

2010

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## Recommended Citation

"A Series of Fortunate Events: Becoming an Academic Librarian." CMW Journal Vol. 2, No. 2. March 15, 2010.  
<http://www.mennonitewriting.org/journal/2/2/>.

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# CMW Journal

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## A Series of Fortunate Events: Becoming an Academic Librarian



Marta Brunner

I didn't set out to be an academic librarian. In fact, one might say that the option was often literally staring me in the face, but it never occurred to me to consider librarianship as a career. Only through a series of fortunate events did I end up in what I think is my perfect job.

Why do I like academic librarianship so much? I get to teach, I get to do research, I get to write, I get to buy books and scholarly resources. I get to bring order to apparent chaos. I get to work with people in all parts of the library and from other campus units on a variety of projects—no day is like the previous one. And I get to be of service, both in terms of helping serve students' and scholars' immediate research needs and in the activist sense of agitating to make the world a better place.

Being an English major was pretty inevitable for me. Early on in life, my writing skills received praise from my teachers and parents, and I read a lot. What seldom felt inevitable was a career. Throughout high school and college, I heard that English majors can do anything after they graduate. So while I knew that teaching was probably the most common career for English majors, I never felt like I was on a career track as an English major.

My life after college was a series of short-term jobs, none of which felt like a potential career. Either I burned out, as with ESL teaching, or I felt underutilized, as with my many office jobs. Consequently, eight years after completing my bachelor's degree, I ended up in graduate school, on the assumption that an advanced degree would surely open up more satisfying career possibilities. Ironically, though, graduate school actually seemed to narrow all my career possibilities to a single, inevitable track, rather than keeping the ones I had open--never mind opening up new ones for me. In other words, I heard that English majors with advanced degrees are good for only one thing: tenure-track faculty jobs.

I approached graduate school the way I had often approached writing projects up to that point: I didn't have a clear idea of what I wanted to say but I trusted that something good would take shape. Somewhat naively, I enrolled in a graduate program in rhetoric and composition. I say "naively" because the program accepted me at the Master's level rather than into the Ph.D. track and made no offer of funding support. I still wasn't sure what I would do with an advanced degree, but I just assumed that there were jobs out there that I didn't know about yet.

I recall attending an online discussion about the job market for rhetoric and composition Ph.D. holders during my first year. As a veteran teacher but novice grad student, I asked, "What jobs are out there besides teaching?" The response felt like a slap: "Why are you in a doctoral program if you're not going to go the faculty route?" The implication seemed to be: "Move out of the way so that someone else can have your spot." One semester into the program I realized that I desperately needed funding besides student loans.

Within a couple of semesters, I began what would be a very long string of graduate teaching appointments, starting in the composition program. So here I was, teaching again. I really enjoyed it, even felt energized by it. I especially loved meeting with students one-on-one to help them tackle a research topic or plan effective structure for their written arguments. Nevertheless, composition

instruction still didn't feel like something I could sustain over the long haul.

Although I did get accepted to the Ph.D. track in my rhetoric and composition program, I eventually switched programs in order to do more interdisciplinary work, entering the History of Consciousness program at University of California, Santa Cruz. Throughout my doctoral work at Santa Cruz, I assumed that I would eventually get a tenure-track job in an English or history department at a college or university somewhere. I felt increasingly confident that I would be a good teacher and scholar, and I really looked forward to getting a faculty appointment.

Still, I had moments of doubt. At the time, I chalked up my misgivings to the inevitable self-doubt that humanities graduate work tends to impose: How could I ever become expert enough in my field to become a respected scholar? But on a much more fundamental level, I still wasn't convinced that a tenure-track job was what I wanted for the rest of my life

In the midst of all this, there were hints that librarianship might be for me. I lived with a librarian during part of my doctoral program. In the aftermath of 9/11, I heard firsthand from her of the steps Santa Cruz public librarians took to protect privacy and intellectual freedom in face of the Patriot Act. I started picking librarians out of very large crowds, such as one anti-war march in San Francisco. It wasn't hard to spot them bearing "Books Not Bombs" signs or "Just another librarian against the war" t-shirts. It became apparent to me that librarianship was not limited to serving the pleasure reading or research needs of the populace. In a sense, librarians seemed to be out to change the world, and that appealed to me.

After I passed the qualifying exam for my doctorate, I moved with my husband to Chicago, where he was entering his own doctoral program. This private institution restricted borrowing privileges to enrolled students, faculty and staff only, so I was faced with the dilemma of completing dissertation research without a library card of my own or of having my husband check out all the books I needed on his account. I applied to a variety of campus positions in the hopes that a job would come with borrowing privileges.

Before long, I was a part-time library assistant in the bookstacks department of the university's library. Since my main impetus for getting this job had been the borrowing privileges and the money, I didn't expect much from the job besides a modest paycheck. So my first day took me by surprise: It was ridiculously satisfying to see bins jumbled full of books get transformed into orderly rows and sent, cart by cart, to the stacks for reshelving. It produced the same geeky, giddy feeling I had gotten when I visited my husband's apartment for the first time when we started dating. His bookshelves were lined with neatly labeled binders for every class he had taken or taught.

For the most part, my library assistant job was to create training materials for student workers who checked in and shelved books, but my supervisor also encouraged me to learn all I wanted to about the work of the library. For example, the serials cataloger would sit me down in a mother hen sort of way and show me how she fixed problem records, or the monograph processor would explain why a particular problem happened over and over again, or a preservation librarian would give me rules of thumb for evaluating the conservation needs of a particular book.

The idea that librarianship might be a career option began to sink in. People seemed to be enjoying their jobs. I asked a couple of library staff members who had advanced subject degrees how they got to be where they were now, and they were encouraging, but I didn't see how I could get a librarian job unless I attended library school. The thought of two more years of graduate school on top of the eight I was still paying for emotionally and financially made me cringe.

One day, I arrived at work to find the printout of an email on my desk. My supervisor's boss, someone with whom I had only occasional contact, had printed it out on the off-chance that I had not come across it myself. That email was a call for applications to the Council on Library and Information

Resources (CLIR) Postdoctoral Fellowship in Scholarly Information for Humanists, then entering its third year. What are the odds, I gasped! They want people with humanities Ph.D.s to work in academic libraries and learn librarianship! Could there be anything more perfect for me? Within six months or so, I had been interviewed and accepted to be a fellow at UCLA and was busy relocating my family to the West Coast.

The appointment was for one year with the possibility of a second, so I still didn't know whether I was embarking upon a career. However, at the "boot camp" at Bryn Mawr College preceding the postdoctoral fellowship, I immediately knew that this is where I belonged. Sitting at a conference table with my new cohort during this orientation seminar and talking about academic libraries, I had so much to say, which took me by surprise.

We talked about the research needs of humanities scholars. We talked about access to pedagogical resources. We talked about intellectual property and libraries as physical space. We interrogated Library of Congress subject headings and the politics of organizing knowledge. We talked about access to knowledge and the growing fight to promote open access to scholarly publishing. We talked about what it might mean to be a scholar-librarian. In eight years of grad school, I had seldom felt so thoroughly immersed in and invigorated by a seminar discussion. I was unequivocally in the right place.

From the moment that my postdoctoral fellowship began, the fortunate events sprouted like flowers along a path. An early event was my stumbling upon a fellowship project, which would involve digitizing oral histories. One of the pleasures of being a library postdoc was that I got to call people on campus and ask to have coffee with them just to find out what they do. I called the head of the Center for Oral History Research, a unit in the library in which I worked, and soon met with her. In the course of our discussion, I realized that the Center held a number of oral histories that would have been great primary sources for my own dissertation research and, sheepishly, I wondered aloud why I had never come across them in my research.

She reached to her bookshelf and handed me the finding aid to the oral history collections—a blue hardbound book. "Unless you know a particular person is in our collection and you look it up in the library's catalog or an archive database, you probably wouldn't know we had their oral history." I thought to myself, "I need a fellowship project—the Center needs an effective online presence to raise the visibility of its collections." When I proposed the project she said it was perfect timing: The Center was just in the process of trying to move into the digital realm but had not achieved much forward momentum yet. A pilot project was just what they needed.

The next fortunate event came when it was time to renew my fellowship for a second year. During my first year, when I was not managing my digital projects, I had been learning collection development from my mentor here in the UCLA library. I learned how to write collection development policies, select and purchase resources for discipline-specific collections, and manage the life cycle of existing collections. By now, I was pretty convinced that I wanted to become a subject specialist librarian. I was sure that this was the career for me. For someone with my background, this conviction was both startling and reassuring. Thanks to an upcoming retirement, what I got instead of a second fellowship year was a job offer to become librarian for English and comparative literature. In another year, my mentor retired and I was also the librarian for U.S. and British history, as well as the digital humanities.

Part of my job as a subject specialist librarian was to sit on the Scholarly Communication Steering Committee. I had actually started sitting in on this group when I was still a postdoctoral fellow. Scholarly communication is basically the production and circulation of knowledge and information—scholarship—throughout the academy. Scholarship involves formal scholarly publications like books and journal articles, as well as conference talks, classroom lectures, emails and blog postings, and even informal conversations over coffee. I became particularly attuned to the issue of open access: the question of who, if anyone, gets to control the flow of scholarship by limiting access to particular

(usually paying) sets of users. Predictably, scholarly communication and, especially, open access issues appealed to the activist side of me, so I tried to keep abreast of the developing open access movement within academia.

One day, I happened to write a blog posting about a new open access publisher called the Open Humanities Press (OHP). This scholar-led press had just been launched with a roster of electronic journals, and I wanted people in UCLA's English and Comparative Literature departments to know about it. Soon, one of OHP's co-founders contacted me to thank me for my interest and to invite me to join a discussion list about open access publishing for scholarly monographs in the humanities. I guess I wore my enthusiasm on my sleeve because soon I was invited to join the OHP steering group.

I was starting my fourth year at the UCLA Library this past fall when my boss invited me to step into a leadership role as head of my department, a position that has been filled by interim appointments for as long as I have been there. My jaw dropped. "Why?" I stammered in shock. I really wasn't sure that I was up for the responsibility. I was just starting to feel as if I knew what I was doing, and I loved my new work with OHP and with a digital humanities steering group on campus. I was afraid that a management position would require me to drop those involvements. I was also thinking that he had the wrong librarian: After all, I had not taken a very traditional route to my job. I didn't even hold a library degree.

"Actually," he reassured me, "your background and your work with OHP and the digital humanities are some of the very reasons I want you for this job." Before long, I warmed sufficiently to the idea and accepted his offer. I became Head of the Collections, Research, and Instructional Services unit in the Charles E. Young Research Library at UCLA.

Now only a few months into my new job, I am still figuring out what I am doing. I continue to develop history and literature collections, to teach library instruction sessions, and to take a regular shift at the Reference Desk. I am still heavily involved in digital humanities and open access scholarly publishing. Now, I also chart the future for this department. During the first month as head, I met with each team member in order to get up to speed on their work, their needs, their ongoing issues, their goals, and so on, and to figure out what direction I wanted to take our group. These individual meetings have, unexpectedly, filled me with hope and optimism.

This department has been through a lot of wrenching change in the past five or six years—not to mention the astonishing budget cuts this year—and has had sagging morale to show for it. I expected these individual meetings to be more angst-ridden than they have proven to be. Certainly folks have been sharing difficulties and raising issues that need to be addressed, but I feel unexpectedly up to the task, even excited to take on these challenges. Where did that come from? I have no formal management or supervisory training. I know that even after the economy recovers, there will not be enough money anytime soon in this California institution to fund anyone's vision of the good old days. There is a lot of new ground from here on out, and I am definitely okay with that.

When I first drafted this essay, I was going to say that the biggest change in my job duties is the explosion of meetings that I must attend regularly. I now think that the most significant shift is the amount of problem-solving I am called upon to do on a daily basis. Some problems can be solved with a quick decision or delegation of responsibility. Other problems chart the course for long-term projects. In the weeks between when I first accepted this position and when it was finally announced to the library, I lost sleep over the question of whether I wanted this problem-solving responsibility. I feared that poor decisions on my part would expose me as an amateur or dabbler—that it would prove that I had experience in lots of things but real expertise in very little.

Upon reflection, I see that nearly every bit of my varied resume has been brought to bear in this job. Even my pre-graduate school job in a federal government building management office—one of those temp agency jobs that seemed about as far from academia as I had ever been—has come in handy now

that our library is undergoing a major remodeling project. My brief stint as an accountant for an Episcopalian parish helps me wrap my head around the complexities of managing funds in the library.

Getting to this point has been a series of fortunate events, in part because I didn't plan on each step ahead of time, but mostly because it turns out that I am a better academic librarian for having pursued all my scholarly training, teaching gigs and non-academic desk jobs rather than going straight into library school right after college. My story is about finding a middle ground between the extremes of "an English major is good for everything" and "successful English majors go to graduate school and become English professors." The former extreme encouraged me to explore at the same time that I was preparing for the latter extreme until another career option presented itself. My humanistic education allowed me to go out and collect all of this experience, to encounter and become fluent in multiple literacies, and then go back in and apply this experience to the one task to which I have now devoted my life.

This education only began with my English degree, a major which allowed me to really branch out. Being an English major prepared me not just to spot a good career opportunity but to take advantage of it, to make the most of it, and, best of all, to have a hand in shaping it.

## About the Author



**Marta Brunner**, of Culver City, California, is Head of Collections, Research and Instructional Services at the Charles E. Young Research Library at UCLA. A graduate of Goshen College, where her poetry was published by Pinchpenny Press, she earned an M.A. in Rhetoric, Composition and the Teaching of English at the University of Arizona and a PhD in the History of Consciousness from the University of California, Santa Cruz. Essays by her on W.E.B. Dubois and on academic libraries have appeared in print anthologies. She calls herself an "other-degreed" librarian and dedicates her CMW essay to "Pete and Gordon for taking this journey with me."

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