



Beyond the Book[®]



“The Future of Reading” at Book Expo America 2008 – Irene McDermott

KENNEALLY: I want to turn finally to our last guest Irene McDermott. Comes to us from the world of libraries and will tell us a bit about whether libraries are museums or not – museums for books. She gains insights about the Web and the world of publishing from what she tells me is her daily frontline experience as a reference librarian at the Crowell public library in San Marino, California, not so far away from here. She writes about these discoveries in a column, *Internet Express*, which has appeared monthly in *Searcher* magazine and recently published the second edition of her book *The Librarian's Internet Survival Guide* from Information Today. She speaks often to meetings of fellow librarians and indeed has addressed the Library of Congress as part of their Luminary lecture series. Welcome, Irene McDermott.

MCDERMOTT: Thanks Chris. I'm delighted to be here.

KENNEALLY: Well it's good to have you here and I thought it was important to enjoin the conversation with you because libraries are often where at least as children we first discover this world of books and perhaps because libraries are almost warehouses of a sort of books that can be an overwhelming experience rather like BEA. But in a world where we've got all these media distractions, are libraries at all in danger of becoming museums of books or – I would hope not, but mortuaries of books?

MCDERMOTT: Well in fact the exact opposite has occurred, Chris. Since the advent of the Internet about 13 years ago, across the nation circulation and use of libraries has gone up at least 50 to 60%. It's fantastic. People come in, they use our books, they use our Internet. We have wonderful book clubs, as has been mentioned. The Oprah books bring in people. And that's just the adults. We're coconspirators is what we are, with publishers, to help children really develop their brains to be able to read the technology that is books.

KENNEALLY: And you said something to me as we prepared for our conversation that struck me as interesting. I know that the library is a place where I've done research for my books and it's the first image that comes to me, the repository of knowledge. But librarians have for a long time seen their role as connecting people to entertainment as well.

MCDERMOTT: Absolutely. Since about the turn of the last century, libraries have – public libraries have taken on the dual role of having information for practical use in the world and also being an outlet for entertainment such as fiction – fiction books that people read.

KENNEALLY: But it's beyond the form factor, which it's not simply the book itself.

MCDERMOTT: Absolutely. A book can be considered a technology, a codex technology which has its roots, really, about 2,000 years ago when we turned from scrolls to actually having a book where you could turn the pages. So that is one form of technology that we offer our books in. Another is large-print books. And a very popular format is books on tape or CD or MP3 player. Lots of commuting, lots of listening – we consider that reading.

KENNEALLY: Well I was going to ask you about that. If people are coming to the library to use their computers and so forth – they're reading, but they're not reading books? They don't end up taking out books? Or you say they do?

MCDERMOTT: They actually do. Once they're in there they're right next to them, so why not? So they do take them, too. The more you take out, the freer they get.

KENNEALLY: And what about the role that librarians have? Librarians don't take courses in marketing themselves, I can't imagine. They take courses in the Dewey Decimal System. And so they learn how to organize the works. But they may not actually be taught or be thinking about how to promote the work. True or not?

MCDERMOTT: Yes that is a failing of librarians and we've realized that. We're literally among ourselves taking marketing classes, how to push more information out. We're trying to develop podcasts ourselves. So we have authors come to speak and we push those out.

KENNEALLY: Accepted that change.

MCDERMOTT: Well we accepted that change with a change in architecture. We just had at – our library just opened in January. And it features what modern public libraries have, acknowledging its dual role with two constituencies that just don't get along. One constituency is our traditional constituency of older readers who like it to be quiet. Another is the after school kids crowd. And these kids are really studying. But they get together in a group and they talk to each other. We've actually developed a system. The library is divided in two and over in one corner is our study area where the kids go after school. The other is the adult area. We make sure they separate out when they come in. And then it's not a problem anymore.

KENNEALLY: What about cell phones? Wireless PCs, that's great because people can bring in their own computer, they don't have to just access yours, do the research. But cell phones and texting and all the other things that, at least to cranks like myself seems annoying, does that have a place in the library?

MCDERMOTT: Well we have started just now allowing some cell phone use in the library but we do ask if people are talking loudly that they go outside. Texting is silent. We wish you'd text. Text.

KENNEALLY: And that's writing itself so it's reading so maybe it's going to help them read.

MCDERMOTT: Right. It's writing and reading.

KENNEALLY: I suppose so. And are librarians moving forward with this, too? You go to Old Navy and you see them walking around on the floor with the wireless microphones telling each other what's what. If somebody's looking for a book do you get that assistance in the new library?

MCDERMOTT: Well we're really hoping to move towards that. Lots of libraries are. So they're constantly connected that they can answer – we can answer telephone questions and questions from the circulation desk and all these at the same time. So yes that's a movement.

KENNEALLY: But finally, how do you respond to this age of abundance when it comes to books? 277,000 titles published last year. You can't possibly acquire all of them. And then there's the additional works of nontraditional publishing. The role of the librarian as another form of gatekeeper – how difficult is it and especially when people divide themselves now into so many separate constituencies – you really have to have a book there for everyone, don't you?

MCDERMOTT: Absolutely. Of course not all libraries are the same and there's not really a perception of that outside but there's academic libraries, just like there's different stores. They're car parts stores and then there's Wal-Mart. You don't go to Old Navy to get a car part. In that way libraries are different from each other. Our library happens to be a shallow new collection because we have a restricted area to store books. So a lot of times some of our older books that don't circulate, we allow those to go out to our bookstore. So you just have to decide what kind of library you are. Are you a new library or are you an archival library?

KENNEALLY: And any words of wisdom, if you will, from the library's reference desk for publishers as far as your relationship with them?

MCDERMOTT: Well we are your biggest advocates. We shop. We love to shop and buy things from you. So anything you can do to help guide us is just wonderful.

KENNEALLY: So things like access to Internet author – or interviews with authors and so forth would certainly be helpful to you as well?

MCDERMOTT: Yes and we also like authors to come to our library and speak. Those events are very, very popular.

KENNEALLY: Well thank you all. Thank you Paul Dry, Ana Maria Alessi, Deborah Kovacs and Irene McDermott for joining us today.

MCDERMOTT: Thanks Chris.