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Managing a Small Theological Library: How to Color with Broken Crayons by Kris Veldheer – A Review Story

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This open access title from Atla is aimed at both those who are not already based in small theological libraries (STL) and those who are. Indeed, the introduction focuses on whether readers have what it takes to work in STL. An interesting premise and here we hit the first fundamental difference between Europe and the USA: the nature of the role and title of STL librarians.

Never have I encountered the words ‘library director’ so often in a few paragraphs. To be fair, that is in part down to Kelly Campbell, who wrote the foreword, but Veldheer also heavily refers to their own experiences as a library director and the main issues they faced, as these formed the main impetus for writing this book in the first place. But let’s face it, whether you have this title or not, as the professional librarian (PL) in this context, all the issues still apply.

The PL is the one who faces revalidation course paperwork from the library perspective, makes cases for staffing or budget increases, and ensures that senior management understands what issues STL face.

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Another language divide is in the use of the term “public services’, an area in which Veldheer suggests STL librarians should be proficient in alongside technical services. From a UK perspective, this must mean customer/user services. They are certainly correct in identifying one of the blessings of STL work: to be responsible for all aspects of the management of the service, including delivery, promotion, and development.

Veldheer states that they could not find books relevant to them back in 2017. Of course, St. Clair and Williamson’s *Managing the new one-person library* (1992); Cooperman’s *Managing the one-person library* (2014); and the ABTAPL guidelines for theological libraries (2008) were in print at that time. However, Veldheer chooses to lean into ‘ten core topics’ from their own management practice.

These are:

- The function of the library and priority setting
- Staffing and the nuances involved in ensuring all tasks are done
- Collection development
- Budgets and budgeting to get the best value
- Service needs of users
- Solo librarians: a chapter written in dialogue with other ATLA colleagues
- Cross-institutional work
- Managing up
- Accreditation
- Succession planning

Why crayons, and broken ones at that? Some of the ATLA Small Libraries Interest Group members had expressed resource envy in terms of the big boxes of crayons held by other librarians. One noted that the contents of their own, imperfect, eight crayon box was often broken. Yet the irony is that the small library is the one in which the PL has to be multi-purpose. There is a lovely summary of the STL, pages vii–viii, highlighting the special nature of the environment, i.e., one of community, not always found in larger places. There is a nod to that in the expression of thanks addressed to ATLA librarians.

The tone is conversational, with questions and examples interspersed throughout the text. This is done to create a reflective situation for the reader. In each chapter, the key points are summarised and followed by the relevant references. As such, it is not a book to be read from cover to cover but dipped into so that attention is paid to the pressing elements at any given time.

For readers prone to skipping forewords and introductions, the book starts by examining S. R. Ranganathan's *The Five Laws of Library Science*. Veldheer suggests that the 'laws' outlined by Ranganathan are a useful springboard when it comes to time management and setting priorities; in effect, asking, 'What are the essential functions of my library, and how am I going to get things done?' The book explores the work of George Eberhart, former senior editor for the American Library Association, in order to provide answers to these questions.

Unlike Lucy Roper's *The Solo Librarian: A Practical Handbook* (2024), this is not a practical book, in that it does not take the reader by the hand and provide templates, but rather frames everything as suggestions. There are descriptions, however, of what a strategic plan, or goal-setting, might look like.

Here we hit a major failing of the book. Overall, whether a PDF or hardcopy form, the text is dense and tightly packed. Despite the use of subheadings and easily distinguished case studies, paragraphs are long. When combined with clunky phraseology, the content is difficult to process.

Perhaps the physical style was an attempt to keep the number of pages down to 167, Roper is 420 pages, as publishing is a pricey business. But compared to a Facet Publishing text this is a very old-fashioned take on a book.

Open access books are a progressive way forward, but there is no index with links restricted to references and additional resources only. There is no way to search for key terms, and no list of case studies; neither are there footnotes or endnotes.

Solo librarianship takes up a fraction of the whole book. The chapter is said to be the result of conversations with others. Whilst stressing the benefits and advantages

of solo librarianship, Veldheer also holds that solo librarians, described as the 'air traffic controllers of the library world', must create connections in order to thrive. Yet this section is filled with examples of the author's work life, revisiting aspects found in other chapters. Unfortunately, the delivery of this content is fettered by the aforementioned stylistic choices of the book.

Does the book meet its objectives? Yes, non-STL PL will get a real insight into the situation on the ground. In addition, I think any person considering solo working would gain from spending time with the book, as would students looking for reflections on actual day-to-day practice.

The book also benefits from being accessible, as far as LIS books go, since the paper copy is affordable and there is the option to access the PDF or EPUB version online.

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