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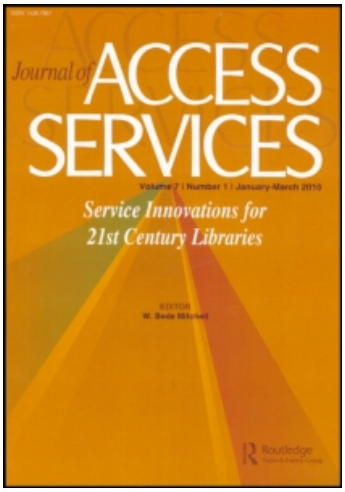

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A Review of "Library of Walls: The Library of Congress and the Contradictions of Information Society"

June L. DeWeese [a]
[a] University of Missouri-Columbia Library,

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Reviews and Remarks
Carol Goodson, Column Editor

Collins, S. G. (2009). *Library of Walls: The Library of Congress and the Contradictions of Information Society*. Duluth, MN: Litwin Books.

There are a great many books about the Library of Congress (LC) but none quite like this one. There are more than 91,000 hits in Google Books about the Library of Congress, so there is a richness of literature available for any researcher. It is one of the largest and most comprehensive libraries in the world. Most people who have been inside LC have been there as tourists admiring the vast public areas and visiting the gift shops. Interlibrary Loan departments in libraries have for several years borrowed items from LC (as a last resort), so materials from the vast collections have been accessible by scholars. It is a well-known and respected library, expected by most persons to have a copy of every book published in the United States and other major publishers in the world. Its vast archive has a rich history and great promise for the future generations of scholars who will use it. Still, what goes on behind the scenes in the workplace and the reading rooms of LC? This is the area that the author concentrates most on in *Library of Walls*.

Collins is a cultural anthropologist who writes about the politics, economics, and culture as well as delving into what is going on in the vast workplace for those who work each day at LC. For readers who wonder about the term *information society*, he defines it on page 154 in this way: "'information society' is that cultural propensity to project a vision of consumers and products in ideal transcendence, sublimating social labor and institutional equality to capitalism's unconscious." Even though this definition is at the end of the book, it is helpful for readers to start reading with this definition in mind. There is also a sentence on page 143 that is very interesting. The author says "Above all else, 'information' becomes something to be controlled, allotted, withheld and hidden." On page 131, Collins offers the following observation:

> While I would resist the notion that the "information society" unavoidably brings with it an intensified hierarchy, I nevertheless believe that, to understand changes at the LC or at other institutions, we must look to the contraction and sublation of information in addition to its supposed explosion.

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He also describes the nature of the work environment, the way people are assigned duties, and the way that some staff perceive the way the organization works. For example, on page 125, a staff person is quoted as saying "Some of the organization is so entrenched that it takes a revolution to change; other parts seem so fluid that you can't hold onto it for a second." He traces the history of LC and entwines history itself with management practices, politics, economics, and the culture of the times. He discusses technology against a diverse backdrop of topics, while focusing on the human aspects of the intersection between technology and those working in LC both as employees and as scholar researchers.

Collins spends quite a lot of time writing about the way management works compared to the way the rank and file work and the way decisions are made and communicated. He interviewed staff persons anonymously and included several quotes from staff on various topics, including the closing of the stacks to LC employees. He also interviewed more than 30 researchers on a variety of topics.

There is an extensive 40-page list of references at the back of the book and liberal use of footnotes within the text.

This book is recommended for librarians who want to read about the Library of Congress in a slightly different way than it has generally been portrayed in the past. It is also a book that will attract anthropologists, historians, sociologists, and others who are interested in information, human behavior, and the way those intersect in a very large institution. It is interesting what staff, union representatives, and researchers have said in this book while being granted anonymity by the author. Human Resources staff and supervisors in all types of libraries might want to read this and contemplate what frontline employees in their own libraries might reveal under similar circumstances. It is not a quick read, but it holds the reader's attention and is well worth the time spent.

Reviewed by June L. DeWeese
Head of Access Services
University of Missouri-Columbia Library
E-mail: deweesej@missouri.edu

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Gorman, M. and Suellentrop, T. (2009). *Connecting Young Adults and Libraries: A How-to-Do-It Manual, 4th Edition*. New York, NY: Neal-Schuman Publishers, Inc.

In *Connecting Young Adults and Libraries*, the combined efforts of Michele Gorman and Tricia Suellentrop offer an invaluable tool for any librarian seeking to strengthen or begin teen-focused programs. In this fourth edition, the