

**Berman's Bag: Harry Potter Imperiled,
Keyword Searching As Panacea, Robin
Hood's Noble Liege, and Other
Foolishness**

by Sanford Berman, U*L Contributing
Editor

As a kid, I devoured the Robin Hood canon, developing a righteous fury against the evil Sheriff of Nottingham and conniving Prince John, but absolutely revering Robin's liege lord, the toweringly brave and majestic, if often absent, English monarch, Richard-the-Lion-Hearted. Lately, however, I stumbled upon a paragraph in James A. Haught's *Holy Horrors: an Illustrated History of Religious Murder and Madness* (Prometheus Books, 1990) that has completely and forever changed my youthful awe toward Richard I into pure disgust. Says Haught, on page 26:

In the Third Crusade, after Richard...captured Acre in 1191, he ordered 3,000 captives--many of them women and children--taken outside the city and massacred. The corpses were cut open in a search for swallowed gems...

This is exactly the sort of nugget that someone may later want to retrieve, but short of painstakingly thumbing through the whole tome, there's no way to identify references to Richard, Acre, massacres, or Crusades. Symptomatic of an alarming, access-limiting trend in book publishing, this volume contained no index. Nor do indexes appear in the thematically-and detail-rich *Nickel And Dimed: On (Not) Getting By In America*, by Barbara Ehrenreich (Holt, 2001), Michael Moore's *Stupid White Men* (ReganBooks, 2001), and *Reclaiming San Francisco: History, Politics, Culture* (City Lights Books, 1998), which incidentally includes Nicholson Baker's *Weeds: A Talk at the Library*, the speech that blew the whistle on SFPL's massive bibliocide. So now my righteous fury is directed against writers, editors, and especially publishers who collude in this dumbing-down epidemic, effectively reducing access to potentially significant information and ideas by librarians and general readers alike.

I invite reviewers and reference staff to join me in admonishing publishers not to stint on indexes. They're not luxuries. They're necessities.

After bemoaning the sorry state of subject cataloging to a "Banned Books Week" audience, using LC's "Canada. Treaties, etc. 1992 Oct. 7" (the descriptor for what everyone else calls NAFTA or the North American Free Trade Agreement) as a particularly awful example and observing that many libraries don't make the requisite cross-references to the obtuse primary form, a local librarian approached me and somewhat smugly announced: "Oh, that doesn't matter. We get around bad LC cataloging by keyword searching." That colleague undoubtedly echoed a widely-believed myth. Unfortunately, the increasingly heavy reliance upon and devotion to keyword searching reflects not so much the utility of

new technology as the demise of truly rigorous, sensible, and consistent subject cataloging. Keyword searching WILL NOT retrieve material unless the searched-for terms actually appear in bibliographic records. For instance, a "NAFTA" or "North American Free Trade Agreement" search will not produce hits for *Amerique Sans Frontiere: les Etats-Unis Dans L'espace Nord-Americain* (1995), *Arthur Andersen North American Business Sourcebook: the Most Comprehensive Authoritative Reference Guide to Expanding Trade in the North American Market* (1994), and Bill Moyers' PBS documentary on NAFTA's Chapter 11 and its impact on local governance, *Trading Democracy* (2002), since the titles don't contain those magic words. Indeed, solely a "NAFTA" search will miss works like Ambler H. Moss, Jr.'s *Assessments of the North American Free Trade Agreement* (1993), and *Budgetary and Economic Analysis of the North American Free Trade Agreement* (1993), while a strictly "North American Free Trade Agreement" search won't trap such items as *Anticipating the Impact of NAFTA on Health and Health Policy* (1995), *Assessing NAFTA: a Trinational Analysis* (1993), and *Banking in North America: NAFTA and Beyond* (1999). All of these materials can only be retrieved successfully if they have been assigned the same, consistent subject heading. Further, that single heading should ideally be equipped with "see," "see also," and "see also from" references that will lead searchers to both the primary form and related topics. Keyword searching WILL NOT permit such comprehensive access. It also WILL NOT furnish public or scope notes under specific subjects that helpfully explain what those descriptors mean. To painfully belabor the mythic character of keyword searching:

Barbara Ehrenreich's volume deals importantly with matters like working poor people, labor

exploitation, and service industry workers. As it happens, the Library of Congress assigned none of those terms as subject tracings, although they should have. But keyword searches under those three concepts or categories won't unearth the Ehrenreich report because that language just isn't in the title or even (had there been a contents note) the chapter captions. Only creative and intelligent subject cataloging would "save" the book from bibliographic oblivion.

+It has lately been recommended to LC that headings be promptly established for both INTELLIGENT DESIGN and MOUNTAINTOP REMOVAL MINING, two currently "hot" issues. As long as there are no precise headings available for these topics, forms that could then routinely be applied to the growing body of film and literature addressing them, keyword searching becomes the sole alternative, an imperfect fallback approach. "Mountaintop removal" will not identify films like Sasha Waters' *Razing Appalachia* and books like Jedediah Purdy's *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today* (1999), which includes extensive data on the subject. And even a "Mountaintop removal" keyword hit will not furnish a possibly useful note, e.g.,

Here are entered materials on a strip mining method in which the top of a mountain is removed by blasting and drag lines to extract low-sulfur coal. In a process called "valley fill," the "overburden" or excess spoil is deposited into valleys and streams in piles that may be two miles long and over 100 feet high.

Nor would that search mode allow access to relevant records by means of

topical variants (e.g., "Mining, Mountaintop" or "Mountaintop mining"). And of course no "see also" references would direct searchers to that information from broader subjects like "Coal mines and mining," "Environmental degradation," and "Strip mining."

On June 20, 2002, I wrote the Hennepin County Bibliographic Services Librarian, copying Tom Yee at LC's Cataloging Policy and Support Office:

Having lately read John Mangels and Scott Stephens' "Intelligent Design Crusader Keeps Campaigning" in the *Star Tribune* (attached) and watched several TV segments on the current campaign to promote "Intelligent Design" as an alternative to evolution, I made a subject search in HCL's online catalog and found nothing (the closest subject heading was INTELLIGENT MACHINES). I then performed a key-word search and did turn up three relevant titles, together with four false drops (i.e., unrelated garbage). While all three works deal explicitly with "Intelligent Design," none were assigned a subject heading for that topic. I've since discovered that the Library of Congress itself has thus far failed to recognize the concept and controversy--despite abundant "literary warrant"--with the pathetic result that ID material is unreachable by subject-searching library catalogs, nor can a user find any catalog-based explanation of what it means or be directed to ID and cognate information through appropriate cross-references.

These are the cross-references and note I proposed, none of which would "kick in" through the keyword approach:

pn Here are entered materials on the theory that the complexity

of life arose by the design of an unnamed, intelligent being

- sa Creationism
Naturalism
Religion and science
- sf ID
IDC
Intelligent design creationism
Intelligent design theory
Neocreationism
Theistic design
- xx Biology-Philosophy
Cosmology
Creationism
Earth-Origin
God-Proof
Life-Origin
Naturalism
Religion and science
Science-Philosophy

+For another, pithy statement on the hazards of keyword searching and the need for timely creation and application of subject headings, replete with notes and references, see my "Sing A Song Of Green Cards," in *Alternative Library Literature, 1996-1997*, (McFarland, 1998), pages 151-52.

The nearly religious embrace of keyword searching almost certainly may be linked to a mistaken belief that electronic manipulation of data somehow compensates for the absence or inaccuracy or unhelpfulness of the data itself. And the content, the substance, of centrally-concocted catalog records IS declining, worsening. Most such records supplied to vendors or networks derive from the Library of Congress. Yet professional LC staff themselves recently testified before Congress that,

"While cataloging was once one of the Library's crown jewels a world-renowned operation, now we can no longer afford to perform quality

cataloging because of insufficient professional staff. Acquisitions of materials continues to surge, while staff to catalog those acquisitions has plummeted. Just since the end of fiscal 1997 there has been a 16% drop in professional book cataloger staffing levels. Faced with these difficult circumstances, Library management has implemented various schemes to catalog more with less, all resulting in a deleterious effect on the quality of our cataloging product and our once pristine data base. This is a grave error because good cataloging is the foundation of good librarianship. Acquisitions and reference staff cannot adequately perform their duties when they cannot rely on the accuracy of our cataloging records. Moreover, this lack of quality has an obvious adverse impact on our patrons, including Congress. Cataloging errors can make any work, including those about weapons development in Iraq, or the political history of Afghanistan, disappear just as completely as a thief's raid on the stacks."

Harry Potter in trouble? Uh-uh. At that Banned Books Week event--hosted by the Red Balloon Bookshop in St. Paul--people proudly wore "Muggles For Harry Potter" buttons. Ordinarily, I'm big on solidarity and supporting underdogs and hapless victims, ever ready to oppose censorship and repression. But, honestly, folks, Harry's not in any serious danger. And the nearly hysteric defense of Rowling, Angelou, Steinbeck, Twain, and other "imperiled" authors actually deflects attention from the truly endangered products, largely from small, alternative, and ethnic presses, that seldom even get into libraries at all. Here are two complementary views on the sham of Banned Books Week, the first by librarian/novelist/dramatist Earl Lee,

from his "Almost Banned Books: A Brief History," *Counterpoise*, April 2001, page 16:

"The irony of Banned Books Week is that it celebrates books, like the Harry Potter books, that are not really "banned" in any real sense. Every library and every bookstore in the country has multiple copies of these books. For example, here in my hometown of Pittsburg, Kansas, (population 18,000) every library has copies of the Harry Potter books and every bookstore, even Wal-Mart and several local supermarkets, sell copies. Meanwhile, the new Harry Potter movie appears to be doing a brisk business, and our local Cinema Eight has 3 of 8 screens devoted to showing the Harry Potter movie. If this is what it means to be "banned" I would gladly volunteer. In fact Banned Books Week is a kind of bait-and-switch game. Most of the books on the list are not banned, but only "challenged"—meaning that some parents somewhere in the USA have objected to their children reading these books in school, in the case of Harry Potter for religious reasons. "ALA's Banned Books Week is actually a "celebration" of books that parents and others have recently objected to (but not "banned") along with some classic books, like *Ulysses*, which was banned sixty years ago in the U.S., or the *Bible*, some versions of which were banned 500 years ago in Europe. Today the Bible is not "banned" in any country within a thousand miles of the USA, but owning a copy can get you into serious trouble if you live in Afghanistan. Like the Harry Potter books, every library and bookstore in America seems to have multiple copies and several editions and formats are easily available. "Unlike Harry Potter, most of the Almost Banned Books [exclusively

small and alternative press titles previously reviewed in *Counterpoise*] are hard to find in bookstores or libraries. The ABB list for 2000 has seven titles that are not available in any of the...OCLC libraries worldwide. Another seven titles can be found in four libraries or less, and another seven titles can be found in nine libraries or less. For a multinational database like OCLC to show such low numbers means that these books are truly unavailable, and they are truly "banned" in the sense of being controlled by market and institutional forces and thus effectively excluded from the marketplace of ideas."

The second screed emanates from Fred Woodworth, editor/publisher of *The Match*. These comments appeared in the Winter 2001-2002 issue, under the caption "Crap-Detection Department" (page 21):

"Considering some of the items that have received notice in this column over the past years, it may seem hard to believe that we have now whiffed out probably the most incredible one yet, but surely it's true. See what you think after reading this notice from the September 14, 2001 edition of the Arizona Daily Star (sec. B, page 3):

"LIBRARIES TO MARK BANNED BOOKS WEEK. The Downtown Tucson Public Library will join library branches across town in marking Banned Books Week, Sept. 22 through Sept. 29. The library hopes to call attention to hundreds of worthwhile books that would-be censors have tried to ban. "Libraries and bookstores across the country want to really help remind people of some of our freedoms that we need to safeguard: library spokeswoman Elizabeth Burden said.

"We want to say what a great loss it would be if these books were banned... It's important to make them available."

"And what books are in this horrible danger of being subjected to censorship? What ones are direly threatened with being unavailable, relegated to dark corners and kept off the library shelves if not for heroic, enlightened efforts like this one?"

"...Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (and) J. K. Rowling's popular Harry Potter books..."

"HARRY POTTER! The recipient of uncounted millions of dollars of publicity, much of it donated by newspapers and other willing accomplices of the billion-dollar promotion machine dedicated to thrusting a copy of this chunk of printing into the hands of every man, woman and child—possibly every infant—in the English-speaking world!

"HARRY POTTER—the lurid covers in carefully painted likenesses of a young Bill Gates, no doubt to cross-reference propaganda for his own giant corporation at the same time!

"Harry Potter—millions sold! Libraries buying as many as 80 copies A PIECE to meet the artificially pumped demand created by incredible "best-seller" lists published before a single copy is sold! Inflated by newspapers with as many as five separate articles in one single edition, examining, hyping, promoting, and bludgeoning parents and schools to lay down their cash lest young Johnny and Sally feel deprived as EVERYONE ELSE reads HARRY!

"Censorship? You want to hear about CENSORSHIP?! In the city where I've been writing and publishing for 32 years, NOT ONE S I N G L E WORD of mine resides in any branch of the public library system."

"Each library branch will mark the week differently. Some branches will wrap targeted books in plain brown wrappers, and those who check them out will receive bookmarks and other commemorative items. The Downtown branch will cater to area workers with 'brown bag banned book lunch specials' displayed on carts decorated like food vendors' wagons..."

"As for Maya Angelou: How somebody who was feted by the Clinton administration, published slavishly by major outfits no matter what feeble swill she produced, and anthologized in one-half of the high school textbooks of this country, can be regarded in any way as having even the most distant resemblance to a censorship victim, is a topic on which I will offer no further remarks."

Since I'm the columnist, I get the last word. Here's the blurb I contributed to the 5th edition of *Alternative Publishers of Books in North America*, edited by Byron Anderson (CRISES Press, 2002):

"The most effectively "banned books" in America are not the "challenged," invariably mainstream titles widely publicized by the American Library Association. Instead, they're the works produced by the diverse, independent and unorthodox presses listed in APBNA. No book-burning zealot has the chance to "challenge" the presence of alternative press materials on library shelves, simply because too many such volumes aren't there in the first place. They're not selected, not bought, not cataloged, not loaned, not displayed. But it doesn't need to be that way. The

profession can stop murdering its own noble Library Bill of Rights by actively identifying and collecting the varied, enlightening and sometimes unsettling stuff issued by non-corporate publishers. APBNA is a splendid, essential guide to that universe of exciting and even empowering ideas, opinions and information."

Sanford Berman, U*L Contributing Editor, 4400 Morningside, Edina MN 55416.