

# The Thrill of the Chase:

## Why

## We Love Reference

a.k.a. Take My Research, Please

by K.O. Woodhead

This was my first AALL conference as a newly hatched reference librarian and I must say it was a hoot and a half. From the business meeting of the LISTSERV-LIS, where the List Guys (Proc and Serve, the Un-subscribable Brothers) offered reviews of some recent additions to the law listservs:

- LIPREAD-L: Librarians Interested in Preserving Printed Reliable Editions of Authoritative Documents,
- ORWELLIAN-L: Organization for the Removal of Wily Lily-Livered Information Addict Nudnicks,
- PROWESS-L: Society for the Prevention of Wanton Eradication of Script and Seal, and
- BEWAIRE-L: Booksavers Enjoined to Watch the Accuracy and Integrity of Records Electric,

to rousing, and hilarious, late-night hotel bar conversations with other conferees about some of this season's new TV shows on the law: *Inchoate Offenses* (last night's episode was "Attempted Homicide"), *Law School* (the next episode will be "The Satanic Versus: Publish or Perish"), and my favorite, *Jury Duty* (the season-ending cliffhanger episode will be "Let Mikey Decide"). Before the evening ended we all joined in a rather boozy rendition of "It's My Job and I'll Cry If I Want To." Who said librarians aren't cool?

The most exciting daytime program I attended was called "The Thrill of the Chase: Why We Love Reference," in which several law librarians recounted stories of their all-time favorite or most memorable reference adventures. The most stirring story was "Desperately Seeking J," which was presented by a librarian who wished to remain anonymous, and whose voice and face were disguised. He asked to be called simply Z. (Or maybe it was Simply Z. I'll never know.)

Z described interviewing for a job with a large and well-known investigative agency, let's call it BV&C. To demonstrate his research skills, Z was given a case to investigate.

All Z had to work with was a packet of sticky-notes from someone called J. These notes were always found attached to various publisher mailings. Z was given a computer and a quiet place to work and was told to see how much he could find out about J in the next couple of hours.

Z set to work. Could he learn anything from the sticky-notes? Were they "Post-Its" or were they a generic brand? Did it matter? Do the words or syntax of the notes give any clues? J made heavy use of exclamation points! Could that indicate an excitable nature? Could it indicate an underlying fear that no one would listen unless J SHOUTED? Could this J be an egocentric, perhaps megalomaniac cypher with an underlying penchant for Post-It notes and abbreviations?

Hmmm ... Z pondered. This took some heavy thinking, especially since there wasn't much physical evidence. He noticed how J kept telling the sticky-note recipients what to do: Read this! I loved it! Try this! Buy it! Coupled with the egocentricity and heavy use of unrecyclable sticky paper, could it mean that J was not working alone and was just trying to disguise a close connection with a high tech, high-powered company, which more likely would pepper its customer base with unwanted e-mail messages, unnecessary and bloated upgrades, and invitations to fancy-dress cocktail parties?

And then it hit him! Z did a little key-pounding and checked back hard. "Yes!" he exclaimed. J had been seen in the company of A, E, I, O, U, and sometimes Y, but was never ever seen in the company of K! Was this the key? K, K, K ... KEY! Yes! The Dark Tower! Could J be employed by the Dark Tower? Z was stunned. The mind boggled. But, but... but the Dark Tower had nothing to do with these publications that J kept sending — or did they? Oh no ... it couldn't be they now owned EVERYTHING, including J!

But Z was a conscientious librarian and did not want to jump to conclusions without considering the alternatives. Could J be with the White Castle, the Evil Empire, or even ... no ... nothing else fit... it had to be the Dark Tower.

Z had one last brainstorm. Maybe J is a double agent, and is really JJ in disguise! Z then realized just how very good and seductive J was and how much J made people want to believe they were J's friends.

With head bowed and with a heart full of sadness, Z took the research report to the chief interviewer. She looked over the report and then looked at Z. "So, you figured it out," she said. "Yes," Z said, nodding gravely, "I figured it out. I'm very good at what I do."

And then, then ... the interviewer slowly and deliberately stuck a Post-It note on Z's job application ...

So this is reference, I thought! Wow! I was on the edge of my seat. Then Z walked off the podium. What? Wait! What happened? How did it end? Wasn't Z going to tell us? The next speaker in the program, who would talk on "Reference Traps: Are There Really Turtles All the Way Down?," stepped up to the lectern. She looked at us ... all with our mouths hanging open wondering what happened to Z. "Don't you see," she said, "In Reference You Never Ever See How It Ends."

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