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A Look at Libraries: Don't Touch

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DON'T TOUCH

The Tech World of Books

By Cory Wade

Will High-Tech Fever Work Against Literacy?

Although fewer than half a dozen campuses in the United States have chosen such an extreme path, Santa Clara University has recently dismantled its conventional library system and replaced it with an ARM, or Automated Retrieval Mechanism. Despite strongly-voiced objections from faculty, staff, and students, the University elected to close the stacks, thus permanently precluding the fruitful and enjoyable option of browsing.

Under the high-tech format, prospective borrowers will request specific titles to be retrieved from the closed corridors by an automaton. Instead of a library where visitors see and physically handle the books, Santa Clara University will provide a robotic arm programmed to locate items by barcode number. Readers will never enter the area where the books physically reside. They will therefore never experience the delight of removing from the shelf a volume whose contents—and very existence—were unknown to them until they walked among the stacks.

With the ARM system, neither borrowers nor staff members will enter the domain of the books. Only the robotic arm will remove the volumes from their compressed housing. The eerie isolation of books from humans might,

sadly, serve as a metaphor for the nightmarish consequences of inverted priorities.

What could be the rationale for the adoption of such a high-tech plan on a Jesuit campus where contemplative, humanistic values have traditionally been fostered? During the debate surrounding the ARM, one argument which was offered in support of robot retrieval was that “warehousing books” had become too expensive. Is the use of the word *warehouse* in any way synonymous with *library*? Will literacy improve with a facility where people can never explore the shelves directly? Will students read more as a result of having to fill out a card every time they want to examine a book?

As a concerned academician in Silicon Valley, I would gladly send you via conventional mail an excellent library book about the hazards of high-tech seduction. Unfortunately, the title which I had in mind could not be found by the ARM: the volume had slipped to the floor, and the robotic eye could not see it lying there, a few inches out of the range of view.

Perhaps we have become a little myopic. Perhaps it is time to rethink, not reboot. Perhaps we need a new pantheon.

Perhaps we need to unplug. ■

Cory Wade teaches the history of the English language, medieval literature and ancient culture at Santa Clara University.

Common Readings – Jesuit Colleges and Universities

*All are 2005 unless otherwise noted.
Source: Institution web sites.*

Boston College

The Odyssey, Homer (Honors Program) (2001)

College of the Holy Cross

The Book of Job, (transl. Raymond Scheindlin) (2004-05)

Wit, Margaret Edson

All Quiet on the Western Front, Erich Remarque

At the Mind's Limits, Jean Amery

The Hangman's Knot, Eliza Steelwater

Year of Wonders, Geraldine Brooks

The Dialogue Between Voltaire & Rousseau,

Russell R. Dynes

Becoming Human, Jean Vanier

The Death of Ivan Ilych, Leo Tolstoy

Fairfield University

Dead Man Walking, Helen Prejean

Fordham University

Oresteia, Aeschylus

Georgetown University

The Map of Love, Ahdaf Soueif

John Carroll University

Mountains Beyond Mountains, Tracy Kidder

Evolution, Carl Zimmer

Fast Food Nation, Eric Schlosser

LeMoyne College

Heroic Leadership, Chris Lowney

Loyola College Maryland

Galileo's Daughter, Dava Sobel

Loyola Marymount University

Partly Cloudy Patriot, Sarah Vowell

Loyola University Chicago

The Travels of a T-Shirt in the Global Economy, (2006)

Pietra Rivoli

Loyola University New Orleans

Nickel and Dime, Barbara Ehrenreich

Marquette University

A Lesson Before Dying, Ernest Gaines

Hunger, Lan Samantha Chang (fall, 2006)

Saint Joseph's University

Riding the Bus With My Sister, Rachel Simon

Mountains Beyond Mountains, Tracy Kidder

Saint Louis University

Napoleon's Buttons, Jay Burreson & Penny Le Couteur

Santa Clara University

The Piano Lesson, August Wilson

University of San Francisco

The Kite Runner, Khaled Hosseini