

BOOK REVIEWS

INTRODUCTION TO PUBLIC LIBRARIANSHIP, by Kathleen de la Peña McCook New York: Neal-Schuman, 2004

reviewed by Mark Hudson

The scholarly and practical literature on public libraries and librarianship is extensive, but for many years now there has been no adequate single-volume introduction to the field. Kathleen de la Peña McCook's *Introduction to Public Librarianship* not only provides a readable introductory textbook for library students and experienced practitioners alike, but does so in a way that challenges us to think beyond narrow institutional concerns and objectives and ground librarianship in our commitment to cultural democracy and social justice.

A library educator at the University of South Florida, McCook is perhaps best known as the author of *A Place at the Table: Participating in Community Building* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2000), and the vision of public libraries as community-building institutions is a central theme of this book as well. By functioning as a commons where community voices can come together in authentic dialogue, by developing current collections of titles for the general reader, and by providing readers' advisory and reference/information services, libraries sustain and enhance the public sphere without which grassroots democracy cannot survive and flourish. McCook rightly emphasizes the need for librarians to develop a "philosophical and sociological" understanding of reading and book culture if we want to shape balanced collections that promote "introspection and understanding" and thus enhance the public sphere (p. 192). For the poor in particular, the "power of reading to change lives through cultivation of the public sphere in libraries is mighty" (p. 193). Through reading and the reflection it

engenders, poor and other working-class people excluded from the dialogue of the commons have the power to enter and transform that dialogue and the public sphere itself.

The book opens with an extremely thorough review of the history of public libraries in the United States, which covers not only the emergence and development of public libraries but also the efforts of public librarians to shape that development through organized activity in the American Library Association, state library associations, and state and federal library agencies. The achievement of a national voice and message over the course of the twentieth century enabled public library leaders to establish standards, facilitate local planning and expand access to library services nationwide, although the goal of equal access for all has yet to be realized. McCook identifies the “overarching issues that librarians used to shape public policy” (p. 70) as lifelong learning and literacy, libraries as the cornerstone of democracy, and the defense of intellectual freedom. She traces the shift in public library philosophy regarding collection development and intellectual freedom between the First World War, when librarians willingly participated in censorship and book banning, and the years following the Second World War, when they responded to new threats “with a renewed commitment to fight censorship activities” (p. 74). Thus, the public library “gradually made a transition from an agent of social stability to one that supported all points of view” (p. 73), and “adherence to the ideals of intellectual freedom . . . has come to define the core of the profession’s ethical stance” (p.72).

Subsequent chapters on the organization, administration and staffing, and structure and infrastructure of public libraries are equally comprehensive and bolstered with detailed statistics and numerous primary documents. Even when discussing library management and administration, McCook never loses sight of her commitment to social justice, and she writes sympathetically about unions for library workers and the ALA Better Salaries project initiated by 2002-2003 ALA President Mitch Freedman (p. 158). She is similarly unequivocal about the unfulfilled promise of equal access and service for all, insisting that serving poor and culturally different communities “requires a commitment by librarians for social justice and equity” and that librarians “must consider all aspects of the human condition” (p. 202). This is a radically humanist and transformative librarianship that goes well beyond the abstract

commitment to intellectual freedom practiced by the mainstream of the profession, because it recognizes that intellectual freedom is a vacant ideal for people who lack the resources to use it.

The book is thoroughly indexed and referenced, and the lengthy bibliographies of books, articles, websites and statistical reports will make it an invaluable resource for librarians and library educators developing collections and curricula in the field of public librarianship. It deserves to be read and reread by every library student and practicing public librarian, and it will almost certainly be the standard introductory text in the field for many years to come.