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Carley Knight

Jacksonville State University, esknight@jsu.edu

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## Four Weeks in Normandy: A Reference Librarian in France

Carley Knight

Carley Knight is the Art, Music, Language, Drama and Communication Librarian at Jacksonville State University and can be reached at [esknight@jsu.edu](mailto:esknight@jsu.edu).

In the fall of 2016, I sent off a short email to the University of Caen-Normandy requesting an informal internship in their library over the summer. It was inconceivable that I would find something so promptly, but in June of 2017 I was there. In past years I had looked to see what opportunities were available to librarians, and short of a Fulbright program I could find very little. It was at that point that I decided to try a more DIY approach. Before becoming a reference librarian at Jacksonville State University in Alabama, I studied French. As a librarian, part of my responsibility is to oversee and collect books and resources for foreign languages. I also teach beginning level French classes as an adjunct professor, and I was looking for a way to enhance my summer vacation in a meaningful way. *Savoir recevoir* is an expression meaning to give a warm welcome, and it is certainly true that *les Normands savent recevoir*. I was overwhelmed by their generosity in letting me take part in their daily library world. However, there was one unwelcome surprise upon my arrival. Caen, which is located about 20 minutes from the coast of the English Channel, is normally cooler than the rest of France. On the day we arrived the city was in the throes of a heat wave, and without air conditioning in our apartment, I could feel every bit of 90 degrees Fahrenheit. The *canicule* (heatwave) persisted for the first two weeks, and I was absolutely unprepared to the extent that I had to go out and buy clothes at the fashionable big box store, *E. LeClerc*. Unlike anything I'd ever seen, this store sold close to twenty different brands of mineral water and flavors of yogurt, as well having an in-house fishmonger and a rather extensive selection of books.

In early July, 1944, the University of Caen was destroyed in Allied bombings which took place after the D-day landings in June. The entire university had to be rebuilt and as soon as November of 1944 plans were underway. The new site was a large swathe of land to the north of the remains of the castle built by William the Conqueror and within walking distance of downtown. Henry Bernard, the architect chosen for the reconstruction, was like many modernist architects of the era. His extensive use of concrete and imposing style are reflected not only in the rebuilt campus, but also in the massive university hospital located on the outskirts of town. The university, when seen from above, could well be imagined as an assemblage of interconnected shipping containers. The expanse of outside walls feature a repetition of oblong rectangles and act as an accentuated outline for the inset windows. There is little ornamentation, except for some engraved columns. These columns which support the porticoes, connect the two rectangular halves of the building into one enormous and sprawling unit. The engravings give the appearance of line drawings etched into stone and feature various historical

figures who were prominent at the time of the founding of the university. Nicolas V, who founded the Vatican library in 1450 and Henry VI, king of France and England (1421-1471) are two notable examples. Bernard borrowed inspiration from the American or British-style of college campus by grouping the university buildings into a vast and open green space. It is not surprising that some citizens lamented the project as being too expansive. Most post-war French universities are built on the outskirts of the city and do not take up such valuable downtown real estate. (Quellien et Toulorge, 2012)

The main entrance to the library is inconspicuously located to the back left of the large main university complex. I remember following the flow of foot traffic and guessing as to where the entry was located. A well-appointed sign above the doors directed me towards the entrance. While I was there, the library was called *Bibliothèque Droit-Lettres*, or Law and Humanities Library. *Lettres* is the French expression for studies which comprise the subjects of history, philosophy, languages, and literature. It stands in contrast to *sciences*. However, if a student were to pursue a degree in *lettres* it would indicate that they studied literature. Two of the library directors I met had a background in *lettres classiques*, Latin and Greek literature as opposed to *lettres modernes*. Since my internship at Caen, the library has undergone a name change and is now known as the *Bibliothèque Pierre Sineux*, in honor of a recent, former university president.

The library's physical collection is divided into closed and open stacks. Upon entering, there is an elevator, which can be a rarity in France, or three flights of stairs which lead to the main lobby. Advancing through the security gates to the left are a bank of computers set against a window at standing height and to the right is a small selection of circulating books on modular shelving. The combination reference/circulation desk is in the middle of the main lobby directly past the entrance. It is staffed by three people, usually a combination of librarians and student workers. In surprising contrast to many American university libraries, the upper-level librarians also take shifts to cover the reference/circulation desk. I recall even seeing the director work at the reference desk which was a rather surprising revelation. In relation to job specifications, the term *polyvalent* was one I often heard. In English, it's primarily a chemistry term which describes the ability of an element to combine with another element, but its tertiary definition evokes the idea of having multiple functions or facets. This shared workflow really impressed me, and I envied the good natured and interactive teamwork I witnessed. There were two other *stagiaires* or interns, and their work seemed to be well integrated into

fulfilling the mission of the library. One intern was in charge of researching and processing a selection of bequeathed books from a former university historian, and the other was sifting through a stack of post-war gift books and searching for decorative ex-libris or bookplates. Other tasks such as basic cataloging and acquisitions were shared. There was still a head cataloger, but she was not responsible for updating authority files as well as cataloging. Her responsibilities were mainly involved with original cataloging and included the upload and description of dissertations which were submitted to the *theses.fr* database. In France doctoral students have the option to submit their dissertation or *theses* as it is called in French to the open-access database *theses.fr*. The idea of a subject-specialist was a new concept, and had not been fully integrated, but there were librarians who were responsible for certain subject areas and cataloged them if there was an attached MARC record. Shared workspaces were the norm, and I never saw a single cubicle. Most librarians either shared an office or were grouped four to five in a larger room. Oddly enough, there was an upper-level administrator working out of a converted closet. Lucky for him there was a window, and I am fairly sure that this was a temporary placement even though the extent of decoration such as posters and pictures hanging on the walls in his converted office-cum-closet indicated otherwise.

Throughout my four-week internship I was primarily working at the *Bibliothèque Droit-Lettres* which is located on the post-war main campus. I did have the occasion to visit additional libraries across campus and see how they functioned. I also made two separate presentations in French and in English on my academic library, the Houston Cole Library. Each day, I was assigned to several librarians of varying levels of responsibility, and taken around to see the mechanics of their department. On one day I would work with the public services librarians, and then on another day I would work with the technical services or the administration. I even got to work one day with the student interns and the recent library school graduates.

The University of Caen-Normandie has four main libraries: *Bibliothèque Pierre Sineux (Droit-Lettres)*, *Bibliothèque Sciences STAPS (Sciences et techniques des activités physiques)*, *Bibliothèque ESPE (Les Écoles supérieures du professorat et de l'éducation)*, and the *Bibliothèque Santé*. I was very fortunate to see every main library except for the *BU (Bibliothèque universitaire) ESPE* which was the education library. The most impressive university library that I had the opportunity to see was the *BU Santé*, the health and medical library. It opened in September 2014 and lies outside the original main campus which dates from the 1957. Its airy and open interior is ornamented with curving slats of woods that form gothic-inspired arches. There were open workspaces for collaboration as well as smaller individual spaces that could be reserved in advance. There were plans to redesign the interior of *BU Droit-Lettres*, but since the library is a classified historic building, nothing can be done to change the outward appearance.

It was refreshing to get out of Alabama for the summer and see the inner-workings of a French university library. I was shocked to see the differences and laughed to myself as I realized a lot of it was the same. There were the same oddball patrons who wanted to complain about something the library had done, but never wanted to leave. There were those little squabbles between librarians who didn't share the same point of view, but still managed to work together. Overall I could feel the same shared love and pride of working in a library. Things were in flux. The director was preparing for retirement, and the new director was waiting patiently in the wings. Before I left, I had embarked on an elaborate plan to return for a year, but was dismayed when things didn't work out. I did however learn another French expression: *la réponse de Normand*, which means "maybe yes, maybe no". Despite this, I feel driven to try again and undertake another DIY, maybe next time I will try Burgundy?

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