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The Library of High Water

Venice, Italy —

Ask any librarian, and she will tell you that water and books are a lethal combination. Once a book gets wet, mold sets in very quickly. Unfortunately, once mold sets in, the book needs to be isolated and destroyed. Why? Because mold will spread quickly to the other volumes in the collection, destroying it over time. When a burst water pipe or flood occurs in a library, the best course of action is to immediately freeze the books to halt mold from forming. There are actual companies that provide refrigerator trucks to the library site in order to save the thousands of books in the collection when an emergency strikes. The books are then freeze-dried in hopes of containing the damage. But I digress…because what I really want to share with you are my vacation photos…….

As I’ve mentioned before, we librarians are a nerdy bunch. One source of fascination for us is other libraries. If a librarian goes on vacation, chances are good that she will attempt to visit another library. I’m serious, we all do it. We want to see what other libraries are doing, how they are doing it, and measure whether or not we do it better. We want to gather new ideas, and we want to share our ideas with others. The library world is very different from the corporate world. It’s not about the financial bottom line or corporate secrets. It’s about serving, sharing, and helping people, and we love it.

Keeping that in mind, I had the good fortune to visit Italy recently. One of the sites that was a “must-see” for me was a place called, “Libreria Acqua Alta” in Venice, Italy. When I first learned of this library (actually a bookstore), I wasn’t sure whether to be fascinated or horrified. The librarian in me was screaming, “They’re doing everything wrong in this place!” The creative person in me saw the beauty in using old, unwanted books in ways I never imagined, such as steps up to the fire escape next to the canal or an outside wall made completely of books. Apparently, they do plan for the flooding of the canal because the used books are contained in cast iron bathtubs, small boats, a full-size gondola, climbing up the walls and spilling over onto anything and everything. When the canal waters come up over the fire escape and flood the store, the water can be several inches deep. Storing the books in this quirky manner makes some sense……Hence, the gondola in the middle of the store.

If you guessed that the owner is a bit eccentric, you’re right. Senor Luigi Frizzo is the proprietor of this shop. He loves sharing his bookstore with others. He’s even adopted a few library cats that you will see lounging lazily on shelves here and there. One can tell the man has a sense of humor by the décor of the shop.

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I was on sensory overload so I didn’t notice until later that there was a certain method of organization for the books after all. Certain genres were shelved in the gondola, others were shelved in a particular bathtub, yet others were shelved in a boat and so on.

So, what about the moldy books used as walls, stairs, and art? Many booklovers view this as sacrilege. Destroying a book or allowing a book to mold and rot publicly can be a hard sight to swallow. As a librarian with over 17 years’ experience in public libraries, I’ve dug through numerous donations of books that just needed to be thrown out. It did take some time for me to accept this. Unfortunately, many booklovers aren’t able to face the fact that their encyclopedia set from 1953 showing Saturn with only one moon is of no use, information-wise. Yet, booklovers cannot throw them away. We would receive visibly moldy books (and worse) as donations to the public library due to the stigma attached to discarding or destroying a book. Seeing Senor Frizzo’s beautiful, old books being used in a new, artful way for me is a wonderful sight. However, I realize it’s not for everyone.

Senor Frizzo is so delighted with his bookstore that his shingle outside reads, “Welcome to the most beautiful bookstore in the world. Free Entrance.”

Enjoy your summer!
Sandra E. Murphy, Director