

Book Reviews

Crawford, Walt, and Michael Gorman.

Future Libraries: Dreams, Madness, and Reality. Chicago: ALA, 1995. 198p. \$25 (ISBN 0-8389-0647-8).

The cybnaut's siren song can be seductive indeed. The reasons are simple: the technology of the information age enables us to store and project highly flexible information to anyone, anywhere, at any time. Almost all media—print, music, photographs, and video—can be converted to digital format. Electronic data can be instantaneously routed to remote computer terminals whether in libraries or schools, workplaces or homes. The scenario is attractive on logistical grounds alone. Combined with an optimistic ideology, the appeal can seem irresistible: "If the NII [National Information Infrastructure] were to offer access to everything found in the nation's libraries, museums, theaters, auditoriums, and archives, it could help dissolve the boundaries that now separate communities, social classes, people of different economic levels, the highly educated and the broad public, and the peoples of different nations" (*Humanities and Arts on the Information Highways: A Profile. Final Report*, Sept. 1994, 9).

The siren song is, of course, too good to be true. Walt Crawford and Michael Gorman's *Future Libraries* sets out, with a zest, to debunk the myth. As chapter titles like "The Madness of Technolust" or "Deconstructing Dreams of the All-Electronic Future" may suggest, our authors take no prisoners in rebutting electronic extremists. The book is in the first instance a sharply amusing polemic that pillories the "new barbarians" and "technojunkies" afflicted with "technolust." The skewering continues apace with its scathing allusions to the "bumper-

sticker school of library thought" and kindred professional foibles.

Despite—or due to?—its entertaining demythologizing of electronic exaggerations, this book is at once more and less than a satisfying manifesto for the "balanced view." The authors wisely profess their allegiance to all information formats, as warranted by each one's strengths and shortcomings, and as further informed by economic commonsense and an understanding of what people really want. They take pains to show (as their prominent careers also attest) that they are not simply cybernetic Luddites enamored of Norman Rockwell libraries. Their careful arguments for balance, masterfully cast in a section entitled "'And' Not 'Or,'" make for some of the book's most compelling paragraphs. The analysis that distinguishes between data, information, knowledge, understanding, and wisdom, and then suggests the formats most appropriate to each, is a signal contribution. Other insights abound.

This sort of reasoned rebuttal, however, is at intervals compromised by straw-man arguments, hyperbole, and unwarranted assertions. Readers are repeatedly warned of the "many" administrators, politicians, and library leaders who, lost to technolust, would destroy their institutions. A few arguments are based on assumptions that may not hold, for instance, that six hundred dots per inch is a minimum scanning resolution for usable page images; or on oversimplified portrayals like the laudatory account of Eureka and FirstSearch that slides past both the shortcomings of these systems and the often substantial library holdings that are only represented in local online catalogs. These occasional flaws by no means vitiate the

book's message, but they do blunt some of its needles.

Future Libraries does more than simply smite the technojunkies. The final third of the book edges away from declamatory rebuttal to engage in fine-hewn analyses of current library dilemmas. Some of this discussion entails unexpectedly specific analyses of such current products as FirstSearch, CitaDel, and Ariel. The authors also offer a hard-nosed dissection of the "serials crisis," trenchant defenses of adequate library funding, disquisitions on appropriate statistics keeping, and a sobering look at the erosion of academic libraries' support for—and therefore perhaps from—their traditional strongholds in the arts and humanities.

The book is thus amusing, appealing, balanced, provocative, and overwhelmingly right-minded. For all that, it figures as little more than a period piece. The failure lies in the issues it does not address rather than the ground it covers. *Future Libraries* is founded in a candid liberal faith in libraries, knowledge, and informed democratic decision making. Norman Rockwell may indeed be in the wings, albeit in a technologically savvy incarnation fully celebratory of today's social diversity. Literary quotes from the likes of Lewis Carroll, Charles Dickens, and Walt Whitman reveal this grounding. So do stirring affirmations that libraries are "the guardian of our culture and an essential element of the empowering democracy of the mind," and that (italicized in the original) "[t]he only way to have an equitable society is to have universal literacy." The final paragraph is almost martial in cadence and content: "Librarians should never be afraid to defend the eternal mission of libraries—to collect, preserve, organize, and disseminate the records of the knowledge and information of humankind and to provide human services based on those records. Moreover, they should never be ashamed to defend and to show by example the core values—community, literacy, learning, service, reason, democracy, and intellectual freedom—upon which the culture of libraries is built."

For better or worse, all these affirmations are open to question. For better or worse, they also suffuse the "technojunkie's" vision—look again at this review's opening quotation. Painful as the process may prove, the ideological roots of library liberalism are past due for re-examination. "Postmodern" critics pose fundamental challenges to the closed visions—Marxist or liberal, religious or mundane—that have characterized the industrial age. New electronic technologies, mass media and mass communications, "haves" and "have-nots" on a global scale, and "electronic democracy" require us to reconsider the nature of our society, of information's role within that society, of the purposes and varieties of literacy, and therefore of the library's lot. Where do libraries and literacy belong in an age of talk radio and electronic town meetings? The analytical task is huge and complex; *Future Libraries* does not even begin to address it. In some senses the book thus focuses on symptom rather than cause, epiphenomenon rather than essence.

Future Libraries is appealingly produced: it is legible and clean, and comes complete with end-of-chapter bullets to remind distracted readers of "Points to Remember." Given the book's balance, its aggressively vocational advertising hype ("... the one book that may save your library and your job") is unfortunately demeaning. Particularly after the authors' discussion of plausible production costs for a paperback book (\$11.95 is a price approvingly cited for a full-color "tiny-folio" tome of 275 art reproductions), ALA's price tag—\$25 for some two hundred pages—gives reason for pause.

Future Libraries is trenchant, instructive, and timely. Its messages and mood are just a bit too scattered for it to serve as a satisfying Countermanifesto, though some of the pieces are certainly here. Its long-term importance is more profoundly limited by its failure to address the larger philosophical issues associated with the meaning of libraries and knowledge in our information age.—*Dan C. Hazen, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.*