

To catch a spy: When the FBI decides to go by the books

This isn't the sort of thing I normally talk about, but we're living in the Age of Candor, aren't we? So here goes: I was a member of the Library Squad. It's true.

I may have been a draftee — Mrs Lawless was my fourth grade teacher, and Mrs Lawless was in charge of the library — but there I was. Something else you ought to know: I liked it.

We learned, all of us, how to put those shiny plastic covers on the new arrivals. We learned to pull books off the shelves by their sides and not their tops — no broken spines for us. We even learned a bit of the Dewey Decimal System.

What we didn't learn, back there on the Library Squad, was how to catch spies. If only Mrs Lawless had planned ahead.

Maybe you missed this in the papers the other day: The FBI has put together a cheery little something called the 'Library Awareness Program'. It's designed to step up America's fight against foreign espionage by bringing in the big guns — librarians.

Chortle all you want to. Guffaw. The FBI is not amused. They may not see foreign agents lurking under your bed anymore — they think they're all hiding in the stacks. Foreign spies make secret contact in libraries, the FBI says; they've even tried to recruit students there to do their bidding. And then there are all those books, many just filled with important technical information. Some they read, some they

steal. This is not good.

The Soviet spy Gennadi Zakharov, who was arrested in 1986 and later returned in a trade for American journalist Nicholas Daniloff, apparently did just those kinds of things in libraries in New York. It was Zakharov's arrest, in fact, that got the Library Awareness Program (LAP) started in its current form. Presumably, if Zakharov had done his recruiting in smoky little cafes the way they do in the spy novels, the FBI would even now be contacting hundreds of waiters named Sergio.

But it was libraries, so the FBI wants librarians to watch out for, and report on, anybody who looks or acts like a spy. Which raises at least one small question: What does a spy look or act like, and how's a librarian supposed to know?

No problem, suggests an FBI agent quoted by the *Inquirer*. An alert librarian 'would be able to see what kind of person you are. They could check your handwriting, see whether you're a research student or whether you're crazy or whether you're a threat.'

And you thought all they could do was say 'Shhhhhh!'

Wait — there's more, from the same agent. Librarians doing their part could also contact the FBI about 'suspicious' people who exchange documents with other people in the library, or ask for books about military installations or new technologies or underground tunnels, or speak a foreign language.

Needless to say, the stuff sitting on library shelves — even the stuff about tunnels or technologies or military bases — isn't classified; that's why it's allowed on the shelves, where people can get at it. Who knows why Smith and Jones are exchanging paper over at

the far table?

Needless to say, too, most librarians aren't thrilled about having LAP dumped into their laps. The American Library Association has asked for congressional hearings. It's reminded member libraries that state and federal laws protect the privacy of library patrons. And it's filed a Freedom of Information Act request with the FBI to figure out just how far the program has already gone.

'We're not trying to be Big Brother or anything,' says the FBI agent. Big Brother — isn't that from a book or something?

Rick Horowitz

(Reproduced from the Philadelphia Inquirer, 9 March 1988, information supplied by Agent Alexis A. Yeadon, Queanbeyan City Library).

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