

## Raymond Chandler on Libraries

by Suzanne Wise

**R**aymond Chandler must have hung out in libraries because the master of the hard-boiled detective story captured their essence in the titles of three of his novels.

### *The Big Sleep:*

Librarians have traditionally proclaimed the noble mission of getting the right information into the right hands at the right time. For most of our history this approach has meant collecting and housing as much published knowledge as possible, as well as organizing it through classification systems, catalogs, and indexes so that the public, guided by our expertise, might find and use it. When computer technology came along, we gradually adopted it to help accomplish our goal.

That same technology is rapidly eroding the public's reliance on libraries. We have diligently taught our patrons the skills to make them self-sufficient information seekers, and the timely and customized information provision we have championed is now within reach. The era of end-user information retrieval has arrived.

We are not pleased about being squeezed out of our niche as mediators. When the federal government decided a few years ago to disseminate information through kiosks in post offices, there was a loud outcry from the library community at being bypassed. When information seekers choose to sit home with their favorite beverage and surf the Net at 3 A.M. rather than trudge to a remote building with insufficient parking and restricted hours of operation, we feel somehow betrayed.

Libraries will serve for a time as warehouses for the poor, but information seekers will certainly opt for the comfort and convenience of access unfettered by location and time of day. We reassure ourselves that a society without libraries is inconceiv-

able. The Internet is undisciplined, a chaotic black hole fraught with junk as well as jewels. Much of the substantive information there is fee-based, and the availability of full text to fill most needs is still light years away. Sleep on.

### *The Long Goodbye:*

Every day there is better and easier access to the Net. Digital information is burgeoning, as illustrated by the Government Printing Office's plan to transfer most publications to electronic format by 1998. The public already pays for information through taxes and tuition. In fact, individuals subsidize services and information in which they have no personal interest in order to get the bit they want. Inevitably they will choose to access only what is needed and to pay for it in the same way they do for that other revolutionary medium, television — through interminable commercials, higher-priced consumer products, subscriptions for special programming, and voluntary contributions to support noncommercial offerings.

Will librarians all join the unemployment line? Not necessarily. We still have the opportunity to offer the customer a value-added product. This is not about technology, although the revolution is certainly driven by it. The issue we must confront is whether we have the nerve to put our services where our platitudes are and give customers what they want when they want it. Every one of us knows that a patron will wait an hour to use an electronic product when he could consult the print equivalent and be finished in fifteen minutes. Direct delivery of a periodical article beats slogging down to the library to find the volume containing it (if it is subscribed to and if it is on the shelf) and paying for photocopies (if you have the right change and if the copier is working properly and if the

line to use it isn't too long). Libraries must shed the old philosophies and service concepts to embrace a customer-oriented mission. As the multitude of failed businesses emphatically illustrates, if consumers can't get what they want from one provider, they will go elsewhere. Without even a goodbye.

### *Farewell, My Lovely:*

What do our customers really want? Let's ask them, and rather than trying to add a few new frills to traditional services, let's totally rethink the match of their needs and what we offer. For example: accept credit cards; deliver resources directly to the customer through electronic or mechanized channels of distribution (it works for the pizza guys); stop the insanity of massive duplication of rarely used material and establish cooperative depositories, which will gradually evolve from print to digital; eliminate rigid vertical hierarchies and make timely decisions; discard labor-intensive group library instruction sessions in favor of individual consultation on demand. The revolution in mail-order, television, and Internet shopping should convince us to begin planning for a "we never close" concept of information service based on e-mail and telephone, cooperatively supported by public, academic, and corporate affiliates, and divorced from a physical building.

Do I simplify? Grossly. But in the next decade the changes in information provision will make the move from horse and buggy to moon shot seem minuscule. The expectations of Generation X are high. Our historical response of pleading insufficient resources, rather than focusing on what must change to respond YES, RIGHT NOW!, is no longer viable. Unless we wake, a good and worthy institution will fade into irrelevance. Farewell, my lovely.