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Zine Scene at Multnomah County Library: An Interview with Emily-Jane Dawson

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Zine Scene at Multnomah County Library:

An Interview with Emily-Jane Dawson

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and

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"Look: somebody made this, a person just like you, you can totally do it, it's not scary. And you can be empowered." That's part of what zines are about ...

Lamenting the death of print is nothing new in the library world, but recently the chorus of voices anxiously rising includes *The New York Times* and *Newsweek*. Credit the sustainability fad, the Kindle, or even Web 2.0: the people's hot new thing is the same thorn in the side that libraries and publishing companies have sweated over for years.

Enter Multnomah County Library's zine collection. Zines are a cultural phenomenon that cannot be ignored when debating the death of print. Of course, zines were made from paper and ink at their inception, because those were the most accessible materials to use for self-publishing. What is striking about zines now, in the context of this 'print is dead' debate, is that even in the digital age, zine-makers new and old can be found using a ink, paper, and a photocopier. I stopped by Multnomah County Library to speak with zine librarian Emily-Jane Dawson about Multnomah County Library's fantastic zine collection and zines in the digital age. Audio clips are provided for your listening pleasure as you read our conversation.

Sandra: Zine collections are a fairly recent development for public/academic libraries when compared with the advent of zine libraries and infoshops. Do you think this proves that print will always be alive and well?

Emily-Jane: Well, I feel like I have to talk a little bit about this collection in the context of this community. We established a zine collection at Multnomah County Library because there is such an active community of people in the Portland area who are creating zines, sharing them with each other, and building a whole culture. That was very vibrant before we ever had a zine in the library, and one of the things we were hoping to do was to make the library more accurately reflect the literary and cultural activity in the community.

At the same time, a lot of zines have either subject material that is difficult to find in other resources or they have an unusual perspective that is difficult to find in other resources, so the zine collection is an amazing short cut to enriching the whole library collection. Because that culture is so important in Portland and because it touches many other pieces of Portland's life, I would say yes, I think print will always be alive because what people are doing is creating something and they don't have a commercial focus, they don't have a business plan, they are not about making a profit from what they are doing. In a way, you could say it is pure art—they are creating an object of cultural expression that they have a desire to share with other people, and then to use the act of sharing to create more culture, to inspire more pieces of art. I think that is something that people just do—it is an essential element of humanness. The library facilitates that in a lot of other ways and this is just a different aspect, a different facet on the gemstone.

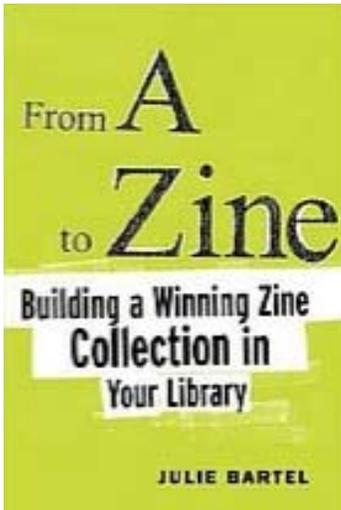
Click here to listen to the first audio clip

http://www.ohsu.edu/library/videos/olaq2010spring/morgan_interview_question_1.mp3

S: With so many articles floating around about libraries getting rid of books and going increasingly digital, how do you advocate for such a lo-fi collection?

E: In a way, you could say the zine collection is really cheap because the items are really cheap. In our particular case, you could also say that the





As the title indicates, this slim book covers everything library staff would need to know to set up a zine collection: collection development, cataloging and promotion, as well as the history of zines and the role they may play in supporting intellectual freedom.

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OCLC: 55036842

way we handle zines is expensive because we catalog them. All of that cataloging is original cataloging done by our amazing staff of catalogers who are awesome ... I do think this collection has the potential to inspire in a way other collections don't. Just a couple weeks ago, I had a call from a grade school teacher; she works at a school where second graders and sixth graders are teamed up together and one day a month they do projects together.

Each second grader has a sixth grade mentor and they do different projects. They came to the library and one of the things they wanted to do was to see the zine collection, partly because the sixth grade class is working on a class zine. These kids were excited to see that not only do we have stuff that they could imagine a person actually making, but some of the zines were actually made by kids and we were able to point that out to them; the way their faces light up is irreplaceable. I don't normally spend a lot of time working with children in my professional life, and it is kind of astonishing to me to have that experience every once in a while.

I think that type of story is very compelling, and not just to library administration, or management, or staff, or other people in the library community, but to someone in the community of Multnomah County. Also, we have events where authors come and read from their zines, though sometimes it is more like a "reading" in quotes because the content is largely visual. Those events are amazing because these are people who just in their own time have made some creation. We give them the space to share that and it is officially sanctioned- we are an organization with weight and meaning. We are very lucky in this community that the library is respected and well used. That is common in the state of Oregon and I think that part of that connection that people have is what makes it seem even more exciting when we offer a space for someone who is an important creator of culture in our community. Those events are always inspiring, and the age range is from babies to seniors.

Click here to listen to the second audio clip

http://www.ohsu.edu/library/videos/olaq2010spring/morgan_interview_question_2.mp3

S: I've published a few zines and that is the greatest thing to make something and then to hold it in your hand or see it at the library and think, wow I made that and now it is at the library. That's the best feeling.

E: Also, the zine collection has content that can not be found elsewhere. Some of it is controversial content, here's a nice example, the zine *Alien Boy*, about James Chasse who was arrested and beaten and later died. He was a person living with mental illness and he also did a lot of zines himself. It has been a while since he died but when it does come up it is controversial and there is not a single item even remotely like this, about this man or this story, in the library's collection. It is the sort of thing that in a few years you can imagine someone doing a research paper on, and this would be a very different resource than if you were to look at articles in the newspaper. It has people's memories, his friends' stories and those are very hard to get when you are doing research without a personal relationship.

S: I just want to say that I love the zine collection at Multnomah County Library. I especially love the zine trading box.



E: That's great. The zine trading box was the idea of someone on the zine committee, Christopher Cuttone, he works at the North Portland library branch. One day he said, "People are always giving us stuff, like a sample, to see if we would like to buy their zines, but we can't buy everything." It's not like we throw them away, we would send them to other libraries or used bookstores. But we thought it would be nice if we had some way to distribute people's zines outside of our cataloged items. It has been pretty successful actually. I was surprised; I didn't think anyone was going to notice it.

Click here to listen to the third audio clip

http://www.ohsu.edu/library/videos/olaq2010spring/morgan_interview_questions_3_and_4.mp3

S: Would the library consider adding e-zines to their collection?

E: I don't think there are any plans to do that now. I think there are a few cases where a zine is available in electronic format, and we have the print item. We have a link to the electronic version that is available on the web in our catalog. That is the only time that I can imagine that it would seem super relevant. Part of the reason is cataloging and processing, where we spend the most money on items, but another reason is this collection is really intended to be a reflection of the zine culture in the Portland area and to kind of be a player in that cultural stream. It is easier for us to do that with physical items than it is to do with abstractions like a PDF zine that has not been printed.

For example, we might have a table at an event doing outreach, in the past we have had a table at the Fix-it Fair that the city of Portland sponsors and there are a lot of zines about how to fix stuff and make stuff, like we have a zine about building a greywater system. The librarians who are going to the Fix-It Fair will have books and other materials from the library and one of the things they will usually bring is zines. It is easy for a person to see, "This is relevant to what I am interested in" or "This answers my questions" and it gives the librarians a chance to say, "Look: somebody made this, a person just like you, you can totally do it, it's not scary. And you can be empowered." That's part of what zines are about as well, and so I think that sort of use is more what we are hoping.

S: One of my questions is about digitizing zines and creating a searchable index because I've seen that a lot, these discussions of should we or shouldn't we? Does it provide information, like you were saying, that you can't find anywhere else? Should we have these zines available for some guy in Japan that wants to know about grey water? What's your opinion on that? I know the library can't do it but in general ...

E: I think that it has a lot of potential utility. QZAP, a queer zine archive has a collection that is largely digitized and that is very valuable resource, but part of the reason why is because it has a really tight focus. It has zines by queer people about the queer experience, related to queer culture and that is a whole area of literature that is challenging to discover. It is hard to find those materials, and people in smaller towns will have a really hard time trying to find materials that cover those topics. So, QZAP does provide access to a wide range



of materials that people otherwise would never be able to get, and so that seems like it's really valuable and an asset to a lot of communities.

I think it would have to be focused like that to be truly useful at this point, unless it was a massive undertaking like the Wikipedia of zine archives where you could fully expect to find anything you were looking for. But I don't really see how you're going to get that, because the reason that we got Wikipedia is that anyone could chime in with any information large or small and it's easy to do, which would not be true with zine archiving. If you were going to do it in a way that made any sense, you would have to have a lot of standards for scanning the item, providing access points, etcetera. I think that makes it a lot more challenging.

I went to library school in the late nineties and there was a huge amount of excitement at my library school about the World Wide Web. There was a lot of talk about cataloging the web and archiving the web and trying to figure out-how are we going to do that? It just seemed like this impossible thing and very challenging; I think we still feel like that ten years later. I fully expect that some brilliant person, or some group of brilliant people are going to come along in ten or twenty or thirty years and they are going to have better technology, a fresher perspective, and a lot of energy and they are going to come up with some ways to manage that information and make it more accessible, more stable than it is now. I think there will be a lot of things like that, changes that will come in the future as people have better technology and more creative ideas for managing the problems that exist. I think it is always going to be a challenge to take all those streams and direct people to what they want.

Click here to listen to the fourth audio clip

http://www.ohsu.edu/library/videos/olaq2010spring/morgan_interview_questions_5_and_6.mp3

Noteworthy Zine Collections in U.S. Libraries

Multnomah County Library	http://www.multcolib.org/
Independent Publishing Resource	http://www.iprc.org/
Fales Library, New York University	http://www.nyu.edu/library/bobst/research/fales/
Salt Lake City Public Library	http://www.slcppl.lib.ut.us/index.jsp
San Francisco Public Library	http://sfpl.org
Ypsilanti District Library (Ypsilanti, Michigan)	http://www.ypsilibrary.org/
Barnard College Library	http://barnard.edu/library/zines/
DePaul University Library	http://library.depaul.edu/Collections/resourceList.aspx?202
New York State Library	http://www.nysl.nysed.gov/
Duke University (Sarah Dyer Collection)	http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/rbmscl/sarahdyercollection/inv/
San Diego State University Library	http://www.iprc.org/



S: Would you ever discontinue use of the zine collection?

E: Well, we don't plan to. I don't think there is anything that is going to replace the zine collection, not anything I can see on the horizon. It seems like as long as people are making these things and as long as there is still an active community here, we will still be adding them. As long as the ones we have are still useful and still getting checked out then we will keep them. This collection gets a respectable amount of use. It isn't the highest turnover, that would be the DVDs, but as long as that continues and there continues to be an active community I think that we will continue to have it even if we stop adding to the collection.

S: There is no point where you say, "Ok, well this is becoming too much."

E: I don't see a horizon where I can imagine it is not going to be important to people to be able to create zines, to be able to distribute them, to be able to read them- I don't see that coming. Part of the reason why is that the library has a collection, and the Independent Publishing Resource Center is here [in Portland], and they have an amazing zine collection in their library; they also do an enormous amount of supporting zine-makers in their work. They have classes on various things, they have workshop space, they do outreach in the community. There are other organizations in the community that do similar work that may not be creating zines literally, but have the same kind of drive for individual creative expression. Frankly, there are teachers, there will always be teachers, and teachers will always inspire their students. That is not ever going to stop so I think we will have a future for a while.

S: I hope so.

E: I hope so too. It's a while until I can retire, and I would like to be doing this for a long time.

Click here to listen to the last audio clip

http://www.ohsu.edu/library/videos/olaq2010spring/morgan_interview_conclusion.mp3



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Zine. (2010, February 22). In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved February 12, 2010, from: <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Zine&oldid=345669812>

