A MURDER IN THE LIBRARY

BY AMY W. BOYKIN AND ALICIA WILLSON-METZGER

A murder in the library is by no means an original idea. A cursory search of WorldCat brings up a few dozen titles, including Agatha Christie's *Body in the Library*. However, using this premise as a framework for orienting a small group of incoming freshmen to library resources was considered quite innovative when the idea was first introduced in the spring of 2003 at the Captain John Smith Library of Christopher Newport University (CNU). When several library staff members discovered the descriptive website of Carleton College's Gould Library and read how a murder mystery might be accomplished, it certainly got them thinking. However, it was only after realizing that the Office of Student Life was interested in including Smith Library in the round of freshmen orientations called Welcome Week that the idea for a murder mystery took hold.

After approaching the library administration about the idea, and receiving proper permissions with the single caveat that the University Librarian could not be the murder victim, planning began in earnest. The first of several things to determine was what places the freshmen should discover in the physical library. Getting back to basics, it was decided that there are five essential areas to cover — where the Circulation and Reserves Desk is, the Reference Desk location, how to determine a book's call number and location on the shelf, how to find a journal or newspaper article in the periodicals section, and where the photocopiers are maintained.

Creating the faux library materials turned out to be the most fun. Collaborating with the cataloging staff, we created ten "books" with special records within the online catalog that were suppressed until the evening of the murder. The physical books were created by using dummy blocks, black plastic blocks that are used to hold space on the shelf. Each dummy block was covered with bright yellow paper, including title information and a call number label on the spine. On the front, the title and author information was printed in an unusual font, while the back held the clue. The periodical shelves were perused, appropriate journals discovered, and article title pages created for existing resources. These title pages had citation information and the murder weapon clue in the form of a rhyming poem. The title pages were paper-clipped into the journal or newspaper on the appropriate page and reshelved.

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The other clues were kept in color-coded folders at the photocopiers and the two service desks. These included fake reserve material (class handouts and exam helps) and directions to use the online catalog to find a clue, and were dispensed as the students came to request them.

The Office of Student Life (OSL), collaborating with the library for the mystery orientation, generously provided refreshments, prizes, and additional staff. While four library staff...
members and four library student assistants worked to provide the clues, OSL staff included ten residence assistants (RAs) who mingled with the freshmen during the refreshment time and helped them find the clues. There were prizes for each participant, with bigger prizes for the winners. The cookies and punch refreshments, catered by University Food Service, were served as everyone gathered before the orientation began.

On the day of the murder, the Friday of Welcome Week, interested freshmen came to the library to pick up their free tickets to the event. Tickets were limited, and it was not long before all fifty were taken. When the library closed at 5 p.m., staff began placing clues and getting the body in position. Yellow crime scene tape, generously lent for the occasion by the Campus Police, blocked off a small area of the stacks to create the crime scene.

At 9:15 p.m., with everything ready and the lights turned off, the library doors were opened to allow those students with tickets to enter and begin enjoying the refreshments. About thirty-five of the fifty possible attendees participated, and at precisely 9:28 p.m., a loud scream was heard. Everyone got quiet. The butler appeared and explained that someone must have seen the body, and that it was time to get started. He led the students upstairs, past the crime scene to an open area where the situation and responsibilities were described. Someone had killed a professor, and it was up to the students to determine who did it and how. Speed and accuracy were crucial. The freshmen were divided into groups of five and each team was given a clipboard with an answer sheet and their first clue. The teams were then sent off to solve the mystery.

Racing down the stairs, the teams began to search the shelves and follow the clues. Library staff took up positions at service desks and in the stacks to provide assistance. The RAs helped the students find their way around the library. One by one, the teams turned in their findings at the Reference Desk and retreated to the refreshment area, waiting for the announcement of the winners. After all the entries were tallied, the winners were announced and prizes were distributed. Prizes included bumper stickers, key chains, and gift certificates to the CNU bookstore and eateries on campus. Everyone started to leave; the library staff did some minor straightening, and then left the building around 10:15 p.m.

After the event, there were several things that the library staff determined to do to make the mystery orientation run more smoothly next time. Providing flashlights was the first suggestion, because even with emergency lighting, some of the shelving areas were still very dark. Pencils or pens should be given with the clipboards, and a sign should be posted on the outside library door to clarify what was happening. Several regular patrons, confused that the library appeared to be open, would have thus learned that the murder mystery was for freshmen ticket-holders and that the library would reopen for regular hours on Monday. Additionally, putting the clues and final answer grids on colored paper to match the team colors would keep the materials in order during the final tally. Finally, the answers/cheat sheets needed to be clearer and more detailed for easier scoring.

The second murder mystery and orientation took place at the end of a summer both exciting and stressful for the library staff — exciting because an extensive construction and renovation project had begun, and stressful because the library's staff and collections were now crammed into half the space previously available to them. Hosting a mystery in such reduced circumstances at first seemed a bit daunting; but, buoyed by the first mystery's success, the library staff decided to hold the event and began planning, regardless of space issues.

To keep things fresh (and to keep the library staff amused), the mystery's details had to be changed a bit from the first orientation. In the previous year, in a period of budgetary
darkness for public institutions in the state of Virginia, the murder victim had been Dr. Anita Staff; this time, with a positive reversal of fortune allowing a number of new staff members to be hired, the victim was Dr. Seymour Staff. While Dr. Anita had succumbed to poison smeared on the pages of a library book, Dr. Seymour departed this life in a messier manner, blown to bits by an incendiary device planted in a book. In both instances, the murderer was a disgruntled librarian. As with the first mystery, the “body” (a large decorative snowman owned by a staff member) was placed in the stacks, appropriately covered with a sheet. A frighteningly real-looking long-haired wig extended from beneath the sheet, and multiple bits of paper surrounded the body, suggesting an explosion. The area was cordoned off with borrowed crime-scene tape.

With preparations completed, the doors opened at 9:15 p.m., and it was quickly apparent that there had been some confusion regarding ticketing. Although students requesting tickets had been asked to leave their phone numbers and addresses with circulation desk staff, many students had left only numbers for their residence halls’ front desks, and a number of them had not received messages from the library staff stating that their tickets were ready to pick up. There was also a deadline — 2:00 p.m. Friday — for picking up the tickets; many students did not do so, instead showing up at the door at showtime. The on-the-fly solution was to tell students without tickets to wait at the library’s entrance until slightly after 9:30 p.m.; leftover tickets were then available on a first-come, first-served basis. The good news, which certainly eclipsed the minor confusion, was the number of students standing on the library’s front steps well before the program’s start time. As students streamed through the library doors, we recognized that we had far more participants than the previous year; fifty students eagerly headed toward murder and mayhem.

The areas to which students were directed by clues remained the OPAC, book stacks, Circulation and Reserves Desk, Reference Desk, photocopiers, and periodicals. Although the areas that students visited were the same as in the preceding year’s orientation, the arrangement of these collections was quite different, primarily in that they were all on one floor, much closer together than previously. Both RAs and library student assistants were instrumental in keeping the freshmen moving in the right direction - and in keeping them from knocking each other over! The biggest helpful hint for those planning their own mysteries is to have sufficient staff to direct and guide each group of “detectives” from beginning to end - which was fortunately accomplished in both years of this program.

One distinct difference in the second year of the mystery was the addition of a "Detectives’ Desk," the last station visited by the teams in order to turn in their worksheets. During the first orientation, students had gone to the Reference Desk both to get a clue and to turn in their worksheets, resulting in a good deal of congestion. The Detectives’ Desk was manned by one library staff member whose job involved accepting team worksheets, noting the time each was submitted, and then scoring them. Amazingly enough, each team got all the questions correct, so the time each team submitted the worksheet determined the contest’s outcome.

Several ideas for improvement surfaced after the second murder. These included having more flashlights available for the teams to use, using a microphone for the scream, and reworking the teams/packets set-up. Space limitations this time seemed to make team formation more difficult. The actual clues, confession letter, and bibliography are available online at http://library.cnu.edu/vla2004.htm.

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The next step in refining the orientation will be to administer a
survey to participants, both staff and students. While there is significant anecdotal evidence of the program’s success, there has not yet been any formal evaluation instituted; however, positive results from the survey would perhaps encourage financial support from the library administration, and would clearly give us a means to prove the venture’s success, along with providing extra leverage to continue to run the orientation program each year.

In very practical terms, a survey would certainly help to fine-tune the mystery’s specifics. For instance: Did the students feel the areas of the library they most need to know about were covered by the clues? Were there too many clues? Not enough? Was there enough assistance from staff members? An open-ended question regarding what participants found most/least interesting or enjoyable about the experience would also be included. A survey geared specifically toward library and OSL staff members would gauge the effectiveness of the exercise from a “big picture” standpoint — what went right or wrong, and what could simply be done differently in the future to make the orientation more effective for all involved.

Fortunately, many more things went right than wrong. Perhaps the most heartening thing about the program was seeing the enthusiasm with which the freshman participants greeted the orientation. They were enthusiastic; they were loud; they were very competitive, and at times even a little raucous — and it was great! No glazed stares so familiar to the bibliographic instruction librarian here — they wanted to win, and along the way, they learned something. And the library staff cannot wait to do it all again next fall!

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