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## **Listening to the Millennials: Thoughts for Literature Librarians**

**Georgie Donovan**

At our state's library association conference two weeks ago, I introduced and moderated a panel on the Millennials. From the turnout, it appears that this is still a hot topic of conversation right now among those in higher education. As the largest generation since the Baby Boomers, this group of 81 million people born between 1982 and 2002 are not only influencing how we think about education, but the culture at large. If one considers the influence which the Baby Boomers have had over our culture – music, art, literature, film, politics – and then realize that a generation this large will define our society's next era of culture and all that means, one can see why we're all attending to what makes them tick. For the Baby Boomers, the defining moment of their lives may have been the Vietnam War. For the Millennials, it may be September 11 which occurred when the class of 2009 was fourteen years old. Reflect on how those two historical episodes differ, how young people's responses to them differed, and we can begin to see how different this new generation may be.

As I introduced the topic, some librarians' eyes widened when reminded that the freshmen of this year, the class of 2009, were one year old when the first George Bush was elected, two when the Berlin Wall came down, four when the Soviet Union broke apart, and five when the Rodney King verdict was announced. Most of them have never lived through institutions which were formative to many librarians, the Cold War being a notable example. In their childhood, they saw the extensive media coverage of bombings including Oklahoma City (when they were eight) and the Olympic Park bombing (when they were ten). They entered junior high when coverage of the Columbine High School shooting was inescapable. Whether life has become more dangerous than it was for older generations is debatable, but what is not debatable is the perception that these students have grown up in a period of personal violence and terrorism. They've never known a day without the AIDS virus, and the U.S. has been at war since most of them started high school.

They've also never known a day without computers, much less VCRs, CD players, or television without *The Simpsons*. Taking into account how much technology has played a role in their lives – how fascinated they are with new technologies, and how supple they are at learning them – will be essential for librarians posing the question of how to create services, collections, and spaces that meet the learning styles and attitudes of this generation.\*

The panel I moderated brought together a librarian who has studied this topic and two Millennial age students, one a college senior and one a beginning library school student. We tried to tease out what these students are like: their characteristics, their uniqueness, their strengths and interests, and their similarities to all of us. Two of the things which surfaced I thought especially relevant to literature librarians. First, the panel felt that the students who arrive on our campuses come with sufficient technological proficiency that instruction sessions which discuss strategies for searching different databases were bound to disappoint the students. According to the panel, these students don't want strategies: they want sources. They want librarians to bring to their attention the definitive database, the stellar journal, the strange and wonderful reference book, and the author whose works are obscure but electrifying. I found it to be a peculiarly retro look at librarianship, where making reader's guides and bibliographies would seem a more valuable use of library instruction time than investigating how to evaluate websites. Now, we most likely do both when working with them, but these students find one precious and one an uneconomical use of time. Though we may have a different assessment of their information fluency, this is what they think.

The other interesting thought which emerged was that the panel felt we should do more work on our websites and with vendors to make the interfaces and usability of our electronic products simple and efficient. As the college senior explained, "Don't think of it as the students being lazy; think of us as wanting to be efficient. We have a lot of things to do and we want to be able to get in and get the information out of each database as efficiently as possible." According to William Strauss and Neil Howe's book *Millennials Rising* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), the Millennials have led highly structured, scheduled lives and are used to multi-tasking all the time. America's obsession with time and squeezing more in has affected the lives of these students from childhood on.

While I think their point is well-taken to work with vendors and make *data gathering* as seamless as possible, I posed as follow-up to this panel that perhaps research is not supposed to be simple and efficient. Perhaps it is supposed to be circuitous and inefficient and time-consuming and laborious – so that the time and path required to meet a text facilitate both serendipity and discovery. The recent *Chronicle* article "Stacks' Appeal" by Thomas Benton describes well that occasion when, looking for a book, another different but perfect one falls on your head. Yes, I want to be able to search MLA and ABELL and a host of literature websites easily and simply, but do I believe the process of research in literature should be easy and simple? No more easy than learning to write well, no simpler than reading *Ulysses* or Akhmatova or Neruda. While believing that we should continue to investigate and shape our libraries with the learning styles and characteristics of our incoming students in mind, I also wonder whether research has begun to denote data gathering and just how simple this process should be.

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