

# EEL... ENERGISE, ENTHUSE, INSPIRE

EEL gives a voice to the new generation of library and information professionals. If you have any suggestions or topics for this column, please contact the column co-ordinator Lesa Maclean at [maclean.lesa@gmail.com](mailto:maclean.lesa@gmail.com)

## Information plus people

*Our DNA is all about getting that information and passing it on, says Tim Ormsby.*

In a recent episode of Dr Who called *Silence in the Library*, the Doctor finds himself in a library in the 51<sup>st</sup> century (I assume RDA would have been implemented by then). This library covers an entire planet and contains every book ever written; the Doctor muses about whole continents of Jeffrey Archer. Apart from the fact that working in this library would be incredible (sans the flesh eating aliens), for me this episode highlights the genes that go to make up the DNA of libraries.

The library the Doctor visits has a collection that would turn any library professional green with envy, with the possible exception of cataloguers. Regardless of the fantastical scale, it highlights what has been at the core of our profession from the start: the collection of knowledge. Like the library in Dr Who, the original library at Alexandria was built to collect all the knowledge of the world. This is pretty much the *raison d'être* of libraries. It is what we have always done and what we will always do in one form or another. It is such a prominent part of our DNA and provides the bedrock on which all our other services are built. The library in Dr Who represents the library in its purest, most basic form. But we all know that today's libraries do so much more than just books. The reduction of the library to just books in the episode is also a statement about the DNA of our industry in itself.

The portrayal of the library in Dr Who is a very romantic one: multi-storied columned halls with endless floor-to-ceiling shelves holding books as far as the eye can see. When volunteering at the State Library of South Australia, the visitors for whom I gave tours inevitably didn't want to see the newly refurbished working library. They want to see the historical Mortlock Wing that holds the old



Circulating Library collection of 30,000 or so books. This beautiful building closely resembles the library in Dr Who. I think this is how a lot of people still see today's libraries, perhaps not realising they offer so much more in terms of

physical and virtual resources, but still somehow understanding that knowledge dwells within those shelves. This shows that our fundamental DNA, the collection of knowledge, is ingrained not just in our industry, but is deeply ingrained in the collective consciousness of society in general.

However, collecting knowledge is only one part of our DNA. We don't collect it in a vacuum but collect it so that others can access it. We catalogue so that people can find items in our collections. To hold the catalogue of the planet-sized library in Dr Who, the entire core of the planet is one massive hard drive. To guide patrons around the library and help them find what they're looking for (or as in the episode, warn people of alien invasion) the library in Dr Who has courtesy nodes – robots with real faces donated to the library grafted onto them (possibly the 51<sup>st</sup> century equivalent of donating a park bench). As a librarian, I haven't had to advise patrons of hostile aliens (yet), but I am constantly guiding patrons and helping them find what they need. Helping people find information forms a significant part of our DNA and it too has been there from the very beginning. Way back in Alexandria, copies of scrolls would be made available to scholars who required them.

So customer service forms a large part of what library and information professionals do, no matter what kind of service we work in. Giving patrons a great information-seeking experience in the library has become much more important than ever in recent years as we are no longer seen as the sole gatekeepers of knowledge, thanks to Google and the internet. As information professionals though, our customer service genes can give people a much better information-seeking experience than these newcomers. In the words of author Neil Gaiman, "Google can bring you back 100 000 answers, a librarian can bring you back the right one."

The DNA of our industry consists of the double helix of collecting knowledge and providing access to it. These strands have been there from the beginning but like all DNA, they will mutate as the forms of information and delivery methods change. However, their basic nature will endure and no matter what form libraries will have taken by the 51<sup>st</sup> century, they will still be the core of what librarians do. (That, and fighting off alien invasions.)

Tim Ormsby  
[timormsby@adam.com.au](mailto:timormsby@adam.com.au)

*While being a lifelong user of libraries, Tim is new to the library industry, having completed his library graduate diploma last year. He is currently working casually at Mitcham Library and Flinders University Library in Adelaide and is loving every second of it. Tim is also a South Australian co-ordinator for the ALIA New Graduates Group.*

