When the title of my presentation today began to make the rounds a few months ago, I was asked by several people the inevitable question: Who is the wicked one? Us (special collections) or you (the technocrat)? The answer, inevitably, is “Yes,” which is, of course, why I settled on that title in the first place. As a science fiction reader, I could have selected any number of other titles suitable to the topic, including “The Year’s Best Horror Stories,” “Worlds of Weird,” or “The Dispossessed.” None, however, as evocative as Mr. Bradbury’s.

As a point of departure, and since it is quite different from that intended by Bradbury, I would like to begin by defining the sense in which I mean the word “wicked.” Among the several Oxford English Dictionary (OED) definitions—most of which have to do with things evil, depraved, or simply noxious—is the rather more gentle phrase, “difficult to do something with.” As I have noted, who considers whom wicked cuts both ways. Let me explain why I think special collections can prove “difficult to do something with.” I do not wish to preach to the converted; I know that many or all of you know most of what I am about to reveal. My point, however, is that you need perhaps to demonstrate your awareness better in order to get a fair—or maybe even an unfair—share of your institution’s resources.

First, special collections can be “wicked” because they are ill-defined. That is, few people actually seem to know what special collections are. I thought it was just me, but even a quick scan of the library literature reveals that I am by no means alone. One writer, for instance, Rebecca Martin, notes that the range of formats or materials found in special collections includes rare books, theses and dissertations, archives, manu-

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scripts, current publications, regionally significant monographs and serials, gray literature, brochures, leaflets, broadsides, posters, maps, music, microforms, and other nonprint media. There seems to be little which cannot be—and is not—included in special collections. Clifton Jones goes so far as to define a special collection as “a repository for all those collections that a library does not know what else to do with.”

Moreover, equally few people seem to know where special collections are. Most, or at least many, of us work in libraries which include something called the Department of Special Collections. One wonders why, if as some contend, “a special collection is more often a collection of ‘libraries’ within one collection.” This is certainly true, for instance, at UCLA, which boasts not only a Department of Special Collections, but also the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, the Belt Library of Vinciana, the Biomedical Library History Division, and “special collections” in at least the Arts, Map, and Music Libraries. In other words, at UCLA at least, and I suspect elsewhere as well, the Department of Special Collections is by no means the only repository of special collections. This begs the question of why then it is called that and what it contains which the others do not.

So on one hand, a special collection can apparently include just about anything in the library. On the other, it can apparently live just about anywhere in the library. Maybe this explains why, invariably, it comprises a surprisingly large, if precisely unknown, number of items.

The sheer variability, dispersion, and size, then, of special collections combine to render them “difficult to do something with.” When I try to “surround” special collections, I sometimes feel like the blind men trying to describe the elephant, except this elephant can be in several places at once.

Second, special collections can be “wicked” because they are expensive. The expenses are evident in the nature and the outright prices of the materials that special collections buy, the labor-intensive activities librarians must go through to locate and buy the items (not through the normal blanket-order or approval-plan channels), the cost of extensive rare-book cataloguing that these materials require, the additional expenses incurred in storing and providing adequate security for these materials, and in the specialized training needed for all personnel in the special collections department. Not only is there special training, but in special collections departments, people must page the materials for patrons and must be available to observe the users. This sort of activity is far from unusual in special collections, and not just because of security concerns. Rather, these sorts of collections typically require mediation of one variety or another. Poor bibliographic control, closed stacks, remote storage, and preservation are all other reasons some form of library staff mediation is likely to prove necessary to bring together the library user and the materials for which she is looking. In light of all the people it takes to run a special collections department, as others have noted, such departments are often relatively poorly staffed vis-à-vis the size of their holdings. This is a point to which I shall return presently.
With all of these expenses in mind, we can understand Gakobo:

The criteria for collecting special materials must take into consideration such organizational factors as housing, processing and cataloguing, maintenance and building up, staffing and administration—all of which have wider implications on the whole question of expenditure. (p. 408)

Third, special collections can be “wicked” because the practices employed in the processing of their materials deviate from those followed in other areas of the library. While this is by and large no longer true for current practice, it is definitely true historically—particularly insofar as bibliographic control is concerned. What is at issue here is consequence, not motivation, because the motivation for such deviation has often been right-minded indeed. Richard Berner, for instance, in a discussion of manuscript cataloguing, notes that

because of their mass, manuscripts present formidable problems in providing intellectual access. Traditional methods of description, employing library cataloging rules . . . were just as ill-suited for the task as subject classification had earlier proved to be misguided.5

His belligerence notwithstanding—he subsequently refers to “the domineering hand of catalogers and their rules” (p. 257)—Berner makes a good point: that traditional bibliographic control mechanisms do not always adequately or easily lend themselves to special collections. And so, the challenge, as I am sure Berner would agree, is to develop mechanisms which are both adequate to the task and consonant with those employed elsewhere in the library. Why is this so? Because the consequence of wholesale deviation from commonly accepted practice is the risk that special collections materials will not be bibliographically integrated into the larger library collections of which they are a part.

This brings me to my fourth and final point: that special collections can be “wicked” precisely because they are “special.” That is, to quote the OED again, they are “of such a kind as to exceed or excel in some way that which is usual or common” (p. 2948). This quality of “special-ness” (to quote David Byrne) can take several forms, one of which is a kind of holier-than-thou attitude on the part of those charged with the care of special collections. Traister notes:

Rare books, we know, are the sexy part of the library world, the stuff of scholarship . . . . The status of rare books librarianship is high. Those of us who work in this field are perceived—though perhaps we merely perceive ourselves—as an elite breed. (p. 350)
Quite apart from the probability that it is likely to win one few friends in the larger library community, there is the possibility that such an elitist attitude can serve to isolate special collections, with undesirable consequences.7

Perhaps more prosaically, another form which this “special-ness” can take is what I call the “Please, sir, may I have another?” syndrome. That is, the steady push for that little something extra which special collections always seem to need. Whether it be additional access points, or notes, or indexed fields, or publications, or space, or even positions, the needs of special collections sometimes seem insatiable.

Having dwelled at some length on why special collections can be so difficult to do something with, let me now share with you some of my reasons, practical and philosophical, for wanting to come to grips with these kinds of collections. Practically speaking, as Associate University Librarian for Collection Development and Technical Services at UCLA, I am charged with facilitating the bibliographic control of all of UCLA’s library collections, not just the easy ones. It is, therefore, my responsibility to strike some kind of balance between a shrinking pool of cataloguing resources and expanding access needs. And, of course, to do so with a view toward benefiting the largest number of library users possible.

Moreover, as Coordinator for Retrospective Conversion at UCLA, I am responsible for the integration of all of our cataloguing records into our online catalogue, even those which do not readily, or routinely, lend themselves to such integration. In fact, with much of the “mainstream” conversion now complete at UCLA, the integration of these more “difficult” records is rapidly becoming my highest priority.

Philosophically speaking, I am concerned with coming to grips with special collections materials because, as trite as it may sound, I do believe that a library’s special collections are what serve to set its collections apart from those in otherwise comparable libraries. Some observers believe that special collections vest a library with a certain prestige and status.8 This is no doubt true, though whether sufficiently so to justify the expense is arguable. Some of these same observers assert that special collections serve as a useful focus for fundraising.9 To them I say, “And a good thing, too,” inasmuch as the funds they serve to raise are often needed to offset the acquisitions and processing costs of the collections themselves.

In my view, the most compelling justification for the existence of special collections is that they contain primary source research materials, critical to the instruction and research needs of teachers and scholars. Gretchen Lagana, in a paper delivered during the fourth National ACRL Conference, spoke to this point:

If the special collections department is to play an active role in the intellectual life of the university, special collections librarians must begin to learn how papers and other non-book collections support instruction and research in fields that often bypass the library.10
I submit that it is insufficient for special collections librarians simply to learn how their collections support instruction and research; they must, in addition, learn how to increase the use to which their collections are put. I return to the matter of special collections’ being typically understaffed. In doing so, I would like to quote Traister again, who notes that

special collections are understaffed as well as under-financed. They must be, if libraries are to pay for the services which the vast majority of their users require. There is no parity between a few thousand readers a year and several thousand readers a day. (p. 359)

Traister is right, of course. Rather than resigning themselves to the truth of his statement, however, it behooves special collections librarians—at least those truly interested in a larger share of the resources pie—to look to its obvious corollary: that an increase in special collections readership is likely to result in concomitant staffing and funding increases.

There are those who believe that the research value of special collections materials becomes fully evident only when they have been processed and made accessible (see Jones, p. 440). I agree completely. I am, in fact, especially heartened by statements from the special collections community, like that made by Jayne Ringrose in The Book Collector, to the effect that: “What we would like is to present everything accessioned, sorted, numbered, conserved, boxed and catalogued.”

I would like nothing better than to help special collections librarians do that. The challenge, of course, is how? I believe that the key to balancing resource supply and demand lies in the joint negotiation of standards and expectations. I have seen this in action at UCLA, where I am fortunate enough to work with those who understand and believe that mutual accommodation goes a long way toward making the wicked palatable, even beneficial.

NOTES


8. See for example Jones, "Remarks on the Integration of Special Collections," p. 438; and Martin, "Special Collections," p. 244.

9. See Martin, "Special Collections," p. 244. Victoria Steele and Stephen D. Elder say about the role of special collections in fundraising, "Special collections may become more 'special' than ever before. As these collections gain in value, so do the librarians who manage them. They are the keepers of objects for which electronic substitutes will not do, and these librarians are invaluable assets for library leaders of the future. Their knowledge and skills can be fostered to benefit the development of the entire library." See Steele and Elder, *Becoming a Fundraiser: The Principles and Practice of Library Development* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1992), 125-26.


SELECTED ITEMS FROM INVENTORY


BENNY, Jack. His 1949 Peabody Award for Radio Broadcasting.

BURROUGHS, E.R. Autographed California hunting license, 1919.

CHURCHILL, Winston S. Large photograph presented to President Roosevelt, January, 1942.

COROT, J.B.C. Autograph letter signed, 1845.


FIELDS, W.C. Archive of 27 letters to his mistress, Carlotta Monti, 1939-44.


HAYWORTH, Rita. Archive of over 2200 original vintage photographs.

HEMINGWAY, Ernest. Autograph letter signed, 1936; with comments on Arabs, E. Pound and Toklas.

JEFFERS, Robinson. Autograph verse quotation signed: "Boats in a Fog."


KENT, Rockwell. Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales," 1930. 2 volumes. One of 75 sets, signed by Kent.

LEWIS, C.S. Autograph letter signed, 1944. Philosophical content on St. John.


LINCOLN, Mary. Autograph letter signed, 1864, to Abram Wakeman.

LINDBERGH, Charles. Signed photograph, with Ford Tri-motor aeroplane.

LIZST, Franz. Autograph note signed [ca. 1860].

MCDANIEL, Hattie. Signed and inscribed photograph, in costume, 1937. 10" x 8".

MATA HARI. Autograph letter signed [ca. 1908-09].


MORSE, S.F.B. Autograph letter signed, 1837.


O'NEILL, Eugene. Typed letter signed, 1930; discussing Paul Robeson.


REMINGTON, F. Autograph letter signed, 1898.

SHERIDAN, P.H. Letter signed, 1882. Civil War career of Col. S.H. Hastings..

STRAUSS, Richard. Inscribed photograph, Bucharest, 1921.

TOSCANINI, Arturo. Inscribed photograph seated at the piano, 1938.


WAGNER, Richard. Letter signed, 1867, to Giovan Guidi.

WAUGH, Evelyn. MS and letter, 1948-49, relating to a misquoted interview, proposed American visit.

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