Book review

An unsettling look at the future

Shuman, Bruce A *Beyond the library of the future: more alternative futures for the public library.* Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1997. 178p US$30.00 hard ISBN 1563084562 (available from James Bennett Pty Ltd).

If you want serious consideration of the public library's future, then do not look here. What you will get is part futurism and part science fiction, for once we go 'beyond' the library of the future — technology offers us unlimited potential to transform the public library into, well, anything we want it to be. The limits lie only in what we can dream. The eight scenarios here are tales from the early twenty-first century about Frank Fairlawn, director of the local public cybrary.

Shuman writes with that typically American combination of breathless expectancy and know-all sagacity of the 'Don't believe it? Stay tuned. Book implants just may happen' variety. It takes a while to get used to the content and style, for after setting off at a racing pace, Shuman's mood turns darker and pessimistic. The first scenario is set in The ExperienCybrary. Members of the public can enjoy a virtual reality climb up Everest, score a try at Eden Park, have a night out with Whitney Houston, or whatever takes their fancy. Yes, it's *Total Recall* at your public library. It sounds like fun, but I can not make any connection between this and the established mission of the public library. Schuman says the ExperienCybrary will make the government lots of money and provide added value by giving therapy to those in need. We just have to cope with 'adult' virtual reality and the inevitable cases of addiction. This scenario leaves one feeling rather uncomfortable, and I'm not just referring to the whitewater rafting virtual reality.

Having got used to the idea, the second scenario, of a time machine available for hire in your friendly local cybrary, does not seem quite as bizarre as perhaps it should. In the third scenario a virus infects the cybrary and quickly takes over the entire 'United States Communication Network'. Well, if in thirty years time we can not stop that from happening we deserve all we get. The fourth scenario has Fairlawn ordering aromatherapy piped directly into his house from the Diversified Library of Essences. The bleak fifth scenario ('After the power went off') could have been an uplifting tale of individuals struggling to survive in a violent city where the cybrary is a beacon of light through the gloom. Unfortunately, when two brave souls run the gauntlet to the cybrary door and then see all the thousands of almost untouched books, all that lonely, frightened Frank can think to ask is whether they will bring him some soup next time they come. The sixth story uses the familiar idea of brain implants to control behaviour, this time with the twist that people are plugged into the cybrary. In the seventh scenario Fairlawn is asked to co-operate with government surveillance of suspected criminals, the only problem being that government suspicion falls on nearly every member of the population. The final tale has Frank on Mars and doing very little at all.

This is a sequel to, not a revision of, Shuman's *The library of the future* (Libraries Unlimited, 1989). It is definitely not required professional reading, though information professionals with a taste for science fiction will enjoy it. There is an index, but its scope is limited because so much of the book is fiction. There is a bibliography of 'readings relevant to the study of the future, with special respect to the future of the public library'. The most enjoyable part of the book is the set of quotations about the future. My favourite comes from good old Anonymous, who said, 'Perhaps the best thing about the future is that it comes only one day at a time'. After reading this rather gloomy book of prognostication, I could not agree more.

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