

# The Selling Of the Library

## Baltimore County System Challenges Assumptions About Library's Role

by Kenneth C. Davis

**T**HE two women have just come from the supermarket two doors down. They stand in front of shelves filled with the latest novels and best selling non-fiction, offering suggestions to each other. One woman picks out "Evergreen," "Chesapeake" and Lauren Bacall's memoirs; her friend chooses "Mommie Dearest," "War and Remembrance" and "Ghost Story." Arms loaded, they head for the checkout desk and hand their cards to the woman at the counter. But these aren't credit cards. They're library cards. And the women are just two of the many people who have made quick visits to one of Baltimore County's popular "minilibraries."

A stranger who is unaware of the revolution taking place in the Baltimore County Public Library (BCPL) system might be startled to find a library branch nestled between a



Baltimore County's first mini library

hardware outlet and an ice-cream parlor in a busy suburban shopping mall. Filled with bright, illuminated fixtures, dumps heavy with the latest romances, shelves stacked with best sellers and paperbacks, this library has no card catalogue, reference section or study areas—nothing to hint that it is anything other than a typical bookstore in a desirable, high-traffic location.

Placing these "mini libraries" in shopping malls is an innovation traceable to Charles Robinson, director of the BCPL. In the traditionally hushed world of librarians, Robinson is currently making a lot of noise. His message: "The public pays for the library, so the public should get what it wants."

For the BCPL that has meant adopting a policy of col-

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lecting materials that most patrons want and use rather than stockpiling an array of materials that librarians feel their patrons "should" read. It has also meant guaranteeing the availability of books as soon after publication as possible and having enough copies to satisfy demand immediately.

If success can be measured in terms of circulation figures, the philosophy of giving the people what they want is working. Baltimore County—which is bordered by Chesapeake Bay and on the map resembles a fist clenching Baltimore but not encompassing the city proper—contains some 700,000 people. Yet the county library's circulation figures rank fourth in the nation after Los Angeles, Los Angeles County and New York, and highest in the country per capita.

Robinson conceives of the library in untraditional terms. "Because of the high cost of books, we are largely a public, cooperative bookstore. We aren't preserving knowledge for the ages. That function is supported by the public through state universities. Why should we duplicate their effort?" (There are two state four-year colleges and two state junior colleges in the county.)

When Robinson decided three years ago that the BCPL should move in the "demand-oriented, public bookstore" direction, he and his staff began studying merchandising techniques used by bookstores. The first lesson was learned from the national bookstore chains. "We asked ourselves why such an important and time-consuming job as buying books had to be done by professionals at every single library branch," recalls Robinson. "Then we imitated the chains and moved to central book selection."

Previously, book selection cost one day per week for librarians from each of BCPL's individual branches. Under the new system, all new titles and editions for the library's 18 branches and three minis are selected by a staff of three at the system's central office in Towson, Md., with input from an advisory group from the branches. Orders for replacement copies are submitted by the branches to the central selection office, which then reviews the requests and processes the orders if necessary.

An aggressive, able and sharp-tongued administrator, Robinson hardly fits most people's image of the benign, placid librarian. "There are two things wrong with librarians," he says. "They don't think about where their money comes from so they don't spend enough on books and then they buy the wrong books." The "wrong" books, he thinks, are those that librarians have learned are "good," "worthwhile" or "important," without ever considering whether the public will request them. "Librarians can't bear to pass up that English poetry of the mid-19th century. Why?" asks Robinson, his voice dripping sarcasm. "Because they're building a collection in that area or they liked poetry in school. And who gets cheated? The hundreds of taxpayers waiting to read 'Chesapeake.'"

Under the new selection process, the BCPL tries to assure readers of best sellers that they won't have to wait months on a long list of "reserve" applicants for the books they want today. And how does a library stay in tune with public taste? In much the same way bookstores do—by keeping up with advertising budgets, media events and hype. Says one librarian who is a convert to Robinson's thinking, "The quality of the item is unimportant relative to its publicity and the number of people who ask for it."

An immediate result of the centralized selection system has been a reduction in the number of titles purchased by the library. Whereas BCPL used to buy 15,000 titles annually, it has cut that figure to 7000. "I suspect we could get that figure down to 3000," says Robinson, "and that's still a lot of titles." Among the first victims are unpublicized first novels.

The library has also instituted a tough policy of weeding out books that don't circulate enough; with the long-range goal in mind of reducing the volume of little-used materials



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At far left: activity inside the mini library at Wellwood; left: BCPL director Charles Robinson (l.) with his second-in-command Eliot Shelkrot

to 5% of the total holdings by 1982. At the BCPL, a book has to earn its keep.

Last year, 19% of the collection was weeded, while 17% (comprising new books and replacement copies) was acquired, for a net reduction of 2%. Books weeded from the library are first offered for sale at discounted prices. Then they are sold either by the ton as waste paper or to Lescron Enterprises, a New York company that then resells them.

Meanwhile, library circulation has risen dramatically. Eliot Shelkrot, the BCPL's second-in-command, tells *PW*, "We learned that the more books we eliminate, the higher our circulation goes. People want to be able to find the books that are new and interesting. They don't like crowded shelves. Still, there's virtually no subject we don't have information on."

And just what gets eliminated?

Circulation figures are the determining factor. A new computer system has begun to keep tabs and will aid branch librarians in deciding which titles should be thrown out.

Those numbers could have a disturbing impact, as revealed by a story Shelkrot tells about the search for a librarian to fill a vacancy in one of the branches. "One of the questions we asked was, 'If "The Odyssey" doesn't circulate, what will you do with it?' If the applicant answered, 'But it's a classic, you must keep it in the collection,' we couldn't hire that person." Shelkrot laughs as he tells the story, but he is only half joking.

Despite budget cuts and a reduction in the number of titles purchased in 1978, the BCPL actually has increased the number of books it acquired by increasing its purchases of paperbacks. Last year the budget for buying paperbacks was doubled, to more than \$200,000. Robinson laughs scornfully when he hears that trade paperbacks are published in hardcover "for the library market. Frankly, I would prefer it if the whole industry went to the trade paperback tomorrow."

Not only are paperbacks cheaper, but also, Shelkrot notes, library users' attitudes toward them have changed. Formerly, the paperback was viewed as "trashy" or second-rate, and many people thought paperbacks were abridgements. Now, says Shelkrot, the paperback generation has come of age: "Paperbacks attract public attention more than hardcovers."

A tireless cost-cutter, Robinson is always looking for ways to spend more of his budget on books. He likes paperbacks because they give him "more circulations per dollar." He scrutinizes invoices with almost Scroogelike vigilance, and when a shipment of books comes in billed at net, he screams bloody murder and sees to it that he gets his

discount. Not long ago, he began to send his own truck to the Baker & Taylor warehouse once a week to save on freight costs.

Having made the move to central selection and increased purchases of paperbacks and best sellers (the library bought more than 700 copies of "Chesapeake," only in part because of its regional appeal), Robinson and colleagues went back for another look at bookstore merchandising. They saw attractive display units that highlighted books and asked, "Why not?" Shopping around, they selected shelving from Display Fixtures, a bookstore supplier in North Carolina, and found the units not only more attractive than traditional library shelving, but less expensive as well.

After consulting with Vincent Agnifilo, director of library sales for New York wholesaler Bookazine, the library also brought in "point-of-purchase" displays and dumps to be placed by checkout counters, bringing the library's merchandising efforts to full stride.

Faced with an expanding population and growing demand for library services, Robinson next hit upon the mini-library concept, which he managed to sell to the county executive by agreeing to staff the minis with volunteers. The first mini was set up in a newly constructed shopping mall in Jacksonville, Md. With approximately 1000 sq. ft. (monthly rent: \$5.50 per sq. ft.), the library is outfitted with the Display Fixture wall units and eight chest-high, free-standing bookcases. Bright and neatly kept, the "store" contains approximately 80% paperbacks and is staffed by volunteers supported by a part-time clerk.

A middle-class community, Jacksonville was apparently well suited to the mini-library concept. In its first month the mini library circulated 15,000 items. In the first year, Robinson reports, 170,000 items were circulated from this small space—a very healthy figure in library circles.

A second mini represented a more ambitious social experiment. Unable to find a vacant commercial space, the BCPL set up a prefabricated hexagonal building in Edgemere, an area largely populated by low-income blacks and senior citizens. Of it Robinson says, "If anybody opened a bookstore there, they would be crazy. Theoretically, nobody reads there." Yet the Edgemere mini now circulates 3000 items each month and will probably check out 50,000 items in the first year. In Robinson's view, those are dramatic figures.

The three minis (a fourth is planned for Owings Mills) are serving a variety of functions. Although they do not offer complete library services, they are equipped with micro-readers that list the BCPL's holdings—catalogued by title, author and subject—and with a free information hotline



## Some Selling in the Library

To keep libraries solvent in the era of Proposition 13, one proposal would have them go into the bookselling business.

A leading advocate of this idea is California publisher William Kaufmann. Two years ago, in an article in *Harper's Weekly*, Kaufmann wrote:

"By blending the best features of modern bookstores and the booksellers' merchandising know-how with the professional librarians' standards, taste and high degree of awareness of local community needs, libraries can provide a multitude of new book outlets that will make a dramatic contribution to American life. And, in an era when it is increasingly difficult to get tax dollars to keep libraries open, they can make some money for themselves."

Kaufmann's idea is now being tested in a limited way in the San Francisco Public Library, where orders will shortly be accepted for "California Water Atlas," an in-depth analysis of the state's politically and economically crucial water supply. Prepared by the California Governor's Office of Planning and Research, the \$37.50 volume is being distributed by William Kaufmann, Inc., principally through bookstores and direct mail.

John Frantz of the San Francisco Public Library proposed to Kaufmann that the library be used as a sales outlet for the water atlas because the book is a state document aimed at a rather select audience that "average bookstores would be unlikely to invest the time or space to serve." Under the agreement Frantz and Kaufmann reached, "California Water Atlas" will be displayed at the entrance to San Francisco Public's central branch; library personnel will take orders for the book and forward them to Kaufmann, which will then dropship the book to the customer (at the customer's expense); Kaufmann will give the library 25% commission on each sale.

"California Water Atlas" is not the first book the library has offered for sale. Recently, 30 copies of the Norton facsimile "Shakespeare" were sold in conjunction with a Shakespeare exhibit held at the library. And other books of local interest have been available through the efforts of a nonprofit group called Friends of the Library.

Frantz admits that profits realized from book sales will hardly fill the gaps in California library budgets, but he agrees with Kaufmann that bookselling has a place in the public library and speaks open-mindedly about selling other books in the future, although he would limit their range to small press books, items of local interest, poetry, drama and backlist titles that are not "routine trade stuff." K.D.

that is tied into the information services desk at one of the main branches and offers patrons access to reference information. A system of interlibrary loans can provide any book in the system in a matter of a few days.

Robinson says that minis take the pressure off the full-service libraries, freeing more time for programming and reference assistance. They also relieve pressure applied by politicians for complete library services where population doesn't warrant them.

But the minis—and Robinson's ideas in general—also raise some disturbing questions, principally having to do with the effect on bookstores. At first glance, it would seem that making large quantities of best sellers and other popu-

lar books available at no direct cost to the public in consumer-oriented shopping centers would create competition for bookstores.

Two schools of thought seem to clash here. The first says there are book buyers and book borrowers and never the twain shall meet; this notion suggests that book outlets stimulate interest in books, creating a symbiotic relationship between library and bookstore.

But Robinson says, "If libraries are run the way they should be, they would create serious competition for bookstores." And Shelkrot agrees: "We have certain goals that can be described as competitive."

One local competitor is Melvin Gordon, owner of Gordon's Books, a well-established chain of six stores in the Baltimore area. Gordon told *PW* he is not concerned as long as the library doesn't sell books ("It would be asinine to start screaming about libraries. They've been around for hundreds of years") and that the library might benefit him by discouraging other bookstores from opening. Gordon also revealed, however, that he had been negotiating for a space in a mall in Wellwood, Md.—a space that became the location of the BCPL's third mini.

The most recently opened mini, this one may prove the most successful. Situated in an existing shopping center in affluent Wellwood, it checked out 12,000 items of the 15,000 in stock within its first week and a half of existence. Robinson notes that the turnover (the average number of times a single volume is circulated) at Wellwood is between eight and 10. By comparison, the national turnover rate in libraries is less than one. Yet there is nothing unusual in the demographics of Baltimore County—statistically "average" in income, education and other social factors—to explain the high rate of library use. Charles Robinson believes it is simply the natural response to his philosophy of giving the people what they want.

But is everybody happy? Apparently not. Robinson and Shelkrot admit some resistance on the part of both the staff and the community to the dumps, displays and weeding policy. But Robinson notes that his staff has adjusted easily to such innovations as microfilm and computers. He says they are generally young, enthusiastic and interested in responding to the public. And librarians from around the country have begun to contact Robinson with requests for information.

Of the public, Shelkrot says, "Many people see our policies as cheapening the libraries—making them too much like the local drugstores. But it's really an enhancement of services, and the majority of our patrons have responded favorably."

One who would be hard pressed to agree is the woman who fired off an angry letter to a local newspaper. She reported going to the system's Reistertown branch (a full-service branch, not a mini), only to find a stack of favorite poetry books on sale at 75¢ each. When she learned that the books were placed on sale to make room for books that were in greater demand, she surveyed the shelves and found mostly romances, Gothics, mysteries and media tie-ins. "No one," she complained, "now risks stumbling across a book of poems that might unexpectedly hook him into the delights of literature. . . . Buy more Gothics, buy more trash. People like it. Especially if that's all they ever see."

Shelkrot defends the system. "Relative to other libraries, we don't offer some alternatives. But our surveys show we have 92% of the books requested."

Robinson is even more adamant. "I have other goals. I want to get people to read—it is a civilizing influence," he says. "But the way to get them to read is to get them exactly what they want. Even if it means comic books." With a note of indignation rising in his voice, he adds, "I'd rather have some kid reading comic books than nothing at all. And that's what we have in this country, a lot of nothing-at-allers." □