

Librarian for the people

Cataloger takes aim at bad labels

By Peg Meier / Staff Writer

Nearly 20 years ago Sanford Berman was working as a new assistant librarian at the University of Zambia in south-central Africa. When he cataloged works about black South Africans, he was told to use the subject heading that the U.S. Library of Congress deemed correct for the people. It was a term he wouldn't *think* of using in conversation with his black colleagues. The word was "Kaffir," and the connotation is very negative, he said, much like the American "nigger."

Outraged after all these years, he said recently, "If you were a South African black and had to look under KAFFIR in the library catalog to find information about your people, what the hell would you think?"

It was then that Berman began his battle with the Library of Congress. The library since has abolished KAFFIR as a subject heading but still has hundreds of subject headings that Berman despises and works to change.

For years he has raised a stink about subject headings that he says are racist, elitist, chauvinistic, demeaning, unclear and simply wrong. They don't reflect modern interests. Some catalog entries don't make sense, he said, and some are just plain silly.

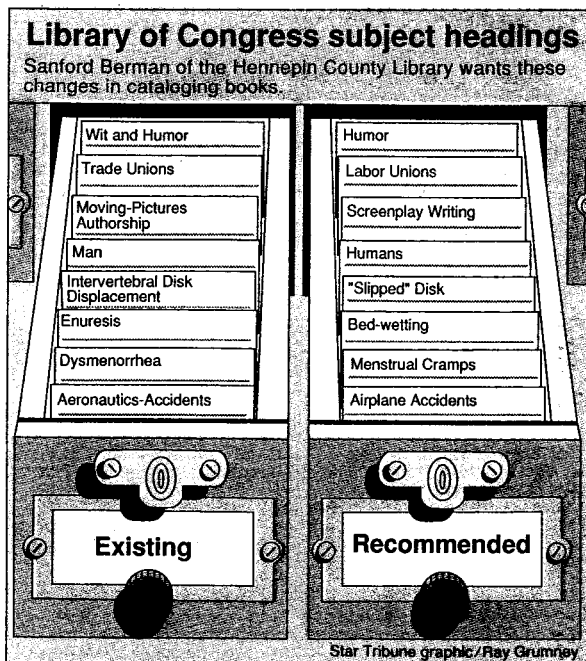
Examples on the accompanying chart are just the tip of the iceberg. Berman also wants listings for BIRTH DEFECTS, not ABNORMALITIES/HUMAN; KILLER BEES, not BRAZILIAN HONEYBEE; ICE AGE, not GLACIAL EPOCH; OCCULT MEDICINE, not MEDICINE, MAGIC, MYSTIC, & SPAGIRIC; PCP, not PHENCYCLIDINE; K.G.B., not SOVIET UNION, KOMITET GOSUDARSTVENNO I BEZOPASNOSTI, and INVOLUNTARY STERILIZATION, not STERILIZATION, EUGENIC.

Berman has been the head cataloger for the Hennepin County Library system for 15 years. He is known by librarians across the country — some say around the world — for modifying the Library of Congress catalog for the patrons here.

He insists that Library of Congress policies are designed for academicians and librarians, not "real people" who use public libraries. In Berman's mind, the policies make library patrons ask for help from librarians, instead of promoting self-reliance, and discourage people from using libraries.

Those who call Berman the "guru of cataloging" praise him for producing a catalog for the Hennepin County Library system that is easy to use and sensitive to diverse cultures. They say he's on the cutting edge. But those who call him a "pain in the posterior portion of the human body" (see also: butt) say he's on the radical fringe and is trying to change society through cataloging — an unnecessary, expensive, radical process. Librarians should reflect society, not lead changes in society, his critics say.

Berman says he's just trying to be helpful. He despised that the Library of Congress took until 1972 to establish ROCK MUSIC as a heading, until 1985 for APARTHEID, until this year for MILITARY-INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX. His library established COMPULSIVE EATING as a subject heading on its microfiche catalog in 1978; the Library of Congress didn't recognize



it until 1987. He had GAY TEENAGERS and TEEN-AGE PREGNANCY in 1978; the Library of Congress followed in nine years.

When he gives speeches about the evils of Library of Congress cataloging, he holds up a light bulb. If you needed information on this thing, how would you look it up in the catalog at your library? LIGHT BULB? Wrong. BULB, LIGHT? No. LIGHTING METHODS? Uh-uh. You'd find your information under ELECTRIC LAMPS, INCANDESCENT.

Berman said, "What does that say about the image of the library? It doesn't say this is the kind of institution you can trust. It doesn't make you say, 'This is designed for me, for my needs.' You want a familiar, common, contemporary term, right? I'm not talking about slang. I'm talking about normal nomenclature. People unfortunately get the idea that the library is telling them they're stupid, *stupid*, for not knowing to look under ELECTRIC LAMPS, INCANDESCENT."

True, if you tried LIGHT BULB in the Library of Congress catalog you might find a note to look under ELECTRIC LAMPS, INCANDESCENT, but to Berman that isn't good enough. The more hoops people have to jump through, the more likely they'll go away without the information they want and the less likely they'll come back. That's especially true of poor people, young people and ethnic minorities who may not readily use library services nor demand that the

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BERMAN: Living in Amin's Uganda got 'real dicey'

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services make sense to them. They haven't been taught to think the way librarians think. Wouldn't it be better, Berman says, to get librarians thinking the way patrons think? Wouldn't democracy be better served if all kinds of people could easily get the information they seek?

He once summarized his thoughts this way: "To library administrators and gurus, who tend to be WASP-oriented and largely identify with middle- and upper-class society, people who don't use libraries are usually written off as not worth approaching. The rationale: 'They don't use them, they don't tell us what they want, so why the hell bother with them? Let's stay with the monied, propertied clientele who look like us, who think like us, who run most everything that counts, and who we know want 75 copies of the latest blockbuster plus up-to-date, even if rather expensive, business and investment services.'"

Berman was born in Chicago in 1933 and grew up in Los Angeles. After he earned a master's degree in library science, he worked at a Washington, D.C., library and in West Germany for the U.S. Army and a college. Because he had married a black woman and held a deep interest in African culture, he wanted to live and work in Africa for a while. He took library jobs in Zambia and Uganda. His wife, Lorraine, and her two children, whom he adopted, went with him.

The Bermans had to leave Uganda in a hurry. Uganda's ruler, Idi Amin, didn't care for interracial marriages. He didn't like Jews either, and Berman is Jewish. "It was getting real dicey," is the way Berman remembers their life in Uganda in 1972. The U.S. embassy had urged them to get out and provided an escort and limousine for the Bermans to get to the airport.

Back in L.A., they crashed with friends for a month while he looked for work. He wanted a job with Boston University's library as the Africana bibliographer but didn't get it. Hennepin County Libraries went after him to be head cataloger. He was interviewed in California for the Minnesota job, and took it, never seeing Minnesota. His family bought parkas at a California ski shop. When they landed in the Twin Cities, a snowstorm was on its way to becoming a blizzard. He found the people here far warmer than the weather, and now pronounces the area a good place to work ("generally") and to live.

His book critical of Library of Congress cataloging, "Prejudices and Antipathies," began to be recognized in library circles. In it he called for abolishment of such subject headings as SOCIETY, PRIMITIVE. He suggested replacing NATIVE CLERGY with LOCAL CLERGY or LOCALLY-RECRUITED CLERGY. He insisted that the heading JEWISH QUESTION was language of "the oppressor, the ultimate murderer, not the victim. Strong language? The stench at Auschwitz was stronger."

His peers began to let him know that if he was so upset with the Library of Congress' unfairness and slowness to change, he ought to do as the little red hen did in the folk tale and simply do it himself. He did.

He preached at library conferences and in his library bulletin that cataloging practices and attitudes were self-serving: "Cataloging has too often been performed for the exclusive satisfaction of catalogers themselves, who seemed to conceive of themselves as members of a special mystery cult. Only the property initiated could really decipher or comprehend what they were into. Well, we don't dig that approach."

He told anyone who would listen — and many who wouldn't — that

librarians tend to be elitist, down to the abbreviations they use in the catalogs. Why write "c. 1946" when "about 1946" would be comprehensible to many more people? Why use "b." for "born" and "v." for volume and "ill." for illustrated or illustrator when the outcome is to "make the uninitiated feel like stupid jerks."

There is one area in which Berman votes against ease of patrons to find material in the catalog. It's the matter of what he considers derogatory headings for peoples. He prefers INUIT to ESKIMO, ROMANIES to GYPSIES. The commonly used terms, he explained, are derogatory words used by other people.

He also worked to get rid of the word "as" in such categories as WOMEN AS INVENTORS, WOMEN AS JURORS, CATHOLICS AS SCIENTISTS and JEWS AS FARMERS, as if those people didn't qualify to be those things.

He flails against the Library of Congress for "printism," because non-print media are considered less worthy than print media. (The Hennepin County Library, incidentally, has pioneered in building a good audio-visual collection and integrating it in the catalog.)

Berman says the Library of Congress panders to big business, is disdainful toward "underground" or alternative materials, slow to acknowledge labor movements, clumsy in handling materials about sexuality.

Milton Freedman is the man who hired Berman at the Hennepin County Library in 1970. Freedman now is director of the Westchester, N.Y., library system and a strong Berman advocate. He said Berman is highly regarded by librarians, even by some in the Library of Congress. That does not, however, include Library of Congress management, whom Freedman called "afraid of its own shadow, afraid of

the real world in many respects and afraid of change." Rather than accept Berman's ideas as positive and constructive ways to serve library users, Library of Congress heads see him as a thorn in the side, Freedman said. "Sandy pushes, pamphleteers, takes risks, doesn't take no for an answer," he said.

Others heap praise on Berman: Marcia Pankake, a librarian with the University of Minnesota, said Hennepin County has an excellent, avant-garde library system, including its catalog. Linda Gardner of the Alachua (Fla.) Library District, said the library profession "needs a few more like him to get us to think, to look at things a little less conservatively, to make the Library of Congress more responsive to the needs of the public." Claire McInerney of the College of St. Catherine's information management department calls him a leader among librarians for social responsibility and equality.

Librarians see so much of Sandy Berman's thinking (magazine articles, letters, books, reprints of speeches, bulletins from his library, lists of suggested cataloging changes) that some people wonder if he ever rests. Lorraine Berman, his wife of 20 years, says he does. In his time off, he reads, walks, sees films, is a good conversationalist. She said she respects his zealous reforming: "It takes some guts to stick your neck out as far as he does."

And what does the Library of Congress say about Berman? Not much, publicly. Berman's main target there is Mary K.D. Pietris, chief of the subject cataloging division. When called for her opinion of him, she asked for a day to form her response, then referred a reporter to the library's public information office, which did not return calls.

In response to letters from Berman, Pietris did, however, spell out her philosophy. "The need to catalog

new books will always take priority over making subject heading changes or improvements," she wrote. About changing ESKIMOS or GYPSIES, she wrote, "We do not attempt to prescribe usage of terms, only to reflect it." Berman didn't like the answers, and sent copies of her letters to his followers.

One of the last of her letters to Berman was in 1986: "In view of the fact that you distribute correspondence from me all over the country, I do not feel it appropriate to continue to answer your letters in the future. We are happy to receive your mailings . . ."

She must be very happy. Berman mails a stack of stuff to her every few weeks.