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# Animal Stories for Good Reference Librarians

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**Animal Stories for Good Reference Librarians\***

Mary Whisner\*\*

*This essay uses animals and animal-related metaphors to illustrate several short lessons about practicing reference.*

¶1 Ravens, wolves, serpents, dragons: animals, real and imagined, populate many stories, standing in for characters and concepts in human society. The vignettes in Aesop's fables are so vivid that their lessons stay with us long after we hear the stories (think of "sour grapes" or "dog in a manger"). Because I was walking at the off-leash park while trying to come up with a theme for this column, it was natural to think of dogs. Other animals crowded into my mind and before long I had a collection of lessons united by animal themes, from pulling a rabbit out of a hat to teaching a person to fish.

**Pulling a Rabbit out of a Hat**

¶2 Recently a Master of Jurisprudence student asked for books about how to read a case. I walked her to a shelf<sup>1</sup> with *Law School Success in a Nutshell*<sup>2</sup> and similar books. That was good, but before she left I remembered seeing a blog post about an essay, "How to Read a Legal Opinion: A Guide for New Law Students."<sup>3</sup> And I remembered that the author (Orin Kerr) said his essay was posted on SSRN. So after just a quick search, I was able to show the essay to the student, who was delighted.

¶3 Pulling a rabbit out of a hat like that is fun, but it's not really magic. Even stage magicians are not actually performing magic with the trick: the rabbit has been hidden somewhere, not conjured out of nothing. My trick depended on having read something relevant to the student's need and then remembering enough to know a source and have good search terms. We reference librarians can't plan our "performances" as carefully as illusionists plan their nightclub acts. On the other hand, we also aren't expected to keep wowing a crowd with a succession of

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\* © Mary Whisner, 2016. I'm grateful to Peggy Jarrett (bassets) and Nancy Unger (lab) for commenting on a draft.

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1. That is, KF283 in our Reference Area.

2. ANN M. BURKHART & ROBERT A. STEIN, *LAW SCHOOL SUCCESS IN A NUTSHELL: A GUIDE TO STUDYING LAW AND TAKING LAW SCHOOL EXAMS* (2d ed. 2008).

3. Orin S. Kerr, *How to Read a Legal Opinion: A Guide for New Law Students*, 11 GREEN BAG 2d 51 (2007).

amazing feats: we just have to help individuals with the questions they have. It was a nice bit of luck that I'd seen that blog post, but there's no way for any one librarian to follow enough blogs, newsletters, journals, and new title lists to anticipate every patron's question. Most of the time we rely on our skills, such as (in this case) using the catalog or browsing the shelf near a relevant book. And the patron would have done very well with that service. Adding Kerr's essay was a bonus.

### Following Rabbit Trails

¶4 I recently met a woman at the off-leash park whose dog appeared to be a cross between a basset hound and a beagle. True to his hound nature, he was sniffing the ground, slowly advancing as he followed a scent. The woman told me that they live in a suburb where rabbits visit, and the dog loves to snuffle around, carefully following the "bunny trails." Bassets and beagles *are* careful and persistent when they're studying scents. When I walked friends' bassets a couple of weeks ago, I was impressed at how different the experience was from walking other dogs I know: our pointer sniffs some, but is also on the lookout for birds; a friend's cocker spaniel likes to spin in circles and run up to greet people; another friend's Maltese mix barks vociferously when he sees other dogs. The bassets studied each bush and tree trunk much more seriously than any of these dogs. (And they never froze into a point when they saw a bird.) Even among a species of talented sniffers, bassets stand out.<sup>4</sup>

¶5 People have used dogs' superior sense of smell for millennia, first to help hunters follow prey and more recently to alert people to diabetic hypoglycemia<sup>5</sup> or a bedbug infestation.<sup>6</sup> When the U.S. Department of Agriculture started training dogs to help inspect travelers' baggage for contraband food items, the trainers chose beagles and beagle mixes "because of their keen sense of smell, non-threatening size, high food drive, and gentle disposition with the public."<sup>7</sup> Scent hounds are good at these jobs not just because they *can* find the target scents, but also because they are willing to do the job and don't get distracted. Smelling interesting stuff all day is rewarding in itself, plus those food-driven beagles will keep checking suitcases for a long time if they are given tasty morsels as rewards. Note that it takes

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4. Bloodhounds are one of the supersmellers among dogs. Not only do they have more nose tissue—more *nose*—but many features of their body seem to conspire to enable them to smell extra strongly. Their ears are terrifically long, but not to enable better hearing. . . . Instead a slight swing of the head sets these ears in motion, fanning up more scented air for the nose to catch. Their constant stream of drool is a perfect design to gather extra liquids up to the vomeronasal organ for examination. Basset hounds, thought to be bred from bloodhounds, go one step further: with their foreshortened legs, the whole head is already at ground—scent—level.

ALEXANDRA HOROWITZ, *INSIDE OF A DOG: WHAT DOGS SEE, SMELL, AND KNOW* 77 (2009).

5. See, e.g., Kimberly Holland, *Diabetes Dogs: Service Dogs That Can Monitor Their Owner's Diabetes*, HEALTHLINE (Jan. 13, 2012), <http://www.healthline.com/health/type-2-diabetes/dogs>.

6. Leslie Earnest, *Beagles Have a Nose for Bedbugs*, L.A. TIMES, Aug. 13, 2007, at A14 ("Beagles aren't the only dogs that can learn to find live bedbugs. . . . But Alden said beagles were the best. 'Their nose goes to the ground,' he said, 'and they're very focused.'").

7. *Agriculture Canine*, U.S. CUSTOMS & BORDER PROTECTION, <http://www.cbp.gov/border-security/protecting-agriculture/agriculture-canine> (last visited Dec. 16, 2015).

more than aptitude: the dogs must be trained. If you took an untrained beagle<sup>8</sup> to the airport, it might well investigate travelers' bags, but it wouldn't know what scents represented contraband or how to signal to the handler which bags had the forbidden goods. More likely, it might run right past the luggage to the food court, hoping for a handout near Sbarro or Burger King.

¶6 Developing good reference librarians is like finding and training these dogs. It's best to start with people who have some natural aptitude for searching, plus the drive to follow a research trail. Reference librarians who think that a lot of questions are interesting will be able to stay with it a lot longer than those who *can* do the research but don't really like to. Even reference librarians with very good natural talents (curiosity, a good memory, an ability to find connections) need training to learn about the available resources. And they need to focus on the right results: the information that answers a question, rather than the information equivalent of the enticing but nonnutritious Burger King wrapper that an untrained beagle would go after. Moreover, reference librarians, like beagles, should have a "gentle disposition with the public."<sup>9</sup> We need to make patrons feel comfortable asking us for help and listening to our answers.

### Down the Rabbit Hole

¶7 Hunting dogs need to be trained to stop following a trail or chasing game. Driven though they might be, they need to respond to the hunter's whistle and give up the chase.<sup>10</sup> Maybe it's time to go home. Or maybe the hunter wants to save the dog from an encounter with a skunk or a porcupine. Likewise with librarians. Although being driven to follow a research trail is helpful, it is important to be able to stop when stopping is called for—because the information need has been met, because the budget limit has been reached, or because continued searching is no longer fruitful.

¶8 Unwary researchers can fall down a rabbit hole only to emerge hours later, somewhat dazed and no closer to an answer than when they fell. Building on the images from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, "down the rabbit hole" used to connote a visit to a bizarre, psychedelic place. Now, though, it means that getting "interested in something to the point of distraction—usually by accident, and usually to

8. Like the late Bradwell, who kept me company through library school and my first years as a librarian.

9. See also SUSANNAH CHARLESON, SCENT OF THE MISSING: LOVE AND PARTNERSHIP WITH A SEARCH-AND-RESCUE DOG 21 (2010) ("Another in the long list of reasons I wanted a Golden [Retriever] was the attraction factor. We search for children and Alzheimer's patients with some frequency, and I didn't want these victims more scared when they were found than when they were lost. I knew I wanted a light-faced dog with an open, kindly expression."). Bears may have the most sensitive sense of smell in the world—seven times better than a bloodhound's. KIM DELOZIER & CAROLYN JOURDAN, BEAR IN THE BACK SEAT II: ADVENTURES OF A WILDLIFE RANGER IN THE GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK 7 (2014). But they are unsuitable for the jobs dogs perform. If you were lost in the woods, would you rather be found by a golden retriever or a bear?

10. We had a pointer who was not trained to turn off her hunting instincts. When she was on point, staring at a pigeon, we often had to put a hand over her eyes to get her to move on so we could continue our walk.

a degree that the subject in question might not seem to merit.”<sup>11</sup> Falling down a rabbit hole is not all bad,<sup>12</sup> but it can prevent us from finding what we need. I sometimes suggest to students that they write down the question they are trying to answer and look at it from time to time, to guard against “question drift”—the tendency to start looking for material that is tangentially related to the question, either because it is interesting or because it is easy to find.

¶9 In addition to the vast rabbit hole that Alice explored, there’s the smaller, cozier hole Winnie-the-Pooh found when he went to visit his friend Rabbit.<sup>13</sup> Smaller is the essential attribute: the hole itself was so small that when Pooh tried to leave after enjoying a good snack he became stuck. Pooh had eaten too much, and we researchers can sometimes take in too much as well. More than once I’ve gone downstairs to grab two or three old volumes of *Martindale-Hubbell*, decided to look at more, and regretted not bringing along a book truck. That’s physically too much. We can also “eat” too much online by finding and reading more than our project merits. Maybe it’s all relevant, so we aren’t going down the rabbit hole of distraction, but it’s still more than is needed. Like Pooh, we need to restrain our appetite.

### Fishing Lessons

¶10 Our role is often to teach patrons how to fish rather than handing them a fish.<sup>14</sup> If we’re in an academic setting, helping students develop their skills is part of our teaching mission. And even if patrons are not explicitly “students,” many of them want to learn: it’s satisfying to develop research skills, and researchers can get their work done better and faster if they know what they’re doing. Making the patrons more self-sufficient is also more efficient for us. It might take longer to explain how to download an article than to do it for the patron, but if the patron has to download a dozen articles, our initial effort pays off.

¶11 When patrons are special in one way or another, we do give them the fish. The specialness is often derived from high status. We compile research and hand the results in nice packages<sup>15</sup> to professors, judges, or law firm partners. At the

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11. Kathryn Schulz, *The Rabbit-Hole Rabbit Hole*, THE NEW YORKER (June 4, 2015), <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-rabbit-hole-rabbit-hole>.

12. The common charge against our online habits is that they are shallow; but, in keeping with the metaphor, rabbit holes deepen our world. They remind us of the sheer abundance of stuff available to think about, the range of things in which it is possible to grow interested. Better still, they present knowledge as pleasure. *Id.*

13. A.A. MILNE, WINNIE-THE-POOH 22–33 (Puffin Books 1992) (1926).

14. There are many variations of the familiar proverb.

Based on current evidence Anne Isabella Thackeray Ritchie deserves credit for formulating a striking adage that used fishing as a paradigmatic task enabling self-sufficiency. The saying evolved over time and became more memorable by mentioning the ability to eat for a lifetime. The claim that the adage was an old proverb from China, Italy, India or somewhere else has only weak support at this time.

Garson O’Toole, *Give a Man a Fish, and You Feed Him for a Day. Teach a Man to Fish, and You Feed Him for a Lifetime*, QUOTE INVESTIGATOR (Aug. 28, 2015), <http://quoteinvestigator.com/2015/08/28/fish/>.

15. See Mary Whisner, *Re: Memos*, 95 LAW LIBR. J. 601, 2003 LAW LIBR. J. 46.

other end of the spectrum, a patron who knows very little and is unlikely to return might need special treatment too. It would take too long to teach such a visitor enough about the library, research, and computers to find and download the needed document, so it can make sense for the librarian to do most of the work.

¶12 The proverb channels us into thinking that we have only two options: teach to fish or give a fish (teach to research or hand over the research results). But each option holds within it a range of possibilities. Teaching to fish might be as basic as demonstrating how to drop a baited hook into a pond or as elaborate as showing the trainee the best fly fishing spots, pointing out how to read the flow of the water, instructing how to tie flies, and coaching the student in fly casting. Giving a fish could be anything from handing over a raw, uncleaned fish to plating grilled salmon on a cedar plank with appropriate side dishes and a paired wine. Similarly, teaching someone to research might be very basic, for instance: “Here are the Oregon statutes; start with the index volume,” or “Click here to connect to LexisNexis Academic; you can search federal and state cases.” But teaching might be much more involved, covering many steps and demonstrating many sources over the course of an hour in a reference interaction. It could even include a semester of lectures, class exercises, and homework. Presenting research results also offers a range of possibilities, from “here’s your case” to “here is a complicated legislative history.” So the proverb takes us only so far. Even as we tell ourselves and our trainees when to teach someone to research and when to provide the research, we need to be aware of all the choices within each of those categories.

### A Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing

¶13 Almost on a whim, a design student stopped by the law library’s reference office. She was studying in the law library (it’s a beautiful place to study) when it occurred to her that we might be able to help her with a project. She was interested in finding something (not necessarily legal) about clothing and waste—for example, “fast fashion” that is worn a few times and then discarded. She told me about a company that repurposed college football jerseys after they’d been worn for a game (apparently big-time teams wear uniforms for one game and then start fresh the next week).<sup>16</sup> As she explained what she was interested in, I began to understand the concept and became interested myself.

¶14 To start, I did a quick search for **clothing waste** in Google Scholar.<sup>17</sup> We were amused by some of the irrelevant titles we saw in the first screen. There was something about **clothing** used when handling hazardous **waste**. And we saw two classic metaphors: “a wolf in sheep’s **clothing**” (combined with something to do with **waste**) and “haste makes **waste**” (also combined with something to do with clothing). Oddly, when I tried to reproduce this now, several weeks later, I found highly

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16. See Michael Light, *How a Surfing Apparel Designer Is Turning Old Sports Gear into Sustainable Fashion*, VICE SPORTS (Oct. 29, 2015), [https://sports.vice.com/en\\_us/article/how-a-surfing-apparel-designer-is-turning-old-college-sports-gear-into-sustainable-fashion](https://sports.vice.com/en_us/article/how-a-surfing-apparel-designer-is-turning-old-college-sports-gear-into-sustainable-fashion). The company profiled is Yokishop, <http://www.yokishop.com/> (last visited Dec. 16, 2015).

17. GOOGLE SCHOLAR, <https://scholar.google.com/> (last visited Dec. 16, 2015).

relevant works,<sup>18</sup> without the funny false hits. But at the time, examples like the article using “wolf in sheep’s clothing” provided a wonderful entrée to the idea of controlled vocabulary. That article was itself *a wolf in sheep’s clothing*: an irrelevant article disguised as a relevant one by clothing itself with the term we wanted (“clothing”).<sup>19</sup> We moved to subscription databases where we could require “clothing” to be in the subject field, leading us to “clothing industry” as a good descriptor. In Academic Source Complete (Ebscohost),<sup>20</sup> the search **de(clothing industry) and (waste or sustainable)** yielded many articles that the student thought were promising. We tried a similar search in ProQuest Environmental Science Collection<sup>21</sup> and found some more. Finally, I showed the student ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.<sup>22</sup> We didn’t find much (the same search yielded only four records), but we liked the look of *Development and Implementation of a Sustainable Apparel Design and Production Model*.<sup>23</sup> I showed the student how she could download the dissertation and get not only the author’s analysis but also a seven-and-a-half page bibliography listing sources the Ph.D. candidate had found over the course of several years.<sup>24</sup>

### The Tail End

¶15 I’m sure I haven’t exhausted the reference lessons one might derive from our vast cultural store of animal myths, fables, proverbs, and clichés. But pursuing them all would lead me down a rabbit hole. It is much more important to get a column draft to my editor than to come up with one more lesson.

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18. The first items retrieved were NICHOLAS MORLEY ET AL., RECYCLING OF LOW GRADE CLOTHING WASTE (Sept. 2006), <http://www.inno-therm.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Recycle-Low-Grade-Clothing.pdf> (a study by Oakdene Hollins Ltd., Salvation Army Trading Co. Ltd., and the Nonwovens Innovation & Research Inst. Ltd.); Remke M. Bras-Klapwijk & J. Marjolijn C. Knot, *Strategic Environmental Assessment for Sustainable Households in 2050: Illustrated for Clothing*, 9 SUSTAINABLE DEV. 109 (2001); Claudio Luz, *Waste Couture: Environmental Impact of the Clothing Industry*, 115 ENVTL. HEALTH PERSP. A448 (2007); Kirsi Niinimäki & Lotta Hassi, *Emerging Design Strategies in Sustainable Production and Consumption of Textiles and Clothing*, 19 J. CLEANER PRODUCTION 1876 (2011). Google Scholar search (**clothing waste**) conducted Nov. 11, 2015.

19. See AMERICAN HERITAGE DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE 1105 (5th ed. 2011) (“meta” means “[m]aking or showing awareness of reference to oneself or to the activity that is taking place, especially in an ironic or comic way”).

20. ACADEMIC SOURCE COMPLETE, <https://www.ebscohost.com/academic/academic-search-complete> (last visited Dec. 16, 2015).

21. PROQUEST ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE COLLECTION, [http://www.proquest.com/products-services/environmental\\_sci.html](http://www.proquest.com/products-services/environmental_sci.html) (last visited Dec. 16, 2015).

22. PROQUEST DISSERTATIONS & THESES GLOBAL, <http://www.proquest.com/products-services/pqdtglobal.html> (last visited Dec. 16, 2015).

23. Hae Jin Gam, *Development and Implementation of a Sustainable Apparel Design and Production Model* (May 2007) (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Oklahoma State University), <http://digital.library.okstate.edu/etd/umi-okstate-2307.pdf>.

24. I just saw that Loyola of Los Angeles’s Fashion Law Institute is holding a symposium on sustainability in fashion, cleverly entitled “Green Is the New Black.” *Symposia and Events*, LOYOLA LAW SCHOOL LOS ANGELES, <http://www.lls.edu/academics/centersprograms/thefashionlawproject/symposiaandevents/> (last visited Dec. 16, 2015).