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Interview With the Blogger: A Conversation with Catherine Lavallée-Welch

By James E. Manasco

When Bonnie Osif, the editor of *Sci-Tech News*, approached me about doing a profile of a Sci-Tech Division member for this issue, one name jumped out immediately: Catherine Lavallée-Welch. My reason for thinking of her, of course, was the notice I've seen given to her EngLib blog. Then again, maybe it was because I had just received an e-mail from her. Or, perhaps, it could have been because she happens to be a member of my home chapter.

Catherine has been the electronic resources librarian at the Kersey Library of Engineering, Physical Science, and Technology at the University of Louisville (Kentucky) since June 2000.

JM: So let's get started. Where did you grow up? I'm pretty sure it wasn't Kentucky, judging by the funny accent. What were the times like then? What was the most important event you remember?

CLW: My funny accent? Have you listened to yourself lately? But, yes, I'm not from Kentucky. I grew up in Montréal, Québec, Canada. The primary thing going on back in the seventies and eighties was the movement for the sovereignty of Québec. Politics really dominated those decades, with the clash between two very intelligent but very different political leaders, Pierre Elliot Trudeau in Ottawa and René Lévesque in Québec City. I am very proud of being *Québécoise*.

JM: What was the education system like when you grew up? What did you do in high school?

CLW: The education system is a bit different from here. We have six years of primary school followed by five years of high school. Two or three years of what we call college, to prepare you for either university or a vocational track, follow this. My main hobby during my high school/college days was writing. I worked on student newspapers and was on academic challenge teams. I also dabbled a bit in photography.

JM: Did any particular teacher or relative influence you in your selection of a university/career path?

CLW: I majored in history as an undergraduate with a minor in records and archival management at the Université du Québec à Montréal. In high school, I

had been good in science, but not so good in math. I had an idea of going into archival science since I had an uncle who was an archivist for the City of Québec. He was a big influence on me—he did such interesting things! I got contract work as a record manager, though, not archives; and, honestly, I found it pretty boring. I then decided to go for a master's degree, but in library science. The job prospects seemed to be better.



JM: Where did you do your graduate work? What was your course of study?

CLW: I did my M.L.I.S. at the École de bibliothéconomie et des sciences de l'information of the Université de Montréal. That's the only French-language program accredited by the ALA. I was motivated to become a librarian primarily because I was interested in a lot of subjects and I'm by nature a very curious person. I thought it would be a good job for someone like that. Of course, my course of study focused mostly on more technical aspects, and now I work every day with the public!

JM: What were your early experiences in librarianship?

CLW: Well, as I was telling you, I did about a year of work as a records manager first. Some of it turned out to be more like data-entry jobs. During my master's degree work, I got involved with a project for an online documentation center for French-language materials. That center was first developed in Wallonie, Belgium. To support the Québec side, I co-founded a co-op where I acted a bit as an information broker. Along with doing contract work in Belgium with the center, I also did work in France. One of those projects was a kind of a crock, though. In the south of France, I worked for a ... gentleman who found a way to get grants by employing four young Québécois through an intergovernmental program. He made money, but we didn't. Anyway, it did lead to me doing some work at the Infothèque of the Pôle universitaire Léonard de Vinci, a private higher-learning institution in Paris, for a summer. That was a great experience. I finally worked on an Internet/Intranet project for a not-for-profit association just before coming to the States.

JM: How did you come to Louisville and to Electronic Resources librarianship?

CLW: I came here for love. No, really! I met my future husband at a pulp magazine convention in Ohio, PulpCon, back in, oh, 1998. I was one of three single women among 300 men! My first pulp interest was in the Doc Savage character and I had a Web site (interviewer's note: check out <http://homme.docsave.net/>) dealing with the French translations of those magazines. My future husband had his own Doc Savage site. We knew each other's sites, but did not know each other. We met and kept in touch. In 1999, we saw each other again in Dayton, Ohio, and started dating. We got married in 2000 and I started at my job a few weeks after the wedding. We have a 3-year-old daughter and, yes, she does have her own blog. It's where we keep in touch with the grandparents and extended family.

JM: Now, back to the work world. What does a typical day at work look like for you?

CLW: It starts with e-mail. I read a LOT of e-mail and forward what would be good for colleagues and faculty. I usually attend meetings every week, since the U of L Libraries are team based and I serve on a few. Otherwise, I also recommend for purchase and troubleshoot databases and other electronic resources. This spring, for example, I worked on trying to find a new provider for INSPEC. I also manage our computer lab/classroom, Web site, and all other technological issues. Along the way, I also do reference, both in person and virtually, and some teaching.

JM: What do you like most about your job?

CLW: What I like about the academic sector is that it gives you a little more freedom to play with stuff, to experiment. I also get a kick out of helping people and seeing the "I get it now!" look in their eyes.

JM: OK, sounds good. But what do you like least about your job?

CLW: My present situation is fine; I really like being in a small library where I can be more of a jack-of-all trades. Though the downside to that is being a bit cut off from the action of the main library. In the day-to-day situation, I really don't like it when I'm unable to help somebody.

Science Librarian Blogs
(for further exploration)

EngLib: for the scitech librarian
Catherine Lavallée-Welch
University of Louisville
<http://englib.info/>

Confessions of a Science Librarian
John Dupuis
York University
<http://jdupuis.blogspot.com/>

The (sci-tech) Library Question
Randy Reichardt and Geoff Harder
University of Alberta
<http://stlq.info/>

JM: After all your experiences, what interests do you have in the sciences?

CLW: I really didn't come with a lot of experience in the sciences when I came to Louisville; most of it came when I was working for the co-op. I'm still developing my skills in the sciences, though I do have some interest in the historical study of it.

JM: How did you get involved with blogging? Why did you create the EngLib blog?

CLW: A blog is really just a digital diary. But it is done with pretty easy technology to use so anyone can publish easily and quickly on the Web, even without having to know HTML to do so. The reason I started the EngLib blog was that I was receiving a ton of paper and electronic mail about job-related stuff. Too much stuff! This was a way to make sure I read all that information and stay up-to-date. And I also wanted to help other librarians; blogs can be community builders.

JM: What has been the response to your blog?

CLW: I've received a lot of good feedback. I keep seeing the blog mentioned in a lot of places. Some readers seem to like that I don't spend a lot of time editorializing. It's a conscious choice by me; that way I have more time for news. I strive to make it a very good current information

source for the engineering/science librarian community.

JM: I'm setting you up on this one: Have you been an active member of other organizations besides SLA? Which ones? What have you done with them?

What is a blog?

A blog is basically a journal that is available on the web. The activity of updating a blog is "blogging" and someone who keeps a blog is a "blogger." Blogs are typically updated daily using software that allows people with little or no technical background to update and maintain the blog. Postings on a blog are almost always arranged in chronological order with the most recent additions featured most prominently.—
from www.matisse.net/files/glossary.html

CLW: I'm a member of the Kentucky Library Association and am the chair of the local arrangements committee for the fall conference for the second year in a row now. I am also a member of the Engineering Libraries Division of the American Society for Engineering Education; ASEE is an essential membership for an engineering librarian.


In SLA, I am a member of the Web committee for the Sci-Tech Division, but the bulk of my involvement in the association is with the Kentucky Chapter, where I serve as chair for the Web Development committee and the Awards committee. The Kentucky members are such a cool and pleasant bunch of people to work with! I would encourage everyone to be involved in his or her chapter's activities.

JM: In concluding this interview, could you name a librarian you have got to know that you find interesting and tell us a bit about him/her?

CLW: My master's adviser, Suzanne Bertrand-Gastaldy, was an inspiration to me in librarianship. She is a great researcher in computer-assisted text analysis and in semiotics. Her fervor and work ethic helped inspire me to work hard and to always do my best. She was fantastic!

JM: Any last thoughts before I get out of your hair?

CLW: I'm really looking forward to attending my first annual conference in Nashville—yes, can you believe it will be my first SLA conference? It'll be a great opportunity to meet many people I know from Web sites and e-mail, but have never had the chance to meet in person. Sounds like it will be a fun time!

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