
All that David Copperfield kind of c * * p



Pat Noon
University Librarian
Lanchester Library,
Coventry University
(Retired December 2008)

The problem with being canvassed to write an article for a publication is that the vanity of liking the sight of your own voice immediately overcomes the very practical countervailing consideration of 'What on earth am I going to write about?' It is the dilemma that clearly faces so many of our journalists who are called 'feature writers'. In order to earn their living and maintain their semi-idyllic lifestyle of working from home for a few hours each week for a truckload of money, every week they have to come up with another feature that is at once witty and thought-provoking, or – in the case of some tabloids – witty and offensive. You can see when they have been struggling with their muse because you are subjected to 250 words on changing the baby's nappy or 'how unbelievably incompetent my bloke is at changing the tap washer', but then this may be marginally more entertaining than the months of increasingly bitter reflections on how my husband/wife left me for the au pair/personal trainer/salsa dance tutor. But I digress and was only making a point, a rather laboured point, that once asked I had to come up with a subject suitable for an audience of academic librarians, which means trying to be simultaneously engaging and witty whilst including challenging references to Web 2.0 and open archive repositories. If that is your expectation then you can avoid disappointment by skipping the rest of this article.

I should start by explaining the odd and slightly scatological title, although the very literary amongst you will instantly recognise it as a quotation from the opening sentence of J.D. Salinger's famous novel *The Catcher in the Rye*. At least it was famous in the 60s when I was a student and actually read it. I can't be bothered explaining the plot of *The Catcher in the Rye*, partly because it isn't relevant to anything I have to say but mostly because I can't remember it. Judging by the

increasingly young and fresh-faced delegates to SCONUL Conference, however, I perhaps ought to explain that the 60s was a brief golden age of innocence, love and mind-altering drugs that appeared all too briefly between the extinction of the dinosaurs and the emergence of more modern but equally terrifying creatures such as computer networks, the sports utility vehicle and Margaret Thatcher.

Anyway, to make any sense at all I ought to explain the reason for the quote. The full version of it goes like this:

'If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to hear is when I was born and what my lousy childhood was like and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it ... the stuff bores me.'

The phrase 'all that David Copperfield crap' was the very first thing that sprung to mind when I was asked to make an after-dinner speech to a CoFHE (Colleges of Further and Higher Education Group of CILIP) conference some time ago and to talk about 'my life and how I got to be where I am today'. When I was asked to do something for *SCONUL Focus* the editor liked the sound of this, especially as I could do it as I was about to retire – which is indeed about to happen so that speech has been 'extensively revised with much new original material', as the marketing people might say.

If I was a politician or an actor an invitation to talk about 'my life and how I got to be where I am today' would be irresistible and I would be off on an unstoppable stream of self-regarding little anecdotes full of well-known celebrities and exotic locations. Sadly my life is less David Copperfield and more a male version of *Bridget Jones's Diary* or Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events*: libraries generally don't – and my life in particular doesn't – provide quite the same scope for blatant name-dropping and outrageous vanity as the lives of the rich and famous. (Although frankly some of the sad and dreary lives that pass for celebrity in reality TV shows nowadays make my life seem positively glamorous.) Exotic locations I can do: I have been fortunate enough to go to very many overseas locations as part of my job and amongst other wonderful things I have had dinner at the top of the KL Tower in Kuala Lumpur (then the second tallest building in the world), seen the Maharajah's Palace in Mysore and walked on the Great Wall of China. But I've

only met a couple of so-called celebrities. I met Princess Anne but only for about half an hour when she opened our new library. She didn't say a lot. The Royals aren't encouraged to say a lot as it only leads to questions in Parliament, but she was good-humoured and good value and even laughed at some of my jokes (which may have involved the inappropriate use of rude words for comic effect). Still, she was like a cheerleader on amphetamines compared with the Shanghai Minister of Education, whom I met on a visit to China and who only spoke through an interpreter. He had no small talk and even less of a sense of humour, but as I was the leader of our delegation, protocol dictated that I had to talk to him and he would only talk to me for three hours, which seemed to last as long as Lent. Whilst the rest of our party were alternating between offering up silent prayers of thanks for being spared my ordeal and revelling gleefully in schadenfreude I was slowly losing the will to live and desperately hoping for someone to come and inject me with novocaine to make it all stop.

Still my career hasn't always been as wonderful as that and I must concentrate on the achievements and love for my chosen profession, and avoid at all costs allowing this to dissolve into a wine-soaked tirade about what a waste my life has been, where did it all go wrong, and what's the point of libraries anyway now that that evil genius Dr Google has achieved world domination over the information universe.

So if I am going to talk about my life I should start at the beginning. I am one of these really sad people who always wanted to be a librarian. I didn't back into it as a second-best option because I failed the medical for the SAS or end up in my career by accident because I walked into the Library Association mistaking it for the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, or even – as in the case of one of my colleagues – because she liked the shoes librarians wore! (They were Scholl's sandals, apparently, and she was at an impressionable age!)

I say 'sad' because I am not sure how many of you actually wanted to be a librarian, as distinct from finding that it was better than all the alternatives indolent or indifferent careers advisers gave you when you filled out the questionnaire and said you liked reading and had a weakness for tweed skirts. I don't think 'librarian' is up there with iconic career aspirations like train-driver, astronaut, doctor or barrister and I just can't believe that, even in some bizarre parallel universe, there

is a moving scene as you tell your Mam and Dad what you want to do when you grow up and they choke back the tears and sob, 'He wants to be a librarian just like his mother and granddad. By heck I'm so proud!'

When I say I always wanted to be a librarian that's not strictly true. What I really wanted to be when I was much younger was a postman. And before you start, this was decades before that annoying children's programme with the black and white cat. Now I know that sounds a bit weird in 2008, especially to those of you who had youthful ambitions to be management consultants, systems analysts, lawyers or hedge-fund managers but, being a working-class lad, where I came from any job that didn't involve 45 years down the nearest coal mine was considered pretty posh and therefore a damn good prospect. In my village there were only two kinds of men: there were miners and there were retired miners. My Dad, who contracted silicosis down the pit and had to leave before it killed him, was determined I wasn't going anywhere near the pit so he was thrilled with the idea of me becoming a postman. You got a uniform, your own transport – well, a bike – and a steady if unspectacular wage. In fact if you squinted really hard it was almost a civil-service job, being part of a government body with a pension and all that! Unfortunately I won a scholarship to the local grammar school, where they send all the working-class kids who are too clever for secondary modern and where as fast as the teachers are trying to make the most of that little bit of cleverness the majority of kids who are middle-class are busily trying to kick all the cleverness out of you. Not physically, I hasten to add, but out of you nonetheless, so the announcement in careers lessons that I wanted to be a postman might have sounded pretty good to my dad but actually would just mark me out as a loser of Wall Street Crash proportions.

So I wasn't going to be a postman and I had no intention of being a teacher, which was the usual route that we were encouraged to take at the grammar school. The thinking was that we were never going to get into university, being working-class and from an area of the country with one of the highest indexes of multiple deprivation. We might just scrape into the second division that was teacher-training college. But I had seen what kids did to teachers, which was why I liked the idea of the bike and the uniform, so I had to find an alternative. And then it happened, in one of those serendipity moments, as I was browsing one lunchtime in the careers library – as you did when

you couldn't get a game of football because you were considered crap at it and you couldn't go home because the school bully had thrown your bike onto the gymnasium roof. I came across a small unprepossessing pamphlet from the Library Association extolling the virtues of a being a scholarly librarian in a research library, complete with full-colour pictures of leather-topped tables and row after row of elegantly bound volumes and not an obnoxious student in sight – in fact no readers at all, as far as I could see. This was great. I decided there and then just what I had been looking for to take my mind off the bike and the uniform. I was smitten; this was the life for me and I wasted no time in writing to the famous Ridgmount St address at the bottom of the leaflet asking for details of how I could enlist and take Bodley's shilling. I say 'writing', and of course I did in those days with a real pen on proper notepaper and in my very best handwriting, because there were no word processors then or email. My huge bubble of enthusiasm was only slightly deflated when a few days later I received a small brown envelope, clearly from the LA, addressed to Miss P. H. Wood – clearly my very best handwriting was not very good. Being mistaken for someone called Wood I could just about cope with, but it was the 'Miss' bit that hurt: not only was I at a sensitive age but it showed that even the LA were not immune from institutionalised stereotyping, believing that the applicant must be a demure young lady rather than the beer-swilling football-playing bloke who actually wanted to become a librarian.

It was the kind of antidote to self-delusion that I have come across several times in my life: they either keep your feet on the ground or drag your confidence into the gutter. The most wounding one was when I used to play football as goal-keeper for the local pub team, when it has to be said I did carry a little weight. After a poor display on Leicester's Humberstone Park I was strolling disconsolately to the dressing rooms when a couple of young kids came up to me and said, 'Eh, are you the goalie?', the bright yellow jersey being a bit of a giveaway. 'Yes', I replied, suddenly brightening up at this unexpected recognition. 'Oh', he said; '... you're fat for a goalie.'

But I am digressing once again.

The one slight drawback with my newfound career was that I needed a degree, since this was the very early days of 'a graduate profession'. Bear in mind my comments earlier that our chances of getting a place at university were even

slimmer than Russell Brand's trouser legs. This would have been a problem had the government not just introduced these wonderful things called 'polytechnics', designed to attract people too clever to be postmen but not clever enough to be doctors. So off I went to Portsmouth Polytechnic where they had places left on a joint History and English Literature degree for people who had astounded everyone by getting good 'A' level grades.

My experience of libraries and librarians at polytechnic and later was frankly a little dispiriting. The library I was confronted with for my degree was a far cry from that elegant and refined research library in the careers library leaflet. The government might have invented polytechnics but they hadn't given them any money and my library looked exactly what it was: a converted army drill hall with shelves round the walls and an ocean of utilitarian and painfully uncomfortable exam desks and chairs across the rest of the floor. The library had all the atmosphere and charm of a deserted Scout hut.

In my earliest library job after graduating, as a library assistant at Leicester Polytechnic's Architecture and Building Library, my illusions were further eroded. Because of course a degree wasn't enough; you also had to get a postgrad qualification and to do that you had to have at least a year's work experience. I am amazed that anyone stays the assault course that is our professional qualification process. Compare it with my original aspirations to become a postman. There it would have been just a question of 'Here's your hat, here's your bike, these are letters and this is a letterbox. Off you go!'

At least the Architecture and Building Library and the other libraries on campus looked like real libraries instead of Dutch barns with bookshelves. But I was thoroughly unimpressed by what I saw of some of the senior staff and their apparent status within the college. The unprepossessing Chief Librarian, as they were called then, was not at all my idea of a person in such an important role. He put me in mind most of Churchill's description of Clement Atlee as a 'modest man with much to be modest about'. Worse, if we were to believe all we were told by longer-serving colleagues, he was a rather toxic combination of the amoral ruthlessness of Machiavelli and the charmless incompetence of Mr Bean. He was held in contempt by all the other senior staff who formed what would have been his management team if they had ever got round to doing any managing

instead of engaging in character assassination of the boss and bickering and point-scoring amongst themselves. Instead of being at the heart of some learned research institute as I had fondly imagined, it was like walking into some institutional dysfunctional family or slipping into a particularly bad episode of *EastEnders*.

My faith in libraries as a career was eventually restored, however. If my library experiences to date had been disappointing, my experience at St Katherine's College in Liverpool where I did my library school placement was everything that I had hoped for. It was managed by a gentlemanly and avuncular librarian complete with cord jacket (and possibly even a pipe, but perhaps I just imagined that through my rose-tinted spectacles) and a group of wonderful assistants who were very receptive to this short fat hairy bloke that had been deposited on them. It was an oasis of the kind of pleasant erudition and charm that not even the staff common room could spoil. It was full of those dreadful chairs you always got in common rooms in the 60s and 70s that looked like they had come from the set of *The Belles of St Trinian's* or *Carry on Doctor* and were designed in a style best described as Albanian austerity chic.

Early on in my placement I was asked what I made of the library profession, as a potential newcomer. Being the usual clever sod not long out of university, and reflecting on my experiences as a student and at Leicester, I said that I felt that the status of the librarian seemed to have declined to an alarmingly sad level. In the early days of higher education, I said, from a knowledge-base so slender it could slip under a tightly fitting door, the librarian was an important enough figure to be allowed to parade just behind the Vice-Chancellor at formal university processions. Nowadays, I pontificated, it seems that the librarian is lucky to be lining up behind the tea lady. It got a cheap laugh and although I didn't quite imply I was going to sort this out, I think that was the general impression I must have made. Well, I am delighted to say that in the last few degree processions in the wonderful Coventry Cathedral I did indeed line up sitting on the front row right next to the VC and processed out right behind her. I don't think too many people noticed that I had to elbow a couple of honorary graduates out of the way and trip up the Lord Mayor of Coventry to get there.

But I am getting ahead of myself. I spent two years as a library assistant, as I have said, and then spent an entertaining if uneventful year at

library school in Liverpool. (I think 'uneventful' might be a euphemism for 'unconscious', as we had discovered that by shuffling between three different venues you could actually drink all afternoon, decades before licensing laws were liberalised to allow this everywhere.) Then I returned to Leicester Polytechnic, more by inertia than good judgement, with the intention of spending the two years I needed to achieve my goal of chartered status there and then move on to something different and hopefully better. When the something different and better finally came along, in the form of the post of Deputy Librarian at Staffordshire University, it was three jobs, a wife, two kids, several cats, a house, a load of debts and 15 years later.

I am still not entirely sure how the journey from Assistant Librarian (Periodicals) at Leicester Polytechnic ended up as University Librarian at Coventry. One of our Deans at Coventry once said that presumably we had all got to where we were because we were ambitious, but I don't think that was true in my case. In the early part of my career I wasn't at all ambitious. It was sufficient to be in a secure, professional job, with pay not bad compared to some of my friends, and working with colleagues who were mainly good company as well as professional colleagues – and, I like to think, for the most part also friends. In this pleasant environment I was able bit by bit to get over the obsession with the bike and the uniform, but only just!

I even began to learn useful lessons about managing people and projects from one of the few honourable exceptions to my previous comments about dysfunctional managers. I began slowly to realise that life as a jobbing librarian, even when enriched by a very fulfilling role as an active trade unionist, was not sufficient to provide long-term satisfaction. I suppose that if there are reasons why I got to where I am today they are less to do with ambition and more to do with a belief gradually dawning over several years that perhaps I could do a bloody sight better than some of the managers under whom I had worked, and I resolved to do something about it. It is only much later, when you are sitting on the lonely and wind-swept pinnacle that is senior management, that you realise what a powerful and dangerous delusion this is. But in my blissful naivety I persisted, blagging my way into a more senior role and onto a part-time MBA. Individually and together these proved liberating experiences that only served to reinforce the delusion that perhaps I could do better and so, on completion of my

MBA, and after 17 years in Leicester, I started looking for new opportunities.

My time at Staffordshire University (née Polytechnic) is best described in the context of how I came to apply for my current job. How I got to my present job is fairly simple. I had never intended to look for a University Librarian post as I was thoroughly enjoying my job as Deputy Librarian, which I got at least partly on the back of that MBA and which remains the job where I most enjoyed getting up for work. I was in no hurry to leave because the Deputy's job is brilliant. You have loads of responsibility and power; you can kick as many backsides as you like, devise and build great plans and strategies and strut around passing yourself off as a very important person, but there is always someone above you to carry the can if, as is inevitable, you cock it up. You also have someone to blame if staff start criticising you because your grand plans have even less chance of success than a Norfolk ski resort. And I also had an excellent working relationship with my boss, who of course had no idea that I was blaming him for everything from the poorly planned refurbishments I was supposed to be responsible for to the fact that Port Vale had lost again on Saturday. So it was a bit of a shock when the boss came running into my office, almost tripping over himself in his eagerness, waving a job advert for the Coventry job and said, 'This is a job for you!' It was said in the kind of tone that suggested that he was very keen to see the back of me – and that perhaps he wasn't quite as ignorant as I imagined of how much I was blaming him for, whilst still wearing my best Teflon suit – and this was his calmly plotted response. I have always thought of it as a very postmodern way of getting rid of me without the unpleasantness of actually sacking someone: a sort of deconstructive dismissal!

Coventry was clearly going to be a challenge. It was the first job that I had inherited from someone with an intimidating reputation as a highly respected librarian. I knew this because even before I started at a social event on a visit I was welcomed by a charming but no-nonsense professor who informed me that they were proud of their excellent library. There are some who would say that I can on occasion be prone to paranoia, but I am quite sure that behind the charming smile his eyes said, '... so we don't want some cocky new upstart messing it up!'

After almost 16 years at Coventry others will have to decide whether or not I have indeed messed it up but in my defence I can point to a newish

library building about which people still say nice things, at least in my hearing, to excellent student-satisfaction ratings and reasonably happy staff, according to our most recent staff-satisfaction survey. I also like to think that the library is still as highly regarded as it was when I inherited it. On the other hand, the things I haven't achieved include operating for 20-odd years as a manager without establishing performance indicators anywhere I have worked, never really grasping the finer points of AACR or MARC and still breaking out in a cold sweat when I remember my embarrassment at asking in HMV if they stocked the latest Dublin Core record!! I can't boast the national achievements of some of our contemporary colleagues who have bestrode the profession, as I too have much to be modest about, but I was pleased to be involved in developing the current suite of management courses that will help in our succession planning for the future, and to have been involved in the creation of MLA (Museums, Libraries and Archives) West Midlands at least, only for government ineptitude to induce spontaneous combustion – but at least we get to see synchronised swimming and water ballet at the London Olympics. If these don't leave an actual mark they may at least leave a faint if fading trail to mark my passage.

What has sustained me as a manager, though, for more than 20 years is a passionate belief in people and customers and a few simple management principles that I learned early on from the managers I respected and from my MBA and which I have developed through experience as the years have progressed. If you will indulge me just once more, I shall share those with you to end this article: partly so that the article will have at least some lasting value to the new generations of librarians who are forced to pick up the pieces from all the wreckage I have left behind and partly in a final desperate attempt to drum up consultancy opportunities.

Rule 1

All good managers have to have a vision, but not too many visions, otherwise you will be tested for psychotropic drugs or acute personality disorder and devoutly religious people will start making pilgrimages to your house.

Rule 2

Surround yourself with brilliant, able people who can help you realise your vision but make sure you watch your back or you will end up like Trotsky, ousted by your protégé, exiled to some

banana republic and never recovering from that splitting headache.

Rule 3

Have a good self-image and be honest about your abilities but not too honest. There are always plenty of colleagues who can list your faults at the drop of an appraisal without you owning up to all the ones they have missed.

Rule 4

Remember that people really are your most valuable asset and they respond best to care, affection and sympathetic treatment. Unfortunately they are also venal, irrational, unpredictable and often psychotic, so getting value from those assets is really tough. If after awhile they don't respond to the sympathetic approach make their lives miserable so they have to leave.

Rule 5

Listen and be sympathetic to all and any of your staff and all of their concerns, no matter how trivial they may appear to you. There is no easy rule to help you decide how much time you should spend listening. When your ears start to bleed you have probably done enough listening for one day, or you have inadvertently let in one of your cataloguers who is sharing their views on how to fully revise the Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules.

If *their* ears start bleeding it is probably best if you stop banging their head on your office door quite so violently.

Rule 6

To justify all this time, of course, listening has to be active listening, showing that you are actively engaging with the concerns of your staff. The effect is completely ruined if you realise that despite the conversation starting with Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules, for the last five minutes in your mind you have been drinking a wonderful chilled beer in a quiet bar in Barcelona.

And that's about the sum total of my wisdom after a career of more than 35 years. I don't know where those years have gone; all I know is my daughters have migrated from absolutely dying if they don't get that pair of Fairy Princess Primrose shoes to absolutely dying if I don't help with the deposit on the house or the Peugeot 206. You will have to ask my colleagues whether I am indeed better than those old librarians were or whether, as I increasingly suspect, I am slowly evolving into exactly that same kind of old inept librarian

whom everyone used to treat with such contempt at the start of my career. You can bet that somewhere out there is an aspiring and resentful former colleague of mine drafting an article that one day they hope to see published in *SCONUL Focus* about his or her career in which they make cheap disparaging comments about the old fart they used to work for who had the charm of Machiavelli and the ruthlessness of Mr Bean. But I won't mind – it will give me something to read in that bar in Barcelona, where I understand they are looking for postmen.