemed relatively inactive in the past several years (apart from a fine program in Toronto). It needs to spark interest in the long-aborning Poor People’s Policy and provide desperately-needed counsel and information (e.g., on how people experiencing homelessness can get library cards and what libraries can do to better sensitize their staffs to poor people’s rights and needs). With the recent advent of a new coordinator—John Gehner, a soon-to-graduate library student who has actually worked at a homeless shelter and is extremely principled, skilled, and creative, the Hunger, Homelessness, and Poverty Task Force is certain to fully revive and make a real impact on library practice.

There has always been some contention and even heated debate within SRRT. In the past few years, however, there appears to have developed an almost measurable rise in incivility, vituperation, and often vindictive, lacerating, ad hominem attacks. This trend contributes nothing

to improving librarianship (or the world). It only wastes time and energy, embittering and alienating many erstwhile allies and comrades in the process. Someone last year described the AC Coordinator as a kind of “excrement.” I’ve been savagely accused of doing things I never did (like deliberately excluding *Progressive Librarian* selections from *Alternative Library Literature* anthologies and somehow “giving up the fight”). I’ve been characterized as throwing a “hissy fit” over the editorial mutilation of an article I submitted to *PL*. (“Righteous outrage” would’ve been more accurate.) I’ve been excoriated for labeling people “Stalinists,” although I never did so. During an unsolicited phone call after I’d announced support for a draft ALA resolution praising the Cuban Revolution’s health and literacy progress, but calling for the release of some 75 jailed dissidents, I was derided for not being a “deep thinker.” Later I was termed “a foot soldier for Bush” (and worse)! (All because I took the very same position on the dissident-crackdown as Naomi Klein, Barbara Ehrenreich, Howard Zinn, Noam Chomsky, Cornel West, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch.)

Which brings me to two deeply troubling recent events concerning SRRT. The second I already alluded to. When ALA convened in San Francisco, the Hotel Workers’ union declared a boycott against the Marriott Hotel, designated as ALA Conference Headquarters. Many ALA units accordingly arranged to switch their event-venues from the Marriott to other locations. SRRT’s Coretta Scott King Task Force did not arrange to move its scheduled Tuesday morning award breakfast out of the Marriott. H.E.R.E. Local 2 planned to picket the Marriott that Tuesday morning. SRRT leaders vigorously tried to get the union to forego that demonstration, inasmuch as it would embarrass the CSK Breakfast attendees. Persons who resisted this pressure were dismissed as “racist,” (Never mind that Local 2 is hugely multiracial.) The SRRT leaders may have sincerely wished not to discomfit the largely black CSK Task Force. They may also have sincerely wished not to lose the considerable revenue that the breakfast ordinarily produces. Although alternative sites were proposed (probably involving the sacrifice of the \$40-per-plate breakfast), none were accepted. Then the inevitable happened. Having been told of the CSK TF intention to meet in a boycotted hotel, Coretta Scott King herself issued a letter stating the obvious: that such an act would not harmonize with Martin Luther King’s legacy and spirit. Once published, CSKers and SRRT cancelled the whole program. No alternative venue. No possibly donating the uneaten breakfast food to hotel workers or soup kitchens. Nothing. At the very least, the Marriott fiasco represented a case of paralytic inflexibility. At the worst, it was a betrayal of principle.

The second instance: Cuba. Frankly, it has shaken me to the very core that nearly everyone in SRRT, however intensely committed to Cuban sovereignty and pleased with its literacy and medical successes, could fail to understand

that the 75 dissident journalists, teachers, and librarians were the victims of totalitarian repression. They were tried suddenly in remote locations. They were charged with such heinous crimes as mounting human rights posters and holding or disseminating “subversive” and “counterrevolutionary” materials. Yes, they may have received money and literature and communications equipment from the United States. (Sweden and Spain, too.) But dealing with books, posters, and faxes—not guns and grenades—hardly makes these people dangerous spies, saboteurs, or agents of American imperialism. Simply to invoke terms like “subversive” and “counterrevolutionary” is to give away the game: that the regime wants to suppress ideas, to restrict speech, to limit intellectual freedom. Of all people, librarians should instantly recognize that kangaroo courts and the confiscation, even destruction, of reading matter signifies thought control, censorship, and repression. Yet not many have recognized that, leaving me, at any rate, with a sickening feeling in my gut that our professional commitment to free speech is not universal and unequivocal, but rather circumscribed by politically convenient double standards.

CP: How would you update your comments in “Jackdaws Strut in Peacock’s Feathers,” which appeared in *Librarians at Liberty*, 6 years later?

SB: Of course, some specific examples might be dropped or revised, but I’d retain the overall complaint and indictment. Let me stipulate the continuing problem in a few pithy observations:

- Cataloging should unmistakably identify a given work, convey its nature, content, and thrust, and specify how it can be accessed: e.g., by subject headings and various added entries for title variations, editors, illustrators, notable contributors, translators, associated groups or agencies, and local, specialty, and alternative presses.

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- Most US libraries rely on Library of Congress cataloging for the bib-records that will appear in their local OPACs. This is especially so for US trade publications, which constitute the bulk of new acquisitions by public, school, and some college libraries.
- Increasingly, most libraries do not review “outside copy” (i.e., the LC or network-supplied data) in a constructively critical fashion. Too often, paraprofessionals or clerks may be assigned merely to check on call number suitability and verify such basic elements as main entry and title, nothing more.

• As demonstrated in “Jackdaws” (reprinted in the *Librarians at Liberty* section of this issue—Ed.) and numerous other sources, LC-originated copy is often deficient in notes, subject tracings, and other access points. Further, despite some fairly recent improvement in the liberality of heading assignment and the topical and genre treatment of literary works, such assignments remain inconsistent and spotty. Moreover, much subject heading vocabulary is still biased, awkward, or absent.

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imperfect and dysfunctional. What to do? Undertake more local enhancement and revision, realizing that poor cataloging may undo the considerable effort and expense of selecting and processing material. If the items can’t be found, what’s the point? Also, support LC’s future requests for greater funding and staffing, providing they acknowledge what particularly needs repair, like the more timely establishment of topical headings and the accelerated inclusion of content-clarifying and keyword-searchable notes.

For recent examples of LC cataloging infelicities, see my column, “Berman’s Bag,” in *UNABASHED LIBRARIAN*, no. 132. Last week, I received a gift from students at the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul: *Shut Up Shut Down: Poems* (Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House Press, 2004). It’s by Mark Nowak, with an Afterword by Amiri Baraka. It consists largely of poems about work, workers, and the labor movement, punctuated by black-and-white photos, quotations, and reading lists. Coincidentally, it is a case study in what’s wrong with standard cataloging. LC assigned a generous four headings: Corporate culture, Corporations—Corrupt practices, Business ethics, and Greed, all subdivided by—Literary collections. The sole added entry: I. Title. So what’s amiss? No added entry (access point) for notable contributor Amiri Baraka. No turnaround title added entry for “Shut down shut up.” No tracing for the alternative publisher: Coffee House Press. No note indicating the graphic dimension, the photo-documentary aspect. No genre heading for “Working class poetry.” No topical headings for plant closings, downsizing, and labor

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ing, and labor movement. Nor for, say, “Employee resistance and revolts.” And “Greed” is way too broad. This is emphati-

cally about corporate greed, which demands an appropriate new heading. Also needed: “American poetry—21st century.” Finally, Dewey classifiers placed this essentially verse collection in “American fiction” Not quite bibliocide-by-cataloging, but close.

For the record, over two years or longer I submitted suggestions and documentation regarding cataloging improvements and possible new or substitute headings to LC’s Cataloging Policy & Support Office. No replies. Then, finally, after some 40 or 50 submissions, came a response, which I believe materialized only because the CPSO Chief was ordered to do so by her superior. Since that December 16, 2004 letter, more have arrived. I would dearly like to report that the “thaw” betokens a genuine responsiveness, manifest in concrete reforms or new-heading creation. Alas, that hasn’t quite happened. Mostly, it’s been perfunctory acknowledgments or tortured explanations about why they won’t do what they should do.

Among other things, I’ve been trying to get them to introduce subject headings for CULTURE WARS, INFOSHOPS, STUDENT ANTI-SWEATSHOP MOVEMENT, PLUTOCRACY, and NATIVE AMERICAN HOLOCAUST, as well as either replacing FANZINES with ZINES or creating ZINES as a complementary descriptor. The latest LC communication was a full-page rebuke, dated 2–10–05 (See p. 10—Ed.), for daring to mention the inadequate Cataloging-in-Publication entry for Nan Levinson’s *Outspoken: Free Speech Stories* in my upcoming *College & Research Libraries* review.

CP: You encouraged Charles Willett to start *Counterpoise*, and have been associated with it since the first issue. How has it changed or improved? How could the magazine improve?

SB: Rescuing *Counterpoise* from the clutches of a few SRRT Action

Council members who sought to emasculate it was an accomplishment I’m genuinely proud of. I believe that the review-and-essay journal devoted to alterna-

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tive media and socially responsible librarianship that Charles Willett had the vision to create and the expertise to produce qualifies as the most lasting, tangible, and useful product ever to emerge from the Alternatives In Publication Task Force—and SRRT itself. Indeed, the only other comparable achievement in recent AIP and SRRT history also owes much to Charles Willett’s inspiration and guidance: the absolutely critical support provided to our island companions during the Hawaii Outsourcing Scandal. The advice, encouragement, and communication resources supplied by AIP’s Hawaii Working Group to those beleaguered offshore colleagues absolutely enabled them to successfully resist the

privatizing machinations of Bart Kane and Baker & Taylor. No other ALA unit came so quickly and committedly to their aid. For those two triumphs alone, Charles Willett should long ago have won the Jackie Eubanks Memorial Award. I nominated him more than once.

Counterpoise could improve in two basic ways: First, it needs to appear more regularly. And second, it should contain more reviews. Otherwise, it's terrific!

CP: What can and should librarians do outside of libraries and in their communities?

SB: Within the very real limits of available time and energy, tell community groups, publications, and activists about new (and even old) library resources likely to interest them and perhaps help in their work: from books, CDs, and videos to journals, databases, and web sites. Government documents, too. Do it by mail, phone, or computer. And don't wait to be asked. If you're comfortable writing, contribute letters, columns, and op eds to the local press on library and information-access issues (e.g., "dumbed down" collections); Internet filtering; media bias and concentration; regional and out-of-the-mainstream news and opinion sources; the USA PATRIOT Act; censorship-by-copyright; adequate and stable library funding, perhaps through special tax districts, to prevent closings and cuts in hours; materials on urgent topics like peace, war, poverty, corporate greed and power, citizen action, GLBT rights, genocide, and election reform; and environmental threats that can be reached online or found at libraries). If you'd rather speak, do the same on public access cable and community radio shows. Or arrange to talk or conduct panel discussions at meetings of civic, religious, labor, business, and political organizations.

CP: How long have you been sending out informative mailings? Where do you get the material, and to how many people do you send it?

SB: Forever. Well, almost. I did it while working. And I do it in "retirement." Admittedly, it's kind of a compulsion. An obsession. But my hope is that recipients find at least some of the material useful, perhaps even amusing or inspiring. What I typically send are newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, clippings, flyers, and—uh huh—web printouts. My object is to target the items to particular individuals and groups. Not everyone gets the identical mailing.

How do I assemble this treasury of stuff? Many things I pick up as freebies at shops or events. Some material comes through memberships and subscriptions. And a small but diligent network of penpals supplies the rest, most notably Steve Fesenmaier (West Virginia Library Commission), Jim Danky (Wisconsin Historical Society), Donny Smith (Dwan/American Libraries/Library Journal), Chris Dodge (Utne), Fred Whitehead, (People's Culture/

Freethought History), Earl Lee (Pittsburg State University), and John Gehner (ALA/SRRT Poverty Task Force). While there's no formal "mailing list," I currently have about 81 active address cards. If I don't mail out SOMETHING every week, I'm likely to sink into serious depression and self-rebuke.

CP: What print and Internet resources can you recommend for people who will be the Sanford Bermans of the next generation?

SB: Hey, the next generation of "revolting librarians" doesn't need ME to recommend Internet resources. They're all amazingly adept and knowledgeable concerning online communication. Some, in fact, maintain their own web sites and blogs. Others produce their own zines. Since there's occasionally a temptation among, ahem, senior members of our congregation to bewail how few younger colleagues seem to be carrying on the (let's call it) radical or progressive or ass-kicking tradition in librarianship, let me puncture that somewhat condescending contention by naming several committed, energetic, and independent colleagues I happen to know—all my juniors by about 30 years or more—who make me confident that the future's in very good hands: Jenna Freedman, Sean Stewart, Bruce Jensen, John Gehner, Jessamyn West, Katia Roberto, Donny Smith, Alycia Sellie, and Tatiana de la Tierra.

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CP: What words of wisdom can you give to budding librarians and activists?

SB: At the great risk of being at once trite and obvious:

- As much as possible, try to harmonize your values and your behavior. (Your mental health may depend on it!)
- In the process of saving the world, don't stint on family and friends. (Indeed, they should come first.)
- Read *The Onion*. Laugh a lot. Sometimes do silly things. (If possible, hang out with toddlers and any kids up to 7 or 8 years old.)
- No matter how dismal or hopeless things seem, don't give up. Said Gandhi: "Even a single lamp dispels the deepest darkness." And Adam Hochschild has demonstrated in his *Bury the Chains* that even so clearly compelling a matter as ending the British slave trade took at least 50 years of effort.

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