

Book Reviews

Briscoe, Peter. *The Best Read Man in France: A Cautionary Tale*. Rockville, Md.: Borgo Press (an imprint of Wildside Press), 2007. 119p. \$12.95 (ISBN 1434400808).

No one would deny that the “digital turn” taken by libraries over the last twenty years has deeply transformed today’s bibliothecal landscape. However, commentators on the current library scene differ greatly in assessing the implications of this transformation for the general cultural role of libraries. Some view the increasing emphasis on provision of electronic resources as an opportunity for libraries to have a hand in shaping the course of the latest “information age,” or, at least, as a concession that they must make to a technology-driven environment if they are to remain relevant. Others fear that the shift in libraries’ focus from the printed page to the computer screen might contribute to untoward cultural consequences such as a decline in reading; loss of contact with the cultural heritage mediated by books; and, more generally, the etiolation of our sensibilities and values. Peter Briscoe, associate university librarian emeritus at the University of California, Riverside, decidedly belongs to the latter camp. He has previously voiced his unease about the increased digitization of libraries and affirmed the importance of careful reading in a handful of articles and a brief monograph entitled *Reading the Map of Knowledge: The Art of Being a Librarian* (2001). In the book under review, he presents a heartfelt critique of the digitization of libraries and defense of traditional book culture in the form of a novella embodying a “cautionary tale about the demise of the printed book, the decline of reading, and the conflict of print and digital culture.”

The novella centers on the figure of Michael Ashe, an antiquarian bookseller living in Los Angeles. Erudite,

worldly, and something of an epicure, Ashe specializes in selling rare French- and Spanish-language publications, a line of work that takes him frequently abroad to the bookshops of Paris and Mexico: a bibliophile as well as a businessman, he admires and maintains a personal collection of works by and about the great seventeenth-century French savant, bibliophile, and librarian Gabriel Naudé. As the story opens, Ashe is disconcerted by the fact that he is receiving fewer orders from customers, especially libraries. A visit to the local university library is symptomatic of this decline: its avuncular and scholarly foreign acquisitions librarian has been replaced by a young, ambitious, and technocratic up-and-comer enamored of things digital, whose mission is to shift the focus of the library’s acquisitions budget from books to electronic resources. As the business climate continues to deteriorate, Ashe receives an unexpected offer from this librarian to buy a collection of French scientific works on the Americas so that its antique tomes can serve as a cosmetic backdrop to a public ceremony celebrating a major donation to the university library for new “state-of-the-art” facilities. Despite misgivings, he agrees to sell; the ceremony succeeds splendidly; and he finds himself entering into a personal relationship with the young librarian. All goes well until Ashe learns that his new girlfriend is overseeing a project to digitize the collection that he had sold to the university library, a process that will require the permanent disbanding of some of the volumes. He must now choose between his bibliophilic principles and his relationship with a lover whose values are diametrically opposed to his own. Ashe maintains his integrity with an act of resistance that saves the collec-



tion, and, as the novella closes, we find him more committed than ever to his precarious bookselling business and in an incipient relationship with a woman who appreciates and shares his bibliophilic passions.

This simple plot serves as the framework for neatly interwoven episodic vignettes and dialogues between Ashe and other characters within which the primary themes of the novella unfold. Several episodes strongly affirm the importance of books as carriers of a deep cultural heritage that not only serve as tangible witnesses of a fascinating and instructive past, but as valuable sources for enriching our own outlooks on the world. Others assert the value of book collections and present them as extensions of their owners' personalities. Reading is extolled as a "way of knowledge" that refines our minds and cultivates our sensibilities. Indeed, books and the culture surrounding them are portrayed as a necessary component of a truly humane way of life, a point made by the warm and gracious personal relationships obtaining between the bibliophiles in the story and their appreciation of the finer things in life. By contrast, the electronic media are presented as purveyors of a shallow and mediocre culture productive of "aliterates" and "barbarians" with short attention spans and an indiscriminating desire for the latest information regardless of quality.

The tension between print and digital culture is thus presented as a battle between the forces of cultural light and darkness, with libraries serving as a key institutional player within this struggle. Briscoe's basic message seems to be that, whereas libraries have historically been the natural allies of the bibliophilic forces of light, their recent turn toward funding for digital resources to the detriment of book acquisition and preservation is turning them into abettors of the forces of darkness. He attributes this development to libraries' acquiescence to the economic power of the electronically-oriented

"information industry," which is working solely in the interests of "corporate America." As a consequence, libraries, once "cathedral[s] of knowledge" that counted preservation of the cultural records encoded in print as a cardinal point of their mission, are, in his view, abandoning a traditional core function and so betraying their own basic values.

The question of what the basic values of a librarian should be is another central theme in the novella. Briscoe adroitly handles it in a series of historical "flashbacks" vividly recounting the life and character of Ashe's hero, Gabriel Naudé (1600–1653). A scholar-librarian dubbed by the encyclopedist Pierre Bayle (1647–1706) as the "best read man in France," Naudé is today perhaps best known among librarians both as the author of *Advis pour Dresser une Bibliothèque* (1627), a classic treatise on establishing a comprehensive library that covers collection development, book organization, circulation, and dealings with patrons, and as the motive force behind the collection of some 40,000 volumes for the *Bibliothèque Mazarine*, which, at his urging, became the first library in France to be open to the public (1643). Briscoe presents Naudé as an *exemplum* of what he believes the ideal librarian should be—erudite and a lover of books; open-minded in his rejection of censorship; public-spirited in his awareness of his cultural responsibility *qua* librarian; and utterly devoted to the collection of books entrusted to his care. In elevating the life of a seventeenth-century French scholar-librarian as a heroic example to twenty-first-century readers, he is, in effect, arguing that there are perennial values of librarianship transcending any particular socio-historical context and inviting present-day librarians to ask themselves if they are living up to those ideals. This is not the only place where Briscoe holds up the past as a mirror to the present: his recounting of the dispersal of the Mazarin library in 1651 in the wake of political troubles and Naudé's desperate efforts to keep the collection intact is

clearly intended to serve as a parallel to the virtual despoiling of libraries that he believes is occurring today.

From the foregoing remarks it should be obvious that Briscoe has written a provocative novella, one that does not shrink from addressing difficult issues about the fate of books and the traditional culture-preserving role of libraries and librarians in the digital age. In many respects, *The Best Read Man in France* is too provocative for its own good: its Manichean vision of the relationship between print culture and digital culture is rather simplistic and often threatens to slide into caricature; its jeremiads about the decline of intellectual standards are overdrawn; and its polemical and elitist undertones, rather unappealing. If one reads it not as a tract for the times, but as the work of fiction that it is, one will find that, despite its somewhat uneven execution, it has much to offer—vivid and loving descriptions of different aspects of the world of antiquarian books and its denizens; a kaleidoscopic selection of interesting bibliographical and historical lore; and a sympathetic portrayal of a historically important and fascinating, yet all-too-neglected pioneer in librarianship, all contained within a story written in brisk prose that can be dispatched within a couple of hours. However, the whole is definitely less than the sum of its parts and it is unlikely that readers will find this book to be more than a brief diversion from more substantial fictional and non-fictional fare.—*Thomas Dousa, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.*

Clark, William. *Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University.* Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2006. 662p. alk. paper, \$45 (ISBN 0226109216). LC 2005-15152.

Earlier reviews have made much of Clark's opening statement, "this is an odd book." It is not. It is a difficult, frustrating, and long book, but not odd. The book first was born as a doctoral dissertation for UCLA in 1986, but has little of the stylistic

taint that typifies such productions. William Clark examined the development of the German university from the medieval period to the nineteenth century—a development that has had profound effects on the evolution of universities throughout the world and particularly in the United States.

The modern American university has been described as a nineteenth-century German university atop a seventeenth-century English college. This description is still a reasonably accurate characterization. Undergraduate education lives on the same grounds as graduate research in an uneasy relationship in which the purposes and priorities of both are antithetical. The values of undergraduate programs are education. Those of graduate programs are research.

Prior to the last quarter of the nineteenth century in the United States, students seeking education beyond the ritualized classical curriculum in American colleges had to look to Europe, and particularly to Germany, for something beyond the strict confines of Greek, Latin, and mathematics passed on to succeeding generations of students through memorization and recitation in the classroom. Through the nineteenth century, thousands of Americans went to Germany to complete their education in the German state universities and found there a new vision of learning and freedom that was impossible in the American colleges of the time. American colleges had developed a curriculum that inexorably led from the basic introductory classes to the culminating class in moral philosophy in which the president of the college demonstrated inevitably that all of human knowledge leads to whatever dogma were propounded by the protestant denomination controlling the college. Americans studying in Germany, on the other hand, found a freedom from this predictability in the skeptical inquiry promoted by the research focus of the universities.

From the beginning of the nineteenth century, criticism of the collegiate struc-