Reflecting on the Card Catalog

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As one of those Old School book guys who find the computerized card catalog one small step backward in our ongoing obsession with anything technological that can be labeled progress, I found the transition to an impersonal glowing screen that makes your eyes go wonky one huge horse pill to swallow. Giving up the satisfying experience of sliding out that incredibly deep and squeaky varnished oak drawer, the tactile delight of flipping through hundreds of rigid cards, the excitement of the spontaneous discovery of a book I never knew existed making me forget what I was looking for in the first place…. Aren’t the greatest discoveries often unintentional? Am I alone in finding this loss tragic?

Part of our nation’s image problem with libraries is that, let’s face it, they’re not sexy. Cold marble… rows of glary humming lights… wake-like silence… stodgy furnishings as comfy as church pews… endless rows of dark wood card catalogs. That’s why they’re forever scrambling to reinvent themselves and prove their relevance by pushing readings and dvd sections and all manner of non-book services.

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You either love all this or shrink away from it. What else would compel anyone to make card catalogs, those obsolete utilitarian objects, the focal point of this weirdly compelling page-turner? Perhaps editor Pewter Devereaux in his introduction can convey the card catalog’s magic allure better than my feeble attempt as he describes the ur-catalog at the Library of Congress:

Assembled in handsome oak cabinets, the card catalog once framed the palatial Main Reading Room at the Library of Congress. It has now fallen to the exigencies of modern life, replaced by the flickering screens of the online computer catalog.... Opening a drawer and flipping through the well-worn cards, many handwritten and filled with marginalia containing valuable information not to be found in an Internet search, leaves one with a sense of awe at how catalogues distilled so much information onto simply 3-by-5 inch index cards – cards that still sit neatly filed, waiting to reveal the treasures hidden in the hundreds of miles of Library stacks on Capitol Hill.

Since a card catalog is simply a means of organizing knowledge, The Card Catalog as expected offers up a few concise chapters taking the reader through the development of such systems and how they evolved into the card catalog we know today. It was a two millennia process. There’s Callimachus’s 250 B.C. list of important texts found in the legendary Library of Alexandria -- the 200 B.C. Sumerian cuneiform tablet listing literary works – a Muslim bookseller’s 987 A.D. Fihrist (“catalogue”), a “somewhat chaotic but exhaustive bibliographic record of Arabic literature and translated works from other cultures” – in medieval times, the transition from clumsy, bulky scrolls to the book-like codex – Johannes Gutenberg’s earth-shaking invention of movable type
around 1450 that greatly accelerated the need to classify learning—Conrad Gessner’s 1545 *Bibliotheca Universalis*, which “brought cataloging into the modern era with his ambitious attempt at compiling a list of all Latin, Greek, and Hebrew books in print.” Talk about foreshadowing:

> Gessner spent years traveling around Europe, visiting libraries and collecting booksellers’ and publishers’ lists. Rather than copying the important information from these lists, he cut out what he wanted with scissors and arranged the slips of paper however he liked. He even thought to store these slips of bibliographic information in boxes for later use, a precursor to the modern card catalog cabinets that would not become the standard for another three hundred years.

As for our modern (that is, post-Renaissance) card catalog, think *French Revolution* and think *playing cards*. Huh? Well, the former caused an enormous gathering of now-state owned libraries to need cataloguing and dissemination, and the latter (with blank versos at that time) facilitated this gargantuan task as they “could be purchased throughout France, were sturdy and roughly the same size no matter what brand, and could easily be interfiled.” An army of amateur bibliographers buried a Parisian office with 1.2 million cards. *Voila!* However crude, the modern card catalog kind of took root. (And an illustration of several of these playing cards proves this crazy tale isn’t actually an old wives’ tale.)

“Constructing a Catalog” chronicles the transition from the spectacularly inefficient book list in book form (“bound, expensive, and quickly outdated... only handled by library staff”) to the elegantly simple, versatile solution of 3” X 5” cards. In the mid-nineteenth century a Harvard librarian formalized a method “to be used by the patron” that offered “The flexibility of adding
or deleting cards to accurately and immediately reflect a library's holdings was groundbreaking when compared to the intractable bound catalog the card catalog was destined to supplant.” And in 1938, a pupil of Melvil Dewey prophesied that “it is exactly when an organism seems to have reached perfection that the seeds of its decay begin to germinate.” A half century, card catalogs began their wholesale disappearance from the American library landscape. *The Card Catalog* does a fine job of depicting the astonishingly mathematical rate at which card catalogs exploded and threatened to engulf libraries, with the Library of Congress leading the way and supplying most of the country's libraries with new cards.

Lovely color illustrations make up two-thirds of *The Card Catalog*. Rectos (right hand pages) all consist of actual-size images of a library card, with images on the versos (left hand pages) illustrating the item described on the card. Some are a century or more old, others of relatively modern vintage. Some are typed, some are machine-generated, some are handwritten (in “Library Hand,” a vertical cursive developed to ensure legibility and uniformity). Most bear some sort of later additions — notes from librarians, rubber stampings, and so on.

*The Card Catalog* is not without an autograph aspect. We see, alongside the title page and front cover of a *Leaves of Grass* first edition (1855), a ripped-out page of “O Captain! My Captain!” from a later edition featuring Whitman’s inked additions and corrections. We see a first edition of T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* signed on the title page. We see several cards for modern titles that an enterprising college librarian sent to their authors for signing and commentary (“some authors simply autographed their cards while
others added short notes about card catalogs or simply bemoaned their fate”) for a library display. We see some cards created for specific copies of certain titles that note signed limited editions: Thus the card for James Joyce’s *Ulysses* records “‘Limited to 1000 copies: 100 copies (signed)... numbered from 1 to 100...’ No. 65” and the card for Robert Frost’s *New Hampshire* notes “‘Of this edition, three hundred and fifty copies only have been printed. This copy is number 187.’ Signed by author.” And the card for T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* states “Of the one thousand copies printed of The Waste Land this volume is number 538.”

It’s also interesting to observe that occasionally cards spell out specific “points” – textual or other distinctions that separate one edition or printing from another. These subtleties that can make a huge difference in value – or not. Thus the title pictured for Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (Boston: Ticknor, Reed, and Fields, 1850) represents the second edition – which, the card facing it notes, “has the word *repudiate* in line 20 on pg. 21, and other textual changes from the 1st ed. There is also a preface added, dated Salem, March 30, 1850.” So what, you say? That little typographical error (it reads “reduplicate” in the first edition) and no preface can mean a low five-digit price for a fine first edition copy, whereas a fine copy of the second edition could be *one-tenth* of that. Also interesting are library cards created, not for individual titles, but for one-of-a-kind groupings such as “The library of the late Harry Houdini on magic, spiritualism, occultism and psychical research, bequeathed to the Library of Congress.”

Other times the library cards pictured and their accompanying pictures raise questions that more thorough captions could answer but don’t. Why does the card for Jack London’s *Call of the Wild* bear a purple ink-stamped “Condemned”? Why does the library card and title page image for the first edition of Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* also include an image of an unidentified image from some illustrated edition of that classic? Why does the card for W.E.B. Du Bois’ *The Souls of Black Folk* for the 1903 first
edition appear side by side with the title page for a 1928 sixteenth edition for this landmark work? Why does the card for a vinyl record version of William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* not show that record album or its pictorial sleeve but rather an image of the book’s dust jacket? And the same for Benjamin Botkin’s *Anglo-American Ballads*, a record album whose image is his book *A Treasury of American Folklore*. The card for Eugene O’Neill’s *The Iceman Cometh* describes it as “Type-written (carbon copy),” which I would love to see — but is illustrated with the ho-hum dust jacket for the final book version.

*The Card Catalog* is a stylish volume that’s addictively hard to put down. Instead of a dust jacket, it bears a nifty wraparound band that reproduces a catalog card for the already-mentioned copy of Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. The front pastedown even bears — what else? — a library-style pocket containing an old-fashioned library checkout card. Once you remove the clear sticker holding it in place, it’s the perfect bookmark. How cool is that? On a curmudgeonly note, *The Card Catalog* is, in this reviewer’s opinion, printed in a surprisingly small type size — 10 point, I’d guess — though the generous leading does help readability. Given the book’s ultra-large margins, the editor could easily have bumped up the type a point or two to a more reader-friendly size while still retaining nice margins and without increasing the number of pages.

But I pick nits in the face of an enjoyable study that I hope isn’t a eulogy but a tribute to an institution that will continue to find a place, however reduced, in the modern library. Us booksellers and autograph dealers are detail-oriented folk, so these disparities between the cards and their images I find disconcerting and a bit inexplicable — but these are persnickety in the face of an otherwise delightful book that any book and autograph enthusiast will find useful and entertaining.