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Challenge Accepted: Request Becomes Quest

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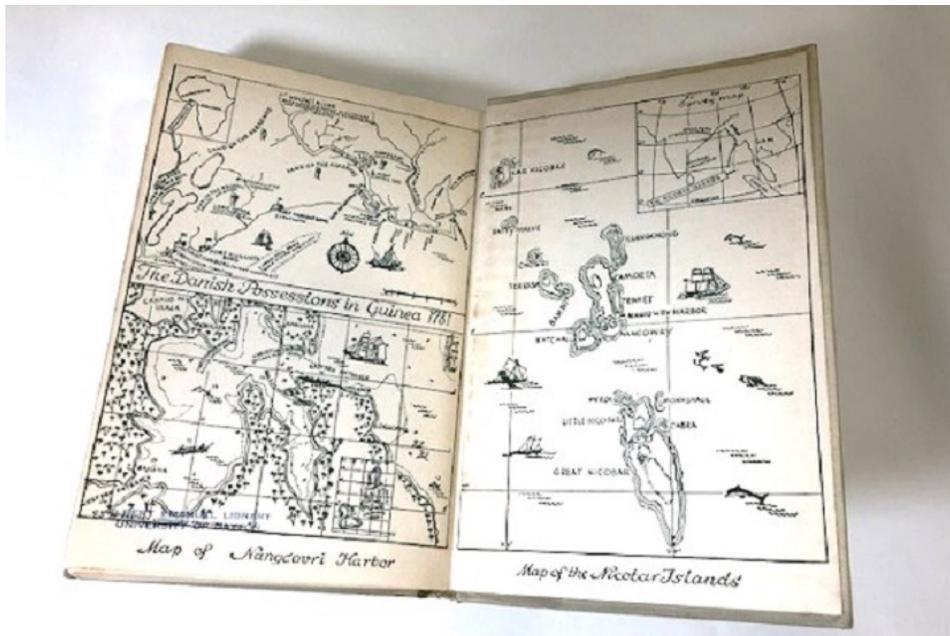
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Challenge Accepted: Request Becomes Quest

By Christopher Tangeman

Many of us have heard the anecdotes, told the jokes or seen the memes. Librarians often find resources based upon the vaguest or most inaccurate information. In fact, one of the first things prospective librarians learn in grad school about providing reference services is how to get at what the patron is really seeking, regardless of how they form their initial inquiries. And if you have ever staffed a service desk at a library, it is likely that you have experienced similar questions.

“I’m looking for a book. I forget the title, but it has a red cover.”

My own daughter recently asked at our public library for a book whose cover has “a girl and a boy walking on a bridge with a cat with hooves and a mustache, and buildings in the background with a giant fire” (translation: *Sophie Quire and the Last Storyguard*, by Jonathan Auxier). And yes, we found it.

These situations even turn up in movies. When a young library employee played by Parker Posey mishears a patron’s request and points her toward books about oranges and peaches, the more experienced librarian recognizes the patron’s request for Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (the movie in question is *Party Girl*, 1995).

Library staff experience perplexing searches like these all of the time. But librarians are wizards! Librarians can find anything!

Well, I am pleased to add another tale to the library search canon.

A visiting patron from the community recently entered our library, came up to our service desk and said, “I am

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looking for a book. I was here *years* ago, and I took a few pictures of a book on the fifth floor, including some maps and the cover. But one of the pictures was a complete blur. It was the cover. I want to find that book.”

Me: “OK. Do you remember what the title was?”

Him: “No.”

Me: “Do you know who wrote it?”

Him: “No.”

Me: “Can you tell what the call number is from the pictures?”

Him, looking at the pictures: “Ummm, no.”

Me, looking at the pictures: “This picture has other books on the shelf in the image. Maybe we can tell from those.”

Him: “Well, I moved to a completely different row on the fifth floor where the light was better so that I could take the pictures.”

Me: “Hmmm. Were you looking at any certain genre of books or any specific topic?”

Him: “No. But it was a fiction book. Do you have fiction books in one section? Like in the public library?”

Me: “Not really. There are tens of thousands of books on the fifth floor that are in the Library of Congress class P, which is the class for Language and Literature.”

Admittedly, my training in the art of the reference interview occurred many years ago, and my subsequent years of focusing on interlibrary loan requests has left me more than a little out of practice. I was not able to glean anything useful from his description of the events of that day; I wasn’t even able to determine what year this photographic session had transpired.

The books had most certainly been shifted in the intervening years, as there had been a shuffling of the call

as well as the 44 million materials available through UD’s membership in OhioLINK.

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numbers housed on the fifth floor just a couple of years earlier.

Had the book met the fate of many others in the name of a growing collection and in the face of an ever-growing search for more collaborative space in the library? Had it been withdrawn? Weeded? Deaccessioned? Was it even still in the building?

STAY POSITIVE, MAN! LET'S WORK WITH WHAT WE HAVE.

The pictures he had (the ones that were clear) were of three maps that showed the Nicobar Islands, Nangcouri Harbor and Danish possessions in Guinea. OK, let's do some librarying.

I went to the [library catalog](#) to look for those three things. Subject searches in the catalog for Nicobar Islands, Nangcouri Harbor and variations on "Danish possessions in Guinea" turned up nothing. OK, how about keyword searches? Nothing but e-books and history books (Library of Congress class D — on the fourth floor instead of the fifth).

Next I went to our [database search page](#) and tried those same searches, limiting the searches to books at UD. Again, nothing but e-books and history books on the fourth floor.

Then I just pattered around on Google and Wikipedia for a while (I get paid to do this!) to see if I could find different search terms or books on the subject, other than history books. One might be surprised at how many times this has led to my locating an interlibrary loan book or article from an old and/or obscure citation (see [A Tale of Interlibrary Loan Sleuthing](#)).

The only leads I came up with, some of which my colleague Elizabeth Jacobs had independently found through her own searching, were *Chronicles of Martin Hewitt* (contained a story called "The Nicobar Bullion Case") and a variety of non-UD books, all of which were

located in the PR section of the fifth floor. That line of inquiry led to nothing.

Finally, I looked through the variety of subject groups covered by the Library of Congress Classification System. I found mentions of Danish this or that in a few different places, including the call number range PD3001 to PD3929, for books about the Danish language. That didn't seem likely since the maps were in English. So I looked in the range PT7601 to PT8260 for Danish literature. Again, the maps were in English, so I didn't know if this would be helpful. But it was worth a look.

Doing an LCCN (Library of Congress call number) scan from PT7601 to PT8260 showed a lot of books about Danish literature or of specific titles by Danish authors. So up to the stacks I went.

I could see in one of the patron's pictures of the maps that it looked like the cover of the book might be white or some off-white shade, so I had something to look for on those rows of shelves between PT7601 to PT8260.

And — lo and behold! — there was an ivory-colored, almost cornsilk-colored book on the bottom shelf (they're always on the bottom shelf). On its spine was the title *The House With the Green Tree*, and on its front cover was a clear version of the tree that the patron had taken a picture of however many years ago.

I notified the patron, who was very happy to be reunited with the 1944 book.

“No, sir. I require no gifts or monetary remuneration. The smile on your face is prize enough for me. For I am a librarian, and finding books is my business.”

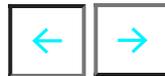
— *Christopher Tangeman is the interlibrary loan borrowing specialist in the University Libraries. His preternatural searching skill does not extend to finding lost keys, Easter eggs or his 4-year-old's missing shoe (every single morning), but if it's a book you seek, it is a book he will find.*



First Clue: A Blurry Photo

1/7

No title, no author, no call number.



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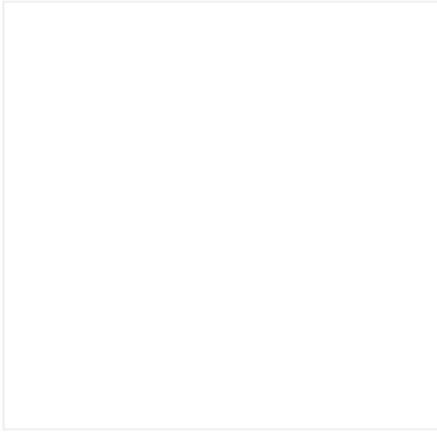
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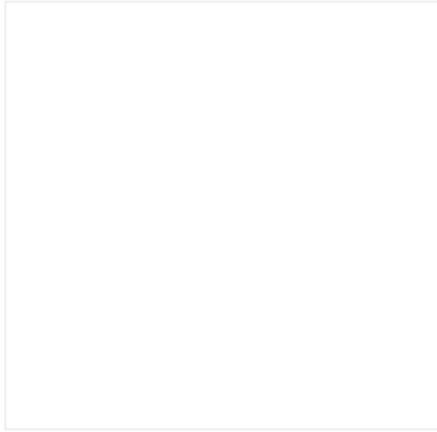
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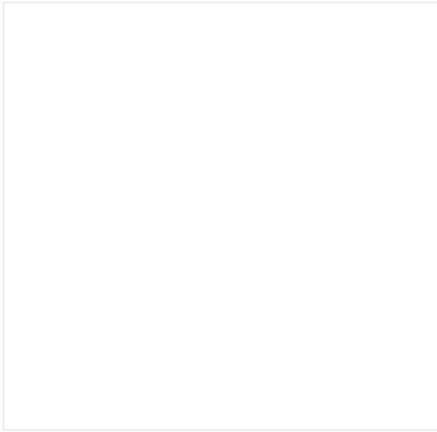
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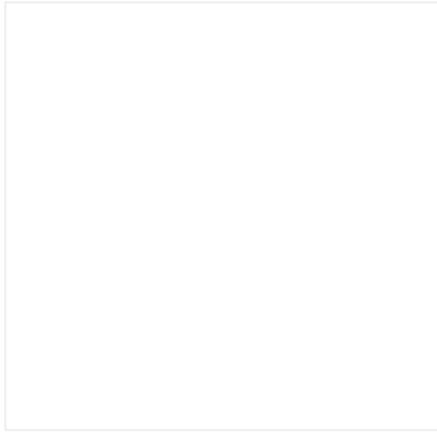
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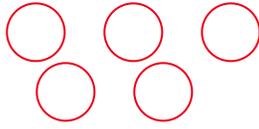
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