

Practicing Reference . . .

The Sensory Law Library*

Mary Whisner**

The move to a new library leads Ms. Whisner to reflect on the range of sensory experiences that exist in a law library and how they color the days of librarians and patrons alike.

¶1 My new office has a white board, which I have been using to remind myself of looming projects (such as the deadline for this column). The other day I picked up a dry erase marker to add a note about our next reference department meeting. The marker's chemical yet sweet scent reminded me of the markers my admired elementary school teachers made signs with forty years ago. I thought of the continuity from the teachers' bulletin boards to my own white board. More than that, I thought about the range of sensory experiences we have in the law library and how they color our days. Don't worry: I am not going to follow this theme as far as Proust did with his famous cake.¹ But it won't hurt to muse just a bit about the ways in which our libraries engage all of our senses.

¶2 My awareness of sensory library experiences is heightened because of my library's recent move to a new building. Here we are—with the same books, the

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** Assistant Librarian for Reference Services, Marian Gould Gallagher Law Library, University of Washington School of Law, Seattle, Washington.

1. "And once I had recognized the taste of the crumb of madeleine soaked in her decoction of lime-flowers which my aunt used to give me . . . , immediately the old grey house upon the street, where her room was, rose up like the scenery of a theatre . . . ; and with the house the town, from morning to night and in all weathers, the Square where I was sent before luncheon, the streets along which I used to run errands, the country roads we took when it was fine." MARCEL PROUST, *SWANN'S WAY* 34 (C.K. Scott Moncrieff trans., Vintage Books ed. 1970). *Swann's Way* is the first of seven novels in *Remembrance of Things Past*.

I have never read Proust, but I have many times heard references to his (or his narrator's) strong memory of the taste of the cake and how it led to countless associations in his mind. Dropping a footnote to Proust without having read his work is, in one sense, what Richard Rosen termed "Bullcrit": "the increasingly popular mode of discourse that combines all the virtues of literary expertise with none of the inconveniences of reading book-length material." Richard Rosen, *Bullcrit: The Reading Disorder of the Literary Fast Lane*, NEW YORK, Feb. 6, 1989, at 44, 44. (I considered relying only on news stories that quoted Rosen, since they were on LexisNexis and very easy to obtain—wouldn't that have been a rich irony?—but I went to our central library on campus, copied the article from the print volume, brought it back to my office, and read it. I'm glad I did: it is an interesting piece.)

But my reference to Proust is not merely bullcrit. It also illustrates a fundamental skill of a reference librarian: being able to remember a scrap of information and knowing how to find the source for it—in this case, borrowing *Swann's Way* from a friend. Knowing even a little about various works can come in very handy for us reference librarians. And, in my own defense against the bullcrit charge, I note that I am coming clean and not pretending to have read the work.

same databases, the same coworkers, the same basic tasks—and yet so much is different. (Peggy Jarrett observed that it is as if we all got new jobs that just happened to be with all the same people. We still know how to update the CFR, we just don't know where it is.) What makes the difference? Why, all those sensory experiences, from the view out my window (I now have a window!) to the feel of the carpet under my feet as I walk from the reference area to the staff lounge. We, of course, were continually sensing in the old building, but we were so used to everything there that the sensory stimuli were part of the background. The change has moved the senses to the fore. So I will take you on a sensory ramble—with a few observations about what this all means for the way we do our jobs.

¶3 Since it is so much on my mind, our new building figures prominently in my examples. It is a wonderful space and has many features that make it a very good place to work and to study. I give much credit for the functionality to Penny Hazelton, our library director, and to associate librarian Jonathan Franklin and all the librarians and staff who participated in the long planning process, from preparing the initial programming sheets to going over each draft plan the architects sent. This does not detract from the credit due the architects: as I understand it, one aspect of being a good architect is working well with clients, asking the right questions, and listening to the clients' concerns.

Vision

¶4 Vision is very important to us humans, and perhaps especially so to law librarians and legal researchers. (I am not saying that someone who is visually impaired cannot perform legal research—just that most of us, most of the time, take in the legal information we work with visually.) There is a reason that “fine print” refers to the details in legal documents: lawyers and others who work with legal texts have to read a lot of print, often in small fonts, and pay painstaking attention to details such as punctuation, word choice, and citations. Anecdotally at least, many law students get their first pair of glasses during their law school years. Many of us over forty cannot read law books without our bifocals (but then again we can't read maps or menus either, so the problem is not unique to our work). If anything, the new technologies have probably made this worse. Not only are we all dealing with the traditional fine print of law, but most of us also spend many hours a day peering at computer screens. One expert has remarked, “Eye-strain is the real repetitive stress syndrome of the information age.”²

2. Gene J. Koprowski, *A New Prescription for the Square-Eye Set?* WIRED NEWS (Jan. 8, 1998), at <http://www.wired.com/news/technology/0,1282,9537,00.html> (quoting Erik Nilsen, “a human-computer interaction expert and assistant professor of psychology at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon.”).

In the most current statistics I located, which were for 1979-80, “Professional, technical and kindred workers” (as the Bureau of the Census dubs us and others) were the occupational group most likely to have corrective lenses (eyeglasses or contacts). The U.S. average for (*cont. on p. 187*)

¶5 So we and our patrons need good light so that we can read the *Federal Register*, the *Standard Federal Tax Reporter*, and whatever is on our computer screens. That is just a start. We see much more in our libraries. The beautiful lines of an elegantly designed building, the art on the wall, the veneer on the tables, and the view out the window do affect how a library's users feel while they are there. The law students and others I have taken on tours certainly comment on all these things (and contrast them with what we had a year ago). We seem to have many more students in the library now, and I believe that the beautiful surroundings have something to do with that (as well as the comfortable chairs, a significant enhancement).

¶6 One of my longtime visual pleasures in libraries is watching the stacks as I walk down an aisle. I don't know why I like this, but I do. Maybe it is because it is like a perspective exercise for an artist who is not ready to tackle people, animals, and landscapes—down each aisle the stacks and their shelves recede toward the far wall, all the lines and angles just so, and then the next aisle appears and I see the same effect. I also like walking up and down an open staircase in a library, watching the stacks and tables on one floor appear as their counterparts on the other floor disappear. (Maybe this is a taste of what Dustin Hoffman's character found so fascinating about the passing bridge struts and highway fence posts on the cross-country drive in *Rain Man*.³)

¶7 Visual cues also make it easier (or harder) for users and library staff to find what they need. While I am very pleased with the lines of sight we have in the new building, I am aware that we are all struggling to replace our old landmarks (“the

(cont. from p. 186) people over 17 was 57.4%. Here are the occupational groups, arranged in order of prevalence of corrective lenses:

- professional and technical workers, 68.0%
- managers and administrators (except farm), 68.4%
- white collar workers, 65.5%
- private household workers, 64.6% (Note that about 15% of these workers were over 65.)
- clerical and kindred workers, 64.0%
- farmers and farm managers, 63.1%
- sales workers, 61.7%
- service workers (except private households), 53.7%
- farm workers, 53.4%
- craftsmen and kindred workers 48.8%
- operatives (except transport), 48.5%
- blue collar workers, 47.0%
- transport equipment operatives, 45.2%
- farm laborers and farm foremen, 40.3%
- laborers (except farm), 39.1%

NAT'L CTR. FOR HEALTH STATISTICS, U.S. DEP'T HEALTH & HUMAN SERVS., EYE CARE VISITS AND USE OF EYEGLASSES OR CONTACT LENSES UNITED STATES, 1979 AND 1980, at 40–42 tbl. 16, available at http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/series/sr_10/sr10_145.pdf. Of course, there are many ways to read these statistics. Do more professional workers wear glasses and contacts because their work demands it or because their work weakens their eyes? Or is it, at least in part, because they can afford them and often have insurance plans that cover them? Do fewer blue collar workers wear glasses because, even if their vision is not perfect, they can see well enough for their work? Do fewer laborers and farm workers wear glasses because they are often poor and uninsured?

Washington statutes are down there near the potted ficus tree”) with new ones. Some sets that researchers were used to finding by quickly scanning the room (“Where are the reporters? Oh, there, along that wall”) now must be found using—gasp!—call numbers. In time, we will all get used to where they are, both by call number and with other visual cues. We reference librarians will know both that “*Pacific 2d* is at KF 135 .P2 P32 in the reference area” and that “*Pacific 2d* is right behind that wall with the yellow artwork.” (I will just remember “KF135 point P-something,” but I know how to look up the full call number. Some patrons may rely only on the yellow artwork, but that’s okay if they find what they need.) Fortunately for all of us, the colors of the sets are the same as they were in the old building—*CJS* is blue, *USCS* is black, hornbooks are green, and so on. We might laugh at the patrons who remember *only* that the book they want is red, but we all appreciate being able to spot a familiar source when we get close to it in the stacks.

¶8 Library users have different preferences about how much background visual stimulation they want. Some students like the big tables in an open area where they can see (and be seen by) others coming and going. They can look out the windows and look at other people, as well as look at their work. Some students seek out study carrels (the further from other students, the better), preferring the monastic seclusion of having nothing but the walls of the carrel and their work. “Monastic seclusion” is a bit of rhetorical excess, actually. Some of the students in carrels have headphones plugged into MP3 players, travel mugs with espresso drinks, and computer games on their laptops—probably not common accessories in the average monastery. My point is that these students prefer not to have the distractions of a whole library and the trees and lawn outside in their peripheral vision.

Hearing

¶9 Talking about visual distraction leads naturally to audio distractions. There again, people’s preferences vary. I enjoy reading in coffee shops and restaurants with people coming and going, and I sometimes play a CD at my desk while I work. I am very comfortable with those background sounds. However, some people very much do *not* like to have sounds interfering with their thoughts when they are trying to work. There are simple solutions for some types of noise pollution. For example, when I am in the mood for music at work and the person next door to me is not, I can either close my office door or wear my headphones.

¶10 Other situations are harder to fix. What library has not had a sensitive patron complain about library staff shelving books or pushing book trucks? Unfortunately for those patrons who would like absolute quiet, some noise just has to happen in order for the institution to keep going. The noise-sensitive patrons can scope out the corner carrels where traffic is less likely, or get ear plugs. Others might use headphones so they can choose their own background sounds.

¶11 I was occasionally shushed by patrons in our old reading room while providing reference service. My telling someone how to use a source, though, seems

to me to be like the shelvers pushing a book truck through the stacks—it is part of the work of the library. I am optimistic that our new layout will be better in this regard, since there are some study areas that are removed from the sources we need to explain regularly.

¶12 Although I have been shushed (or perhaps because I have been shushed), I do not relish the stereotyped (but increasingly rare) librarian role of shushing patrons. With luck, a culture develops in which the patrons respect one another and make as little noise as they would like others to make. There may be a need for official intervention, but it is certainly easier for us—and more pleasant for the library users—if they collectively find a level of background noise that works.

¶13 After the library staff moved to the new building but before it was open, we routinely crossed an empty area diagonally on our way to our staff offices. One day, furniture installers came and began constructing study carrels, a great forest of them. We stopped taking the diagonal, naturally, but the area was still a thoroughfare to our offices. Then the library opened. My goodness, there were students sitting in those carrels! Going through that area was still the way to get to our offices, but we were suddenly aware of every sound we made. My windbreaker rustles when I head out to lunch. My keys jangle. My shoulder bag thuds against my hip. I have even noticed that the plastic tips on my shoelaces make a sound as they bounce against my shoes. I try to be quiet but I am no cat. I guess this might be another area where patrons need to accept that there will occasionally be people walking, and that means some rustling and some footsteps. Other carrels are far from the entrance to staff offices and other natural pathways, so patrons could choose to sit where they will not hear my windbreaker rustle. (The other day, I saw two young women pass by in quick succession. One had on very clunky platform shoes that made a distinct clopping noise. The next had flip-flops that slapped as she went down the cement steps from one level of the library to the next. I took some comfort in the fact that all sorts of people make noise moving around the library, and some of them make even more noise than I do.)

¶14 One thing that has changed dramatically since the early 1990s is patrons' tolerance for computer noise. When the first few researchers brought their laptops into our library, others complained about the clicking of the keys and all the other little sounds the laptops made. Fortunately, keyboards have become quieter. Meanwhile, laptops have become so common that we are used to them. Moreover, the rattling of several keyboards in a cluster of carrels blends and becomes easier to ignore than one keyboard alone. The row of PCs where students check e-mail is almost always full—and no one seems at all bothered by the clacking.

Touch

¶15 I do not want to ignore the sense of touch. It is also part of our experience of the library. Think of the difference between a fresh, new book, with smooth, pristine pages and, well, the opposite. Think of how a *Nutshell* feels in your hand—

the weight, the size. It is not the same as a casebook or a reporter or a *Gilbert's* or anything else quite. Cues like this—as well as visual impressions (color, length, typeface)—are missed online. A student looking at a page in a hornbook (and holding the substantial book and seeing the thickness of pages before and after that page) “knows” that it is not the same as a page from a slim *Nutshell*, whereas the two pages retrieved from an online search might appear comparable. Maybe online vendors will develop some cues that will substitute for the ready recognition we have with print formats.

¶16 Temperature is also perceived through the sense of touch. We all know that research cannot go well if the room is too stuffy for people to stay awake or too cold for people to concentrate or grip their pens. The architects who design the dramatic skylights get a lot of credit (and they should), but I also tip my hat to the engineers who make the heating and ventilation systems run.

¶17 Remember typing? I took typing classes in seventh grade and tenth grade, so I have been a touch typist for some time. Now I use that skill on keyboards during a good part of every workday. I strongly associate the letter “w” with a particular movement of my left ring finger. I used to associate the numeral “6” with an upward stretch of my right index finger, but I got an ergonomic keyboard that is split in the middle, so now I have to associate it with a stretch of my left index finger. (Well, to tell the truth, I still have not made a complete adjustment, and I often peek at the keyboard when I have to type a “6.”)

¶18 Speaking of ergonomic keyboards, we should think of ergonomics generally. Aching shoulders or tingling wrists might not be what you think of first when someone talks about the sense of touch, but our sense of our musculoskeletal system provides us with valuable information—for instance, the information that we are hurting ourselves at work. We need to consider ergonomics for ourselves and also for the users of our libraries. I already mentioned the comfortable chairs we have in the new building, and they are no small matter.

Kinesthesia

¶19 The kinesthetic sense is what tells us where our bodies are in space. This is a surprisingly important factor in using a library (or any building). In our old building, I knew kinesthetically as well as intellectually where the stairways were, how to get to the women’s room from my desk, and so on. I did not rely on a floor plan of the building; I did not see in my mind’s eye a map to get me from desk to restroom and back. I also did not recite to myself a set of instructions: “Leave office, take a dog leg to the elevator bank, go down the long hallway to the right about sixty feet, . . .” I just knew when to turn and what to do. You won’t be surprised when I say that what made me aware of my kinesthetic knowledge of the old building was landing in a new building. In my first weeks here, I walked past the staff mailroom many times, not because I didn’t know where it was on the floor plan but because I didn’t have the physical habit of turning when I got to the right cor-

ner. This same sense helps us—and patrons—get to the materials we are used to using. As we walk from the reference office to the federal statutes over and over, we will again develop the sense that it is about *this* many steps. After I repeatedly fail to grab on my first try the *Bluebook*, the *Statistical Abstract*, *Treaties in Force*, and other staples of the reference office, I will again develop the sense that *this* source is just *this* much up and a *little bit* over from the reference desk. I will be able to retrieve my favorite books just as easily as I once did. It is only a matter of time.

Smell and Taste

¶20 Even though I began these reflections with the sense of smell—the distinctive scent of a dry erase marker—smell and its sister sense, taste, are less significant to our experience of libraries than the other senses.⁴ Still, they do have some effect. It is obvious that unpleasant smells—moldy books, people with poor hygiene,⁵ abandoned banana peels—are, well, unpleasant. What we sometimes forget is that pleasant smells and tastes can enhance the library experience.⁶ Allowing drinks in covered containers was a popular rule change several years ago. The students (and others) like to have them while they study. Doubtless some of them drink coffee and soda for the neurochemical effects of caffeine and other substances, but taste is at least part of the drinks' appeal. Touch might also play a role: I know that one reason I like to sip something while I'm writing is because it gives me something to fidget with between sentences.

¶21 Food is important to us all. In planning the new building we recognized its importance to law students and created a lounge where they would be allowed to eat. So far, it is very popular. Happily, library materials seem reasonably safe from spills, because the students are mostly highlighting their own casebooks while they eat lunch. It seems likely that students who get in the habit of coming into the library for lunch will also study here at other times.

¶22 Finally, there is staff food. During all the stress of moving—working with our boxes stacked around us, learning a new phone system, and on and on—we

3. RAIN MAN (MGM/United Artists 1988).

4. In contrast to humans, dogs experience the world most intensely through smell. When Juno, one of Peggy's basset hounds, went blind, the veterinary ophthalmologist told Peggy that, fortunately, Juno smells in color—meaning that her sense of smell is as nuanced as our sense of vision. And, indeed, Juno weathered the transition quite well, all in all, and still takes in the richness of the world through her refined and sensitive nose.

5. See, e.g., *Kreimer v. Bureau of Police*, 958 F.2d 1242, 1248 (3d Cir. 1992) (upholding public library's regulation excluding "[p]atrons whose bodily hygiene is offensive so as to constitute a nuisance to other persons" against constitutional challenge).

6. The inimitable Marie Wallace alerted law librarians to the importance of smell and suggested that we even use scents in our presentations. See, e.g., Marie Wallace, *Finishing Touches*, 1 PERSPECTIVES: TEACHING LEGAL RESEARCH & WRITING 74, 76 (1993) ("Aroma is cutting-edge technology, especially in the legal community.").

kept our spirits up with food and parties. Those tastes and smells—as well as the sound and kinesthetic sense of laughter—helped us all make it through the move.⁷

Summing Up

¶23 This brief excursion⁸ into the sensory world of libraries is a reminder that libraries are deeply human institutions. They are not just containers for holding terabytes of information (or hundreds of thousands of volumes of books and microform equivalents). They are places where *people* study and work (and sometimes chat or nap). Thus, we should try to keep in mind all the ways that people experience anything—through all their senses—and plan and arrange our libraries accordingly.

7. Thanks to Penny and the library's various social committees.

8. After writing this essay, I checked out and read DIANE ACKERMAN, *A NATURAL HISTORY OF THE SENSES* (1990). It offers a broad and eclectic exploration of our sensory lives, skipping lightly among history, anthropology, psychology, neurology, and the author's own experiences, with an occasional fillip of word play and whimsy. This wideranging work includes one sensory tale from a library:

At Purdue University Library, a woman librarian goes about her business, checking out people's books. She is part of an experiment in subliminal touch, and knows that half the time she is to do nothing special, the other half to touch people as insignificantly as possible. She brushes a student's hand lightly as she returns a library card. Then the student is followed outside and asked to fill out a questionnaire about the library that day. Among other questions, the student is asked if the librarian smiled, and if she touched him. In fact, the librarian had not smiled, but the student reports that she did, although he says she did not touch him. This experiment lasts all day, and soon a pattern becomes clear: those students who have been subconsciously touched report much more satisfaction with the library and life in general. *Id.* at. 122–23.

It never occurred to me, in my brief discussion of touch above, to address touching between library staff and patrons. The more I think about it, the less I want to touch that issue (pun intended). Study or not, I will still encourage the students I train to smile at patrons rather than subtly brush their hands. Implementing a “subtle touch” policy seems rife with danger. What if the staff member's touch isn't subtle enough? Could patrons be either horribly offended or woefully misled as to whether further touching would be welcomed? There is enough risk of sexual harassment in libraries as it is. See Lea B. Vaughn, *The Customer Is Always Right . . . Not! Employer Liability for Third Party Sexual Harassment*, 9 MICH. J. GENDER & L. 1, 14–20 (2002) (discussing sexual harassment of library employees by patrons).