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## Word games

The earnest young face gazed trustingly up at me. 'I need a book about copper knickers', she said. A librarian knows everything and she had no doubt I would lead her straight to the shelf that held a treasure trove of information about her subject, all neatly summarised and presented in the exact format that would match what her teacher demanded, with pictures, in colour; glossary, citations and references listed.

Maybe, I thought, they were doing mediaeval history and the matter of chastity belts had entered the discourse. The teacher would have explored the reason these devices had been constructed; the feudal lord's chauvinist distrust of female frailties and male foibles; his obsession with protecting his property from marauding neighbours or secret swains. Or had the crafty teacher told her class that the librarian would explain everything? A stray thought about 'girding my loins' seemed almost Freudian.

What other questions would this small person ask me once we had the open page of illustrations? Would a cool pragmatic assertion that it protected women from unwanted overtures be within her knowledge pool? She looked about nine or ten years old - what had her mother or her friends or the Internet taught her so far? Kids were so much more knowledgeable at a younger age than my generation, but surely . . . ? And what about the question of rust? And of hygiene? All my own unanswered questions twirled their inquisitive heads in anticipation.

As the 909 shelf loomed in the distance, I debated internally the art of delegation. I would become more proficient at it if I practised it more regularly. This would be an ideal time and here was a handy assistant who would in turn benefit from practising her retrieval skills. 'Betty, please show this young lady the books on the Middle Ages and help her find something about chastity belts.'

'What's a chastity belt?' was the swift response - not from the child but from Betty. So much for delegation! 'Shall we

find out together then?' I invited in mentoring mode. As we paged through the books and I finally found a drawing and a brief descriptive paragraph, I felt the thick cloud of incomprehension fold us in its dank embrace. It was laced with depression, shot with disappointment, coloured with fear of failure and it emanated from my young customer.

'But I want a book on copper knickers, not this junk,' was the plaintive interjection from my enquirer. 'About stars and things . . . you know, teacher said one of those really old Greeks or Romans or something.'

Copernicus, the Polish astronomer, was just a step away in the 920s and quite without any elements of sexual sensitivity. I whipped his biography triumphantly from the shelf and the balance of the natural universe was restored. The child's once wavering faith in the infallibility of librarians stabilised and strengthened; the momentary lapse of direction towards knickers was forgotten and the sun of happiness broke through the dispersing clouds of uncertainty. Librarians are masters of illusion, misdirection and perception - the magic is in the punch line!

As Betty and I walked away, she displayed her lack of experience of office politics by questioning my faux pas. 'So why were you going on about chastity belts?' she persisted inconveniently and incautiously, spoiling my façade of composure. My honeyed tones did not disguise the malice of my words. 'Remember your surreal experience last week when you offered those three teenagers botanical illustrations of the structure of a flower when they asked for information on the Sex Pistols? They had to be scraped off the floor and could hardly stagger out the library for hysterical laughter. I on the other hand provided you with a role-play learning opportunity.'

*Earlier this year the Public and Community Libraries Interest Group (PACLIG) offered a single grant to any member to attend the 12th LIASA annual conference in September this year. To qualify, members could submit their most humorous or embarrassing story dealing with the public. Lyn Steyn walked away with the award. She gratefully acknowledges an ex-colleague, Ethel May Gillard.*