Profile: Laura Koltutsky

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Describe your early background:

Calgary, Alberta is my hometown. I grew up here with my two brothers and my parents. I attended suburban schools, and many of my early memories involved libraries. My mother was a teacher; she allowed me to read whatever I wanted, and I read voraciously, if not selectively.

I spent several years working in bookstores before I went to university. I began a degree in secondary education at the University of Calgary, joining my mother and my brother as teachers. When my brother and I graduated from our programs, there were few teacher positions, so he moved to New Zealand, and I applied to graduate school. While I was in graduate school, I worked at the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology as a reference assistant—my first real library experience.

When I graduated with my MLIS, there were few jobs that didn't require relocation, so I chose to apply to US employers. I started working at the University of Houston as an Education Librarian in 2001 and worked there until 2008. I moved back to Calgary in 2008 to work at the University of Calgary.

What (or who) influenced you to pursue a career in libraries?

Having worked in bookstores, my affinity for books was evident, and a few people asked me about my becoming a librarian. To say that I was resistant would be an understatement, and I didn't explore what that would entail. It was only after obtaining my undergraduate degree that I thought about a different career than teaching. My aunt helped me to identify possible interests and motivated me to start exploring possibilities. When I realized that librarians perform research and teach, I looked for local programs.

I was three weeks away from the deadline when I decided to apply, so I collected references and physically drove my application to Edmonton. I don't know what I would have done if my application had not been accepted as I had only applied to the University of Alberta. Once I started the program, I realized that this was what I had been looking for and that I had found my profession.
Where are you working now, and what do you like best about your current job?

I work in the Taylor Family Digital Library at the University of Calgary as a liaison librarian. My subject assignments are the Faculty of Social Work and the Departments of Sociology and Psychology. My favourite thing about my job is working closely with students and faculty in my liaison areas. I enjoy the teaching aspect of research consultations and like the idea that I am contributing to future research. I have only ever worked in research-intensive universities, and it is exciting to be part of the research process.

As an academic staff member, I am fortunate to be able to follow my own research interests. I have been able to continue my involvement with the intellectual freedom and social responsibility communities of the American Library Association. This interest began while in graduate school as a result of Dr. Toni Samek’s course on intellectual freedom and social responsibility.

What is your most memorable library experience?

My most memorable library experience would be teaching a course on academic libraries for a graduate program in Texas. I was fortunate to teach the course in my own library through an agreement between the University of Houston and the University of North Texas. As a new career librarian it was intimidating to be teaching a graduate course three years out of school. The classes were small enough to have a seminar structure that allowed for lengthy discussions and exploration of academic librarianship. It was an amazing experience, and it helped me to grow as an academic and a librarian.

What do you do for fun?

I enjoy volunteering for the Calgary Folk Festival each summer, and during the rest of the year I volunteer for concerts at the Festival Hall. There is something incredibly appealing about working in and around music.

During my undergraduate years I worked at a game store, and I have a large collection of European board games. In the past few years, there has been a lot more interest in getting together with others to play board games like these; it is a great way to get to know new people. I enjoy organized Meetups as well as getting together with friends to try out games.

Tell us about an interesting book you've read recently. What appealed to you about it?

I read Homeland by Cory Doctorow, and it was amazingly prescient. The protests in Ferguson, Missouri last August looked like a scene from the book. While dystopian, it also feels weirdly optimistic in that government controls are rejected by the populace, and Doctorow wants to give the reader tools to protect themselves if they so desire. It also provided a sort of plausible insight into the decision making process of releasing classified
documents. The characters making those decisions showed more integrity than those characters implicated in the documents.

**What accomplishment are you most proud of?**

My book, *The Library Juice Press Handbook of Intellectual Freedom: Concepts, Cases, and Theories*, was published this spring and is the professional accomplishment that I am most proud of. I co-edited the book with Mark Alfino; it was a long-term publishing project that I started in Houston and finished in Calgary. It evolved over seven years, and in the end there are twenty-one edited chapters that address intellectual freedom from a range of historical, philosophical, and theoretical perspectives. Mark and I both wrote chapters as well as acting as co-editors; it was an intense, slightly terrifying, but incredibly rewarding experience.

**What issues do you think will have a big impact on libraries in the next few years?**

I think that funding is always an issue for libraries, and, sadly, public libraries are not considered a core service like police or roads. I think, as a result, that advocacy will become increasingly important. Efficiencies cannot make up for insufficient funding, and policy-makers need to understand this. Academic libraries face similar economic pressures, and the romantic ideal of the library being the heart of the campus doesn't seem to help. Increased demand for digital resources have in some ways resulted in students and faculty being disconnected from the physical library, its services, and staff. In both settings staffing and services need to reflect funding; we do ourselves a disservice when we continue to try to provide the same levels of service with fewer resources and people.

**If you had one chance to time travel, when would you travel to and why?**

Will David Tennant be present?

I think that it would be terribly tempting to travel into the future. Not too far ahead—perhaps 100 years or so. When I think about what people of the 1950s thought the world would look like at the turn of the century, with spaceships as vehicles and robots, I wonder what changes I would expect in 100 years.

I would like to think that as humans we would have a better handle on how we impact the environment and the world around us. The dreamer in me hopes that we would have found a way to explore deeper into space and discover that we are not alone. I would hope that we would have no need for wars and that we would have used our shared gifts to eradicate hunger and disease.

**What would you title your autobiography?**

Optimistic pragmatist: a career in libraries.