

Fundamentals of Reference. Carolyn M. Mulac. Chicago: American Library Association, 2012. 144 pp., Softcover, US \$52. ISBN 978-0-8389-1087-0.

“Reference work is not a solitary pursuit and neither is writing a book about it” (p.ixv). Carolyn M. Mulac, a reference librarian and manager of the Chicago Popular Library, presents to the reader, be it librarian, library staff member, manager, or library school student, with a core guide covering the basic premises of reference service in today’s libraries. Provision of information assistance is a vast undertaking and Mulac is quick to point out that her book is intended to present the big picture of reference in lieu of focussing on all the details.

The duties of the information professional have undergone constant change in the past few years, due in large part to the increasing deluge of electronic resources and the notion by some that reference assistance is underutilized and perhaps of less importance compared to the past. Mulac addresses this concern by covering not only key reference sources (print and electronic formats) in numerous disciplines, but also discusses the policies, standards, and means by which reference service is currently being evaluated. Written in a narrative format, complete with interjections about her own experience in libraries, Mulac accents each of her chapters with a quotation pertaining to either a particular source or service, and entices the reader to follow reference tips that, while intended perhaps for a novice library professional, will be of benefit to the seasoned librarian as well.

Each of the 18 chapters, consisting of only a few pages devoted to a particular topic, seems at first glance to be organized somewhat haphazardly (encyclopedias are discussed earlier than websites). However, in retrospect, this may be a deliberate tactic by Mulac to reinforce the assertion that her book is merely a guide, scratching the surface of the components of reference service. Each chapter could thus be seen as an encyclopedic entry, intended for referral on an as-needed-basis, rather than being read through from the beginning.

Trying to keep abreast of the latest information available on a particular topic can be overwhelming, and is realistically not feasible, particularly for library staff working in a more generalist

environment, such as a public library. Mulac thus considers herself as more of an expert in knowing where to find information on a particular topic, rather than possessing in-depth knowledge of the subject itself. Reference service thus fundamentally, particular in today's technology rich society, involves a push methodology, where keeping current and raising awareness of the latest resources and trends does, or so it may seem at times, win out over basic service provision. Mulac thus devotes a chapter not only to online reference service (in particular e-mail and chat), but also reinforces the importance of a proper reference interview, regardless of the medium (in-person, telephone, chat, e-mail, or web-form) by which the query is received.

Although written by a public librarian, this book will appeal to librarians in any setting, with the possible exception of those working in a small special library setting (where some of the resources or methods introduced in this book may seem too trivial). Nevertheless, one cannot lose site of the importance of establishing clear-cut reference policies at the outset (which will hold particular significance to those new to the profession, or those attempting to revitalize the library after a major renovation). Mulac's extensive appendix, consisting of links to numerous documents produced by the American Library Association (ALA), along with a comprehensive bibliography sheds light on the importance of reference services, particularly as "reference librarians know a little about a lot of things" (p.xi).

Reviewed by Marcus Vaska, Librarian, Health Information Network, Calgary