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## A Cataloging Carol

Leah Delia Larson  
College of St. Catherine/Dominican University  
St. Paul, Minnesota, United States

Illustrations by Jane Littlefield

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Byron trudged up the four stone steps through four inches (at least!) of fresh snow, clutching his slightly worn leather briefcase in one hand and a small brown-papered parcel in the other. He thought to himself that really, truly, there ought to be a banister because he had recently become acquainted with the treacherous patches of dark ice that often lurked below the innocuous looking snow. If they gave him caution (as a sudden meeting with a frozen slab of stone and ice is never pleasant, even when the blow is dealt where one is best equipped to receive it), imagine the feeling it must inspire in the elderly who so often climbed these same steps in similar conditions. Of course, they met the challenge in broad daylight, not in the pitch black of the 5 o'clock hour. Byron shook his head at the more than twelve hours of darkness lying ahead of him and wondered how many of them he would pass at his desk behind a stack of books. The pattern of molding on the dark-wood door in front of him and the solid, castle-esque charm of the doorway lifted his spirits slightly and he paused with key in lock, turning back toward the newly blanketed main street before him. It made a rather lovely Christmas Eve scene, the type of thing straight from a snow-globe: the lazy ballet of slow-falling snowflakes; the gold of the streetlamps reflecting off every snow-coated surface; the way the white seemed to absorb all snow, all dirt, every flaw of the over-worn main street. Just then a gust of wind caught Byron square in the face, chilling his cheeks and chin, filling his eyes and rimming them in an instantly frozen film, wrestling from him a slight cough that manifested itself in a puff of frozen air.

Thank God for the library, he thought, turning the key, pressing the door, and welcoming the sound of the darkly chilled but nonetheless sheltered chamber into which he emerged. Shutting out the bitter wind and the whitened main street, Byron gave pause to let his eyes adjust to the room before proceeding to his desk to light the old-fashioned lantern he preferred to work by in the evening when he had his beloved house of books all to himself. He treasured the quiet the little lantern preserved with none of the background buzzing of electric lights, the way the leather bindings of the reference books shone in the dim candle-like glow, and the preservation of the dark surrounding the army of books in the stacks. The lantern illuminated the disaster he had left at his desk: the pen and open box of cataloging cards laying haphazardly on his ledger, the mammoth volumes that comprised the rulebook for the task which would soon enough be at hand, and the two cardboard boxes of books lacking catalog cards which currently prevented the opening of his bottom desk drawer.



III. 1: Byron at the library door

Depositing his briefcase at the foot of his desk, Byron snipped the string from his parcel and brought it to the workroom in the back, collected and filled the tea kettle, and started the water to boil on the electric burner he reserved for use only when no patrons peopled the building he secretly considered his own. He breathed deeply the aroma from the Kenya tea his mother had mailed him for Christmas, which had arrived at his apartment this very morning, and mentally composed the first lines of the thank you note he would write in the morning. He wondered if she would enjoy the book he had sent her, *Rebecca*, a mystery story that scarcely stayed on shelves of the library even three years past its release. For the first time since his assurance to his parents that it was the most sensible option for his holiday, and that he would see them happily for the Easter holiday once things had settled some, he felt a pang of nostalgia at the first of his twenty-seven Christmases spent outside the boundaries of Virginia. At least he was free of the endless hours his parents spent squabbling over the correct preparation of the goose, the eggnog, the trifle, and any other item which would make its way to the Christmas table. In Virginia somewhere, a fire burned brightly, illuminating a popcorn-strung tree, candlelit windows, and bows of holly adorning anything that would sit still.

No matter, in Wisconsin there was work to be done, the very work which had drawn him to this frozen frontier (as he still preferred imagine it), to this little library maintained for years by a retired school teacher finally grown so old that she could no longer make out the very bread that sustained her profession—the print of the books seemed to grow smaller by the year. He thought of the state of neglect in which he had found the library just a month past, despite the admirable efforts of the lady and her competent support staff. None were formally trained in the keeping of a library, which was not the easy task some uninformed citizens imagined it to be. So, truly, what could they do to vigilantly guard against the disorder threatening to overtake them when Byron had first arrived? These were the set of circumstances which found him ready to catalog books on the eve of Christmas, as the whistle of the teakettle called him from his musing. He set his tea to steep in the boiling water, and fetched his steaming mug back to his desk and the rather unpleasant task awaiting him.

In an act he would never rightly class as procrastination, Byron set about sorting the books from the two boxes into subsets: those for which cataloging promised to be a fairly simple task; a middle class of compilations, series, and other minor complications; and those which promised to extract abstracted

stretches of time—books whose classification defied the known disciplines and those unlike the bulk of the collection in form and content. He picked up the first volume from the "easy" stack, laid out five cataloging cards—the minimum number of entries he had deemed adequate for any item—and gave the inevitable feeling of unease which always greeted the beginning (and middle and end) of all his cataloging exercises. He tried to rid himself of the sensation by emitting a rather tortured sounding sigh as he flipped open the cover of the book, lifted his treasured college-graduation pen, embellished with the regal seal of Columbia University, and started its first scratchy journey across the manila cataloging card. Many lines and not a few minutes later, our protagonist turned the finished card and glanced at the four still untouched and awaiting his attention. He set down his pen and stretched his back across the solid wooden frame of his chair. The glories of the library alone were already wearing thin, and the heavy yawn lurking somewhere around his chest grew stronger than the aroma of his Kenya tea.

Next he knew, he awoke with a start, the leather of his desk blotter cut rudely across his cheek and his sticky eyes perceived in the distance a rapidly oscillating brown leather shoe. The shoe was attached to a rather perturbed looking man sitting atop the circulation counter and preparing himself to make a statement which consisted of a great deal of throat clearing followed by an authoritative "Excuse me."

Byron could not believe his eyes. It was not as noteworthy to him at first that he had quite certainly locked the front door to the library, and just as certainly checked the back and side doors at closing time his very self, but that the man in his library was clearly hailing in some way from India, a rare sight in this area. However, in seconds Byron had realized that had he not admitted this man to the library, he was by definition an intruder, and that no person dressed as well as this intruder should seek entrance to the public library at seven o'clock the evening of Christmas Eve.

"Who are you and what are you doing here?" Byron demanded, raising his head from his ledger and blinking the sleep from his eyes.

"I am Shiyali Ranganathan and am here to help you a bit with the task at hand, so to speak."

"How did you get in here?" Byron's thoughts drifted from the lock on the front door to that on the back door and back again. "It is quite after hours and I will have to ask you to return tomorrow. Actually, the library will be closed to observe Christmas. You will have to return the following day, and then I will be happy to help you."

"I'm afraid that won't be possible, for I have a great many issues to address in Madras and must return fairly quickly, as a matter of fact. Further, I do believe, by order of the higher library authorities, that you require my assistance this very night."

Byron's still sleepy head flooded with questions. What higher authorities? How could this man possibly hope to be in India by morning? Did he mean to help with the cataloging of books (a task, distasteful as it may be, that Byron fully intended to finish by himself)? How on earth did he obtain entrance to the library and why did he insist on leaving that question unanswered? He chose the most pressing. "First, sir, I must insist that you tell me how you gained entrance to this building."

Ranganathan shook his head at the sorrowful prospect of having to waste any more time (apart from that spent trying to wake the soundly slumbering librarian and then explaining himself) answering banal questions. "Very well. Due to the special nature of the request of the higher authorities, and the spiritual rather than corporeal nature of my travel, I am allowed to transcend the laws of physics to complete this visit. Fear not, the security of your building has been in no way breached."

"So you are not really here, then? You're a trick of my tired mind—a dream."

"No. I am a real librarian, and having traveled from halfway across the globe at short notice, I am anxious to get at the purpose behind this interview."

"Are you a vision of enlightenment? I must understand what you are before I know how to take the advice you are so hurried to pass on to me."

"Think of me as the Spirit of Librarianship Past, if you must classify me before you can focus your mind. My contribution to the field, which is as of yet sadly underappreciated in your country (pardon my lack of humility, but this has been judged truth by the Higher Authorities), and will remain so well into the future, is the 'Five Laws of Library Science.'" Here Ranganathan paused and nodded his head slightly, as if to signal something. He waited a few moments longer, staring purposefully at Byron's desk. Finally, he continued, "you may wish to take some notes on these." He waited for Byron to situate himself with graduation pen and a stack of cataloging cards (the only type of paper he was able to locate in his agitated state) before beginning with the Laws.

"The First Law is: Libraries are for use. Therefore, we must be sure that whatever we do serves the ultimate purpose of getting the library and materials used by readers to the maximum extent..."

Ranganathan went on at some length, holding various library practices up to this standard. Suddenly he is no longer in a hurry, Byron thought, as he let his own mind wander to the standard set by his mother's holiday table, holding up the various pastries he had sampled in Wisconsin up to this standard. Feeling guilty for paying only partial attention to someone willing to travel such great lengths to illuminate the principles of cataloging, Byron fought to focus his mind. However, it was so much information to absorb and he found that subject headings and Christmas cookies made for a rather uneven match.

"...in short every aspect of library operations need serve the utilization of the books. Organization must never come at the cost of use." With this he paused to cast Byron a meaningful look.

"The Second and Third Laws complement each other. The Second: To every reader his or her book. The Third: To every book its reader. The second reminds us that the library is not meant to serve only the segment of the population which it already serves so well, but to extend services to every man and woman in the community—at every age, in the city or the remotest corner of the countryside, regardless of sight, hearing, or even the ability to read, all should benefit from the library." Here again we will take leave of Ranganathan while he describes in detail those less fortunate groups of individuals who have been overlooked by the graces of the libraries, while he takes Byron on a tour of the globe giving examples of libraries finding ways to serve their communities, their patrons. We meet him anew for discussion (more succinct this time) of the Third Law: "As every reader must be made welcome, so must every book be put to use. Many books put themselves to use quite easily, but for those that do not we bear a special responsibility. We must help them find their way into the hands of readers."

Ranganathan paused, waiting for Byron's furious scribbling to catch the tail of his words. "This is where your task tonight finds its purpose. The catalog is most importantly a means by which books can help themselves be attached to readers. Keep this foremost in your mind when you grow weary of copying card after card. Every subject cross-reference you see fit to list in the record creates one more representative of your book to stand patient wait in the catalog, waiting for the searchers to seek it out."

"So you think the more cards made the better?" Byron felt a wave of remorse at this thought, most especially in his throbbing thumb.

"Not quite. I think that all subjects well treated by the text merit a card in the catalog. I certainly do not mean to make you more work than is useful by copying card after card dedicated to any idea or item merely mentioned in a volume."

"How many cards do you intend per volume?"

"I do not want you to force the books to conform to an arbitrary number made captain of the catalog, but for you to allow every book to determine how many entries it requires. Remember, this principal of

cataloging will also serve as the Fourth Law: Save the time of the reader. The reader's time is better spent reading than looking for the materials he desires. With that I fear I must be back to my own library where plenty work awaits me."

"Wait, sir—you have forgotten the Fifth Law."

"The Fifth Law awaits you in the copy of my text, *The Five Laws of Library Science*, which sits upon the shelves of the local university library. They will be happy to transmit it to you via inter-library loan. Fear not, it is a dense little volume but so packed with anecdotes and innovative ideas that it reads quite easily."

"This has also been judged truth by the Higher Authorities, I assume?" Byron asked with a smile.

Ranganathan smiled back. "Of course."

With that, the place where the lively librarian sat only a moment before was left quite empty indeed. No longer trusting of his own eyes, Byron walked to the vacated spot on the circulation counter and gave it a thorough exploration with his hands. Finding it empty, he went to inspect the security of the building and confirmed all doors quite securely locked. So he returned to his desk to contemplate his not altogether small stack of cards with notes taken from Ranganathan's lessons. He barely made it back to his desk and squared the edges of his stack of cards before he felt his eyelids begin to droop anew. Determined not to slumber again laid across his ledger, or in the library on Christmas Eve at all, Byron elected to rest his eyes for just a moment sitting upright, chin resting forward on his chest. It was in this very same position that Byron awoke to the lamp flickering through its last reserves of oil. The sound of footsteps padded up an aisle through the stacks, accompanied by a voice that managed to be poetic in its monotony.

"Poems that turn science into music, that make the ways in which atoms are arranged seem as simple a cycle as the turning of the sun in the sky; stories that catch the breath with the love of the elderly, that make us imagine ourselves filled with longing and covered with grey-ed hair; books with the stories of men that have wooed entire nations, shaped histories to their wills with their words and sometimes lies; everything, really and truly, everything, resides among these walls, these shelves, these pages."

Byron had been aware, in some slowly expanding corner of his mind, of the voice expounding the glories of the contents of books for quite some time before he was able to divine its context. The rather dashing black-suited man before him seemed to have come to a pause in his exhortation. He glanced back over his shoulder down the long and darkened aisle of books, and sighed with resignation and longing that fought to see which of the two would fill the room. With this, the little oil lantern finally surrendered to the shadows that had been steadily closing their circle around Byron as he slept. In the time it took him to locate first a candle, then a means of holding it upright, and finally a match, he had composed what he considered a suitable opening. "To what do I owe the honor of your appearance, kind sir?"

"Kind sir, indeed! Jorge Luis Borges, writer and cataloger. I came in the second capacity, which seemed to be quite troubling you." He gestured toward the stack of cards in the center of the desk. "Your cataloging I mean. It is not merely a time or two I have shared those same sentiments. In fact, I was feeling that way nearly a year solid, not long ago. Of course, something had to be done. I began writing the *raison d'etre* for the task, a metaphor by which to understand the philosophy, a justification for the matter at hand. *The Library of Babel*—are you familiar with the work?"



### III. 2: Borges among the shelves

"Well, I think I may have heard mention of it somewhere. In fact, it sounds rather familiar indeed. However, I cannot say..."

Borges cut him short in his fumbling explanation. "Just as well, then. I will tell you the story here briefly. Do you speak Spanish?"

Byron gathered himself up to resume his hedging process, feeling rather certain that his desired good impression was irreparably damaged.

"I will tell it in English then." He pulled around a chair and positioned himself, leaning with one elbow across the chair arm, and retrieved a cigar from his jacket pocket. The air crackled as his match ignited the paper at cigar's end, his lips popped gently with the first pull of smoke, and his soothing baritone resumed. "The universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite and perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries..."

At some point Byron closed his eyes to let the images of the beehive of the metaphorical library—the much sought vindications containing the apologies perfectly matched to each person, and the baffled inquisitors fruitlessly searching out the books—fill his mind. Byron kept waiting for the explanation that would bring the symbolic strands of the story into a coherent whole. Even as Borges drew his winding story to a close, Byron's mind scrambled to assemble the pieces and draw the meaning from them. As the last notes of Borges's voice hung in the cold night air of a much humbler library, Byron felt quite confident that he had missed an essential piece. He took time to mull this thought over in his mind, as he had read a great many books and rarely found any that left him quite as confounded as the story now at hand. "Sir, I imagine your story is something of a riddle, and at the moment one I seem quite helpless to solve."

"No, not a riddle exactly," Borges said, "but how could one attempt to draw a metaphor for the universe that would be easily understood? That would be quite as misleading as the books of false truths that wait upon the shelves to mislead us. No matter—you need not understand every corner of the story to focus your mind upon its faithful catalog."

"Ah, yes. Back to the catalog," sighed Byron with exasperation (though in truth it was a relief to be back in the realm of the comprehensible).

"Why the catalog?"

Byron was growing tired of crypticism, and felt this question hearkened back to his course in freshman literature. "I've no idea."

"Of course you do."

"Well, then, my catalog exists to locate books, the books within these walls, which are of quite the ordinary variety. As for the books of your story, and their catalog, I am certain they serve a greater purpose, but am quite at a loss as to what that is."

"Is 'locating books' the greatest purpose of your catalog then? You could do the same by hanging signs above the shelves to direct people: science, literature, history, and so on. Eyes are also for locating books. What separates the catalog from these other methods?"

Byron thought about the qualities of the catalog: that it was kept neatly within the few cabinets near the desk while the books themselves stretched on for rows and rows; that the cards were something like a library in miniature; that each book could have a varying number of cards, relative to its contents, as Ranganathan had said; that they could be arranged so many different ways, with books occupying whichever space they warranted, and the books themselves placed only once; that without the cards it would be very difficult indeed to discern the order of the library. "Well, the order. The catalog tells the order of the library by putting the books as they belong in relation to the others. It makes up for the shortcomings of keeping the books in one place when they could be in so many. Especially those that are taken from the shelves. Just think if each book used by a reader was truly missing from the record altogether! The knowledge lost!"

"Indeed. Now if only it was so easy to locate that supreme book holding the truths of the universe as to pull a card from the catalog. The catalog does not guarantee it will be found, but it does increase the chances."

With those final words the candle flickered briefly and the return of the flame found Byron sitting across from an empty chair. By now the familiarity of the events coming to pass in Byron's library this cold and snowy Christmas Eve were no longer lost on him. His visits by these enlightened souls of the library and their quest to illuminate his practice were quite reminiscent of visits paid to other familiar personages on Christmas Eves past. Byron knew the Dickensian story well, having read it nearly every Christmas of his life, and knew these types of visits tended to threes. This time as he rested his arm across his desk and his other arm atop it, he fully expected to be woken again before the night was out. He glanced at the small brass clock on his desk before blowing out the candle: half-past midnight. In his mind he called a Merry Christmas to the books on the shelves before laying down his head and shutting his eyes.



### III. 3: Berman at the desk

Byron was half expecting to find another mysterious librarian sitting across from him when he awoke—his surprise this time was from the visitor's rather modern appearance. On this occasion, a man with a full white beard (though in truth he did not look old enough to be the bearer of such a beard) and a colorfully printed cotton shirt was leaning past him with a match to ignite the candle on the desk. "Hello," he simply opened, shaking the match to extinguish it. "I am Sandy Berman, a librarian—a cataloger at the moment, although that moment is still quite a few years from your present."

"It is a pleasure to meet you," said Byron, righting himself and looking a bit suspiciously at this man who chose to catalog books full time, though not as suspiciously as he would have looked at him had he met him but a few hours past.

"It's growing late, and we have a great deal left to talk about, so we had better get straight to the point. The Authorities sent me because they wanted you to gain the impression of someone who has a passion for cataloging, though your last two visitors were passionate in their own ways: the first about librarianship and the second about knowledge. My work, though, is more firmly rooted in the practices of cataloging."

"What, exactly, about cataloging inspires your passion?" It seemed to Byron a strange choice of words to associate with such a task.

"My ultimate goal is to make the task of cataloging accomplish the work for which it is intended: access. If the library is for the use of all, then all must be able to use the catalog to use the library. In my time, as in this time, the catalog is structured to serve a precious few. This realization started to weigh heavily on me while I worked in Zambia, which would now be called the Congo, I believe. As you can imagine, the catalog and the entire system behind it, which was not designed in Zambia, did not function particularly well there. In particular, the subject headings used to classify the intellectual content of the books were not only foreign to the library users but were often completely counter-intuitive. For instance, all religiously oriented headings assumed a god of the Christian orientation, which is a preposterous thing to assume in this country, let alone in the entire world. I became very involved with the idea that the process of cataloging has a duty to represent the materials it classifies in a way that is at the least neutral, and presents the content of the works in a balanced fashion. A balanced fashion is not one which bows to the

prejudices and antipathies of those who are making the rules for cataloging, but is mindful of the perceptions of those who use the catalog as well."

Byron felt somewhat lost in this wash of information. He had never really moved past the mechanics of cataloging, which he undertook begrudgingly and without devoting it his full attention. Ranganathan had made him consider why he took the pen to his cataloging cards, and Borges the greater purpose which cataloging served. However the idea of how the cataloging was done was something that he had never considered not taking for granted. Berman must have seen the confusion washing over our fledgling cataloger, because he chose to clarify the abstract concepts he had used in launching his explanation with a more easily managed example.

"Take, for instance, the subject heading 'Poor'. You may start by asking yourself, poor what? Poor weather, poor lighting, poor cataloger sitting here at two in the morning on Christmas Day? None of these, nor any of the other possible employments of the term poor, except for the group of people we deem 'poor' for lack of material wealth. Then the cross-references made to poor people take them as either victims of their lowered status or the recipients of others' help. They are never listed as agents, as doing things for themselves, or really as doing anything at all. Even worse, they are never linked to the larger economic systems connected to their poverty. So then, according to the catalog, people living in economic poverty who come into the library looking for books are not going to find a very pleasant representation of themselves. Imagine a person out of work looking for a book on what is being done by those facing similar circumstances elsewhere in the country to help themselves improve their situation—what will they find? Only references to hand-outs, none to actions being taken. Similar arguments could be made for many racial and ethnic minorities, of which the catalog seems only to represent the negative and never the positive."

Byron thought about this argument and found it perfectly logical. Somehow, though, he had never managed to think of the simplest tenets of it himself. Even the idea of poor people needing the library not just for having equal rights to use public services, but as needing the services to improve their lots in life, was quite new. Byron was amazed by the simple truth of this idea, and even more so by the idea of viewing the descriptions and the means of finding the books through the eyes of others. He, in his small Wisconsin library, though, did not decide on the classification of books. He merely applied the tools provided him by far away librarians who were experts on the process of cataloging.

"I do not decide the headings, though. Surely the Library of Congress is much better suited to the task?"

"What makes them better suited for it, though? What makes one better able to identify the needs and capabilities of patrons seeking materials? You might think that every librarian in the country who is in direct contact with patrons would have something to say in the matter. Or you might think that the patrons themselves or the materials for which they are looking would have something to say."

"Do you mean to claim that I know more about cataloging than the Library of Congress?"

"You certainly know your patrons better. Never mind, though, because you are seeing things in just the same manner as the Library of Congress will for quite some time to come. Power structures are always slow to change, and this is the very matter I have been working on for a number of years. For now, there are smaller things you can do to improve access to materials for your patrons using only the tools upon your desk," said Berman, pointing at the stack of cards before Byron.

"What type of things?"

"Make more cards, for starters. Use as many subject headings as you see fit, and if you think of one which does not exist for the Library of Congress, make a local heading so that your patrons might benefit from your insight into their needs. Give any information you think might make the reader realize that this is the material he is seeking, if indeed it is. You might add a cross-reference for a word that is misspelled

more often than not. You could even apply the subject headings to literature, if you believe the examination of a topic could benefit from the inclusion of fictional accounts."

Byron chewed his lip a bit, thinking of all the work this entailed, but knowing that it would be a disservice to his patrons and his profession to avoid it now that he had recognized it.

Berman must have noticed because he added, "Not tonight though. It's already Christmas. For God's sake, go home."

With this Byron collected himself enough to bid Berman Thank You, Goodnight, and Merry Christmas before this librarian took his leave every bit as suddenly as the last two. Byron looked at the stack of cards in front of him, the boxes of books, and the empty aisles of his library. He thought as well of going home, not to his cold and still sparsely inhabited apartment, but to the Virginia of his childhood and his family. He thought of them slumbering now in their beds as their presents waited under the tree and the dinner that would be set out in steaming plenty on the table.

For a moment he wavered—what would his visitors say if he abandoned his Christmas task, these Spirits of Librarianship Past, Present, and Future? He reflected for a brief moment, then he gathered the cards and stacked them neatly to one side. He folded the tops of the boxes closed over the still un-cataloged books and collected his things. If he left now, he would have just enough time to pack his things and make his way to the train station for the departure of the morning train.

He would be in Virginia in two days time, in plenty of time to welcome the New Year among loved ones. He scrawled a note to his clerk, requesting that she leave the library open during the limited holiday hours she was scheduled to be back, and that he would return in ten days time. He bid her a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year, and extended the same to the collective body of books, even those which would await his return still uncataloged by the foot of his desk. Unless, of course, the Spirits found themselves with extra time before Byron's return.

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## **Author's Bio**

Leah Delia Larson is a MLIS (Masters of Library and Information Science) student at the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul, Minnesota. A middle school English teacher, she also enjoys cataloging books on a volunteer basis. Sometimes....

## **Illustrator's Bio**

Jane Littlefield is soon to graduate with an MLIS from The College of Saint Catherine. Originally from Oregon, she loves to travel and has lived everywhere from France to her current locale, St. Paul, MN. Apart from reading, her hobbies include drawing, skiing, playing racquetball and tennis, cooking, and watching HGtv. She is specializing in academic libraries.