

## BECOMING UNSHELVED

by Cindy Rider

**H**urry! Hurry! Hurry! Run, don't walk, to your nearest computer and surf your way to [www.overduemedia.com](http://www.overduemedia.com) to see yourself in print a la Dilbert in the comic strip called *Unshelved!* Co-authored by real-life librarian Gene Ambaum (a pen name) and software engineer-turned professional cartoonist Bill Barnes, *Unshelved* provides a humorous look at librarians while presenting various serious issues of our times, such as unattended children, Internet filtering, and the Patriot Act.

*Unshelved* debuted online on February 16, 2002 under the title *Overdue* and claims to be "the world's only daily comic strip set in a public library." (<http://www.overduemedia.com>)

although she does NOT wear a bun or even glasses! (Since I have never seen her feet, I'm not sure if she wears sturdy shoes, however.) Her major modern attribute is that she adopted a baby from China, thus becoming a single mom. Of course, what she reads to her baby isn't exactly Dr. Seuss.... (You'll have to check out the strip for October 12, 2002, in the website's archive to find out.)

Mel, the branch manager of the Mallville Public Library, tries hard to keep things running smoothly, but Murphy's Law frequently thwarts her efforts. Dewey is the laid back (spell that l-a-z-y) young Young Adult Librarian who readily embraces all things modern, such as downloading pirated music on library PCs, graphic novels, and (gasp!) disrespect for his elders!



FIGURE 1.

Its popularity grew quickly and it wasn't long before subscribers were asking for a book of the cartoons. Just as the book was about to be published, a trademark problem with the name *Overdue* was discovered, so the creators held a contest to rename the comic, resulting in the title *Unshelved*.

No one is safe from Bill and Gene. They get away with poking fun at stereotypical library professionals and patrons alike by keeping their tongues firmly implanted in their cheeks. Take Reference Librarian Colleen, for example. She's an old fashioned gal who is "technologically challenged" (i.e. computer illiterate),

We all know the patrons seen in this comic strip — the pseudo-techno savvy ones, those who either ask for books on multiple topics all in one breath, or don't know what they want, are confused, or make unrealistic demands (e.g. asking for photos of Moses). Patrons doing their kids' homework are fair game also.

Few topics seem to be taboo. Take gender difference in salary, for instance. This was explored in a series of cartoons in June, 2002. Mel is working the reference desk and tells a patron on the phone that she will not read him any more TV listings because "the library is a FINITE RESOURCE" and asks him to please

use it responsibly. It turns out that the patron is Dewey, sick in bed at home with a cold caught from a patron who sneezed on him. His whining and complaining prompts Tamara, the children's librarian, to say, "Men can be such whiners!" to which Mel replies, "And they STILL get paid more than us."

Another "hot topic" is budget cuts. It was addressed succinctly with only one cartoon on August 26, 2002:



FIGURE 2.

Other subjects dealt with include ergonomics, banned books, public displays of affection, tax forms, and the infamous "Library Police."

Ideas for the cartoons come from many sources. Bill writes on the Overduemedia.com website, "Some of the stories are made up, some of them are based on real life, and some are absolutely true stories sent to us from our readers. And the stranger the story, the more

over to Tamara and asks, "How long did that really tall guy make you wait in the video aisle?" Tamara icily replies, "Fifteen minutes." Mel returns to the patron and says, "Sorry, the computer just went down. It'll be back up in exactly fifteen minutes."

*Unshelved* is a brilliant source of tips on management techniques and providing excellence in customer service. The following exchange says everything one needs to know about Proper Attitude (the old "It's not *what* you say, but *how* you say it" thing):

Dewey (to patron): I'm afraid you have some serious fines here, ma'am.

Lady: Oh?

Dewey: These books are overdue by many months. Did you lose them?

Lady: Young man. I never lose ANYTHING.

Dewey: Okay then, it looks like you decided to keep them.

Lady: That's better. How much do I owe? (March 18, 2002)

One more area simply cannot be ignored any longer. It is a librarian's finest hour when he or she enlightens an impressionable young adult about the



FIGURE 2.

likely it is to be true." The writers actively seek opinions from readers to help maintain a humorous approach to each issue and keep them from being confusing. Experiences from their personal lives also enter the strip from time to time. For example, Bill recently returned to studying Aikido, so he had Tamara perform it on a male "problem patron" (August 9, 2003).

*Unshelved* is also great at giving its readers the opportunity to vicariously experience doing what we wish we could do in real life. One example is a strip I call "Payback": A male patron attempts to check out a video. Mel says to him, "One moment please." She steps

librarian's primary duty...SHUSHING!! This is aptly illustrated in the strip that ran November 23, 2002:

The June 11, 2003 "List-A-Day" website recommends *Unshelved*, saying it "takes a sarcastic look at all the weirdness that goes on whenever the general public approaches the reserve desk, the stacks or the computerized catalogs." Weirdness?? I resemble that remark! Truly, however, I love this comic strip because it treats the hard issues and the stress of my job with humor and helps remind me not to take myself so seriously. Watch for *Unshelved Volume 2*, due to be released on the comic's second anniversary, February 16, 2004. For

now, though, point your mouse to <http://www.overdue-media.com> and start laughing!

#### **SOURCES CITED:**

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