

## Book Reviews

**White, Herbert S.** *At the Crossroads: Librarians on the Information Superhighway.* Englewood, Colo.: Libraries Unlimited, 1995. 422p. \$55. (ISBN 1-56308-165-2).

It is easy to imagine the author of this volume as the exasperated, but unflagging coach of a permanently cellar-dwelling football team, shouting by turns encouragement and abuse at his players on the field, patiently explaining to them at half-time the game plan for the umpteenth time, reviewing again and again the old game films, analyzing what went wrong and why—yet all the while never giving up, never losing faith in his team. In this case, the coach is Herbert S. White, immediate past dean of the School of Library and Information Science at Indiana University and one of the best-known and most enduring figures on the library scene. The team he is coaching is the unprepossessing cadre of professional librarians. And the opponents (or “enemies,” as the author is not reluctant to call them) are all the other stakeholders in the information marketplace who value too little what librarians do but expect them to do more of it, and always with less and for less. Fifty-seven essays gleaned from White’s speeches and writings between 1982 and 1995 are collected here. They might be called, not completely unfairly, the master’s collected pep talks. Although many of his carefully reasoned and insightful analyses of specific issues are included here as well, on topics of note from resource sharing and the explosion of journal costs to personnel evaluation and bibliographic instruction, the dominant tenor of the book is not educational, but exhortative. When White is not quoting Peter Drucker (or himself), he invokes the immortal words of Pogo Possum: “We have met the enemy, and it is us.” We have to come to

grips with our own timidity, he is telling us—and then come out swinging.

Most of the essays in this volume have been reprinted with changes from his popular and polemical “White Papers” column in *Library Journal*, a fact that goes far toward explaining the overall tone of the book. However, other articles, which have been culled from White’s work as a teacher and invited lecturer across the country, are published here for the first time. Completely original are the introductions the author has penned for each of the three section headings of this book: “Librarians and Their Role,” “Librarians, Their Self-Image, and the Perceptions That Define Their Preparation,” and “Librarians in the Cruel World of Politics and Money.” These section titles seem contrived, and in no way subsume or even loosely organize the essays they contain. But how could they? It would be impossible to impose any order on these opinion pieces, essays, and analyses which cover the entire gamut of issues in our field. The uninspired title of the volume, standing in awkward contrast to the trendy and thoroughly hackneyed subtitle (*crossroads* on a *superhighway*?) also is nothing but a capitulation before the enormity of devising a single label for the whole body of eclectic thought of this great library advocate.

But wait: Is Herbert White truly a “library advocate”? He denies it, and rightly so. White is much more a *librarians’* advocate and their grassroots organizer, who sees no hope for the profession unless it asserts itself with the same single-mindedness as the American Association of Retired Persons, the tobacco industry, or the National Rifle Association—examples he explicitly invokes as models.



"We are easily seduced by 'good' causes," he writes, adding that "we are casually pressed into service on behalf of someone else's priorities," while no one, no one at all, looks out for us. This is the "cruel world" he talks about and which he rubs the noses of his readers in at every turn. We are lulled into passivity, he writes, by the "cheap praise" we attract through the "library profession's perceived role as mendicant," although this earns us "very little political leverage or professional respect." He provides stinging examples of our naiveté: In "Bailing Out the Pacific Ocean with a Teaspoon," he recounts that when Hillary Rodham Clinton graced a library conference with her presence and was enthusiastically received, nobody seemed to care that she did not talk about libraries but simply used the platform to recruit our support for her version of health care legislation. We might have offered her a trade by suggesting that in return for our support, she persuade her husband to restore program budgets for libraries. However, we did not. Perhaps librarians would consider such a suggestion rude, but it was political deals that passed NAFTA.

Later on, in "Playing Shell Games without Any Peas," he recalls how educators, our presumed allies, composed *A Nation at Risk*, "an otherwise superb political document that never acknowledged the existence, let alone the importance and role of libraries" in the national educational enterprise. Our only hope lies in the recognition that our competitors for public (and tax) support are not in the military or the space program but, instead, are the "other social programs, unpleasant and uncomfortable as that realization may be: . . . the present competition for funding among 'good' things is ferocious and it should suggest to us an insistence on hard-nosed quid pro quos in building alliances." White is an old-school liberal who believes in libraries but believes that their interests are best served when librarians aggressively represent their *own* interests, not someone

else's and not abstract "good" causes that only serve to distract them from the serious business of survival in a hostile climate. None of this will sound unfamiliar to readers of White's prodigious production of articles and books.

Why, then, purchase this book if most of its contents are easily found in widely held journals amply indexed in *Library Literature*? Perhaps the greatest single advantage of this compilation is that it brings together White's disparate writings of the past ten to fifteen years, allowing us to study White himself—a worthy subject in his own right—and to compare his thought today with that of his earlier "collected works" volume, entitled (with premature optimism, as the author now recognizes) *Librarians and the Awakening from Innocence* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1989).

In the present political climate, White's style of advocacy often seems as dated as its object, the "profession of librarianship" itself. Libraries, and especially library schools, now seek success in the public arena by distancing themselves from traditional notions of libraries and librarianship, not by returning to the core values of the profession that White so vociferously upholds. Depressing comparisons come to mind while reading this book, not with sleek lobbying SWAT teams such as the NRA but, rather, with the moribund interest groups of organized labor. It is a cold, cruel world out there indeed, and White's brand of librarian militancy seems overtaken by events and strangely out of synch with the times. Maybe if we had listened to him years ago, it would not have come to this.—Jeffrey Garrett, *Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois*.

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In "The American Scholar," Ralph Waldo Emerson criticized those who balk at the new and untried, but then he sets out the