

***Reference reborn: Breathing new life into public services librarianship.* Santa Barbara, Calif: Libraries Unlimited, 2011. 401 pp. Ed. by Diane Zabel. ISBN 9781591588283.**

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There isn't a librarian out there who is absolutely certain what the future of libraries looks like. And there is no library service that invokes more uncertainty than reference. As a free service where anyone can get help with just about any question, library reference is unlike anything else in our society. As such, it presents unique challenges and possibilities for both librarians and administrators.

This volume of 25 essays attempts to address these challenges and possibilities by examining reference from almost every angle. Written by both new and seasoned librarians, these essays highlight issues in both academic and public libraries and would be insightful for any librarian who interacts with the public. The volume is organized in a way that makes it easy to consult based on the needs of the reader and does not necessarily need to be read cover-to-cover. Students and new librarians will find a fairly comprehensive, informative and, at times, inspiring snapshot of reference librarianship as it exists today and examples of trends that will likely shape its future.

What is readily apparent in this collection is that reference is in no way "dying out" (Carlson, 2007). What is even more apparent is that the traditional librarian-behind-the desk service model is being re-imagined by many libraries in ways that better meet the needs of users. Additionally, these new roles and service models are not a threat to the venerable institution of reference but are a way to ensure its value, and thereby its survival, in a world where many of the variables have changed. Many libraries have acted on this and have helped facilitate a sort of "Reference Renaissance" (a term coined by the volume's editor, Diane Zabel, in a 2007 editorial published in *Reference and User Services Quarterly*) that has renewed interest in how reference can be re-conceived rather than abandoned.

As evidenced by the diversity of its essays, the volume defines the concept of "reference" broadly and contains quite a number of pieces that deal more generally with the changing roles of librarians. "The Embedded Academic Librarian" by Sharpless Smith and Sutton is one example. The authors describe embedded academic librarians as those who go beyond the activities of reference and instruction to "position themselves as full partners in the academic enterprise." Additionally, Smith and Sutton point out that in tough economic times it is essential to consider where a librarian's time is best spent and question whether staffing the reference desk full time is the most effective way to meet users' needs.

Several essays address the fact that the current recession intensifies the need to be creative with service provision, especially with reduced staff and resources. Librarians have proven themselves to be very adaptable, despite previous characterizations to the contrary, and have been taking on diverse job duties for years. Several articles address the skills and knowledge librarians need for responsibilities taken on in addition to reference including instruction, marketing and outreach, collection development, web design, assessment, keeping up with trends

in technology, and scanning the environment to better adapt to change. While the book is most relevant to librarians who interact with the public, many of the articles would be of interest to anyone working in libraries today.

Another theme found within the work is the need for librarians to continue to meet users at their point of need. In the chapter, “Going Beyond the Desk: 21st Century Reference, Outreach and Teaching Services,” authors McKeigne and Blake state that librarians “leave the library to help sustain its place at the heart of the university.” Whether it is out in the stacks, at the student union, within the classroom, or through a social networking site, reference encounters are increasingly occurring in places other than the reference desk. Librarians that have been successful in “breathing new life” into reference have increased their personal contact with patrons even while the number of ready reference transactions has gone down (Zabel, 2007). By exploring different service models for reference desk staffing, embedding oneself in academic departments and elsewhere, using social networking tools for reference and outreach, providing reference services virtually and within virtual worlds like Second Life, the authors who have contributed to this work offer new and exciting examples of what can work if librarians and their institutions get creative with what constitutes “reference.”

In the not-so-distant past, librarians have been characterized as inflexible and stubbornly traditional in their approach to reference (Carlson, 2007). This volume shows that this characterization needs to be discarded like an old computer manual. Librarians have proven themselves to be adaptable and innovative and are capitalizing on what has always set reference apart—excellent public service. While this book does not offer the magic bullet that its title seems to promise, it does provide in one accessible volume a collection of articles that, together, paint an optimistic and realistic picture of what reference services look like today as well as possibilities for the future.

Zabel, D. (January 1, 2007). A Reference Renaissance. *Reference and User Services Quarterly*, 47(2). Retrieved from <http://rusa.metapress.com/content/mh694732220k1387/>

Carlson, S. (April 1, 2007). Are Reference Desks Dying Out? *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 53 (33). Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/article/Are-Reference-Desks-Dying-Out-/20976>