

AJL 2013
Life Membership Award
Acceptance Speech
Joan Biella

Thank you, Heidi, friend and collaborator through thick and thin on many projects in Judaica and Hebraica cataloging.

And thanks to all of you, collaborators and (I hope!) beneficiaries of these projects—NACO, BIBCO, the Heb-NACO electronic list for Hebraica catalogers, years of e-mail correspondence on cataloging topics, occasional training sessions at the Library of Congress and on your own turfs, and regular get-togethers at AJL to “touch base” on these issues.

In the quarter-century I have worked with you, we have, I think, become a much closer body of colleagues, turning to one another in hours of trouble and solving mutual problems together to our mutual benefit. Thank you for welcoming me into your institutions and maybe even your hearts. When our association began, there was for the first time in history a policy in effect called “putting a human face on the Library of Congress”—I tried to do that with you, and though it sometimes seems that the policy is no longer in effect (series decision, anyone?), we’ve quietly kept it up behind closed meeting-room doors.

C.S. Lewis, the beloved children’s author and scholar of English literature, once compared himself to a dinosaur because he faced a society in which the methods and subjects to which he had devoted his life were no longer valued. We can say the same to some extent about my own career as a cataloger and teacher of cataloging—not that cataloging is dead or even dying, but it’s certainly undergoing sometimes violent upheavals and finding itself lower and lower on the budget food chain in most places. (Multiply those thoughts by ten or a hundred for cataloging in squiggly languages.)

At my institution, for example, retiring catalogers are no longer replaced, and the famous Sequestration has finally forced managers to restrict even the number of resources acquired—which may have the effect of lowering the number of items waiting in the backlog for an ever-declining staff of catalogers to find time for them. And as for upheavals, well, there is RDA.

When I first began to catalog, the AACR2 cataloging rules had just appeared, and I did my best to learn all about them. I’m a person who likes to be told what to do, and AACR2 performed that service for me. I once asked my first trainer, a very experienced cataloger, if the answers to all cataloging problems could really be found in the rules of AACR2—something which I thought pretty doubtful—and he replied YES. When I finally became an experienced cataloger myself about twenty years later, I found that I agreed with him. And then there was that wonderful tool

for recording cataloging data in both roman and Hebrew script called RLIN. I loved RLIN! I became quite knowledgeable about it. For a while I was considered quite the expert and even had some travel paid for so I could teach these things around the country and in foreign lands.

And now I ask you, where are the snows of yesteryear? Where is RLIN? Where is AACR2? Where is Joan? DINOSAUR!!

There was a brief moment of excitement for us all when the new cataloging rules appeared—RDA, Resource Description and Access. For a while I thought maybe I could learn RDA rules, excuse me, *instructions* really well and go on beavering away in the back room, with occasional excursions for teaching if I got good at it. Well, that plan didn't work. I found, as many of you in turn have found, that the only real graspable RULES in RDA are, like, you have to spell out "illustrations" and not put a period after "cm" meaning centimeters. After that, you're on your own—footloose and fancy-free, exercising your own judgment eight hours a day plus overtime (if you can get it). Not my cup of tea! DINOSAUR!!

So now I'm about to retire and leave the game to you youngsters ... good luck exercising your own judgment in the wild new world of cataloging.

P.S. You can still e-mail me with your RDA questions, but you may get AACR2 answers.

C.S. Lewis told us that we should value our dinosaurs, meaning in his case, him—but I'm afraid I forget his argument for that. Not too much will remain of my career except (of course) the books I cataloged and the collegiality I shared in with all of you. I believe that you've given me this award because we all value that. Good!