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Book Review: Reflecting on the Future of Academic and Public Libraries

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Reflecting On The Future Of Academic And Public Libraries edited by Peter Herson and Joseph R. Matthews ALA Editions 2013 ISBN: 978-0-8389-1187-7 \$55.00 (paper)

As you read the library literature, every decade believes its budgets are stagnant, its challenges many, and its resources strained to the breaking point. A superficial reading of this book will consign it as one more Chicken Little prophet in a history of pending library disaster.

A reflective reading shows that the editors believe libraries are living in a tectonic shift in the information landscape and evolutionary selection can be seen actively at work in this landscape. This evolutionary selection works through the current trends affecting libraries; the 2008 recession, the changing desires of user communities, and the possibilities of new technology to drive, not just services and solutions, but the philosophy of what it means to be a library.

The book provides an overview of tools to navigate this changing landscape including: the use of scenario planning with five archetypes as comparison points; reviews of key writings which influence futuristic viewpoints; and reflections from prominent directors on these scenarios to spark thinking about and discussing the future of libraries.

More pages are allotted to the challenges and opportunities facing academic libraries than to those facing public libraries. Perhaps the editors feel the challenges facing public libraries are more clear-cut and the solutions less revolutionary. For example, the electronic library scenario has been seen as a necessary component of library planning at least since the publication of J.E. Rowley's *The Electronic Library* in 1998, if not earlier. Yet, the editors place the electronic library at the heart of one of the numbered scenarios for public libraries. This is a less futuristic vision when compared to a comparable scenario for academic libraries as scholarly publishers.

There was no discussion of any symbiosis between the academic and public library. The editors devote few lines to joint-use libraries despite a growing literature on this model. It would also be useful to imagine the place of both types of library in the life-cycle of the future library user. In the future, the services and environments of the public library may impact user expectations of the academic library. In turn, as more users pursue higher education, their experiences in academic libraries may influence their expectations of the public library. A symbiotic scenario is as viable as scenarios which conceptualize academic and public libraries as two distinct environments.

Despite this, this book is a good starting point for bold envisioning and is recommended reading for library managers and also for certain library stakeholders to begin generating discussion on the future of libraries in general or the future of a particular library, be it academic or public.

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