

**Robert's Rules of Order**

a monologue

by David Jason Snow

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*“Any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.”*

**Catharsis at the expense of others:**  
a hack’s credo

It might be foolish to bite the hand that feeds you, but I’m only famous for my good looks, not my intelligence or tact. So, to those colleagues of mine who object to the tone and content (“vicious” and “scurrilous” respectively, by my own estimation) of the script in hand, and resent the shallow stereotyping and gratuitous character assassination that constitute its *modus operandi*, my advice is, “write your own damn play, Shakespeare.” If satire possesses any virtue, it’s the power to offend; attempting to blunt offense or deflect criticism with an excuse that it’s all in good fun is cheap hypocrisy. Hypocrisy deserves more reverence than that.

- DJS

*For Robert Sherrane*

*The stage is dark. A recording of the aria “Ia liubliu vas, Olga” from Tchaikovsky’s opera Eugene Onegin emanates from an unseen boombox on stage. Lights fade up to reveal a stage bare except for the small table at which ROBERT is sitting stiffly, his hands primly folded. Resting upon the table along with the boombox are a stack of paper, a thick paperback tome, and a pen. Robert’s expression is severe; his eyes nervously scan the audience. At length he turns off the music and pauses before addressing the audience in a brittle, pedantic tone.*

#### ROBERT

Rule 5.1A1. Punctuation. For instructions on the use of spaces before and after prescribed punctuation, see Rule 1.0C. Precede the title of a supplement or section (see 1.1B9) by a full stop. Enclose the general material designation in square brackets. Precede each parallel title by an equals sign. Precede each unit of other title information by a colon. Precede the first statement of responsibility by a diagonal slash. Precede each subsequent statement of responsibility by a semicolon. For the punctuation of this area for items without a collective title, see 1.1G.

*A beat.*

A chicken-and-egg conundrum for your consideration: does my profession attract diseased personalities, or do the Black Arts of description and classification cripple otherwise healthy psyches? From my experience I’ve concluded there’s truth to both propositions. We cast-offs from the creative professions, wounded as we are by failure, naturally gravitate towards a discipline that relieves us of responsibility to reinvent the world, and instead only requires us to slavishly serve other people’s muses. But whatever damage we’ve incurred in the course of our dysfunctional lives can only be exacerbated by performing a job that crushes the spirit and extinguishes whatever spark of humanity we still possess.

*A beat.*

Rule 5.1B1. Transcribe the title proper as instructed in Rule 1.1B. If a title consists of the name or names of one or more type or types of composition, or one or more type or types of composition and one or more of the following: medium of performance; key; date of composition; number: treat type of composition, medium of performance, etc., as the title proper.

*Robert relaxes a little, picks up the stack of paper, and taps the bottom edge of it smartly against the tabletop to even the sheets. He replaces the stack*

*on the table, picks up the pen, and leans back in his chair.*

There's a tragic contradiction inherent in my line of work. On one hand, as a servant of truth, the cataloger's duty is to facilitate access to information, and thus stoke the fires of democracy and the fecund chaos of a free society. On the other hand, in his role as facilitator to information, his need to classify and describe the world's disorder forces him to adopt a mindset so anal-retentive, so hidebound by rules,

*Getting worked up.*

so obsessed by fucking arbitrary minutiae that I wonder why you don't read in the newspaper about librarians going postal!

*Calming down at bit. A thoughtful pause.*

You weren't put off by my language, were you? You shouldn't be. Librarians are human, we know the patois of the streets. We may possess absolutely no sense of couture or an appreciation for anything as flamboyantly exotic as "hairstyle," but goddamn it, we have passions, we're as hobbled by desire and frustration as anyone else. Besides, it's not our job to be arbiters of expression. In a democracy, librarians are card-carrying moral agnostics. It's our job to make information accessible without judgment so the public can make up its own fucking mind. Free speech, my friend, the First Amendment, what made America the grand and glorious historical experiment it is: every ill-informed moron entitled to his worthless opinion. And the function of Information Professionals like me is to take those opinions, that gristle on the flesh-stripped bone of American intellectual life, to gather them up and make them available for every other ill-informed moron, i.e. you, to gnaw on. That's why I sit here seven godawful hours a day busting my ass following rules...

*Robert flips the pages of the large paperback book on his desk.*

in all their arcane, Talmudic glory, coding bib records and exporting them to the OPAC, all for the benefit of you, Mr. and Mrs. John Q. Public. It sure as hell ain't for me. If I had my way I'd be fulfilling my destiny on stage, not wasting away in this dungeon...

*Muttering to himself.*

Pasty-face drone...

*Addressing audience.*

I ended up with that fershluggener MLS because mom and dad wouldn't foot the bill for drama school; no son of theirs was going to end up some impoverished, frustrated loser.

*A beat, then he throws his hands up in exasperation.*

*Robert indignantly clicks his pen and prepares to mark the top sheet on his stack of paper.*

Chapter 5.4. Publication, Distribution, Etc. Rule A1. Punctuation. Precede this area by a full stop, space, dash, space.

*He marks the paper with a few impatient strokes of his pen and tosses the sheet onto the floor.*

Precede a second or subsequently named place of publication, distribution, etc., by a semicolon.

*He marks another sheet in similar fashion and tosses that onto the floor as well.*

Precede the name of a publisher, distributor, etc., by a colon.

*He marks yet another sheet, this time with a little more violence, and tosses it onto the floor.*

Enclose a supplied statement of function of a publisher, distributor, etc., in square brackets.

*Another sheet, more anger.*

Enclose the details of printing (place, name, date) in parentheses.

*Again.*

Precede the date of publication, distribution, etc., by a comma.

*And again.*

Precede the name of a printer by a colon.

*And yet again.*

Precede the....

*Glaring at the audience with barely contained rage.  
A beat.*

Fuck! Catalogers do not believe in democracy, we do not subscribe to freedom of expression, not when it comes to organizing information. We cannot abide the contentious illogic of it. Too messy. We... worship... order.

*Robert fiddles neurotically with the objects on his desk and arranges them just so.*

Consider the jargon of our profession: bibliographic control. Controlled vocabulary. Authority file. Final solution. Well, that's not a library term strictly speaking, but it might as well be. Scratch a cataloger and underneath you find an obedient, needy little Deutsch-Bürger: "I vas chust follovink orders!" But democracy isn't all it's cracked up to be anyway. Look at Wikipedia: at least 50% of what's posted on Wikipedia is, factually speaking, horseshit. That's "information democracy" for you. And try doing a comprehensive Google search on anything. Forget comprehensive, comprehensive is impossible. Google indexes maybe twenty, thirty per-cent of what's on the web, tops, and that thirty per-cent's a toxic slurry of... of fact, semi-fact, paranoid delusion, pornography... And out of that thirty per-cent, your keywords are going to match only a subset of relevant pornography because... of relevant documents, because you are an ill-informed idiot who doesn't know how to frame a search properly. That's perfectly in line with our limited expectations of you, it's not as if anyone expects your ham-fisted data-mining to strike gold. After all, you're not an Information Professional like me, you're just some PBS-watching dilettante. Oh, I know your type. You heard some pretty little ditty on a fundraising special last week... oh, which middlebrow spectacular was that? Wait, it was from that new DVD, the hundred-dollar pledge premium. Shit, what was the title... something like, "Three Mo' Desperate and Declining Primo Dons Pander to the

Musically Semi-Literate.” A classic. Anyway, the DVD title doesn’t make any difference to you, you’re googling for a free mp3 to download, cheap bastard. All you remember is that it was some tune by Tchaikovsky.

*Feigns typing at a computer keyboard.*

Tchaikovsky, Tchaikovsky, Tchaikovsky, let’s see: 19<sup>th</sup> century composer, Russian, like yourself a tragically closeted homosexual... how do you spell that, anyway? T-C-H-A-I-K-O-V-S-K-Y? Or is it T-C-H-A-I-K-O-W-S-K-Y? Or should that be T-C-H-A-I-K-O-F-S-K-Y? How about T-S-C-H-A-I-K-O-W-S-K-Y? T-S-C-H-A-I-K-O-W-S-K-I. T-J-A-J-K-O-V-S-K-I-J. They’re all correct. The guy was Russian, his name was originally written with Cyrillic characters, and every self-appointed linguistic genius who presumed to transliterate it had his own ideas about how to do it. T-S-C-H-A-I-J-K-O-W-S-K I-J. C-S-A-J-K-O-V-S-Z-K-I-J. C-I-A-I-K-O-V-S-K-J-I. Jesus! And we haven’t even begun to talk about his first and middle names. P-E-T-R. P-I-O-T-R. P-Y-O-T-R. P-apostrophe-Y-O-T-R. Ilich. Ilyitch. Iljitch. Iljietsj. Google doesn’t give a shit. “We just index it the way we find it, throw it up on the web and let you figure out how to search it.” Good luck, fella. The Library of Congress traces forty-two variant spellings of Tchaikovsky; have fun sifting through that mess. But if you look up something by or about Tchaikovsky in a library that follows LC protocols, theoretically you’ll find everything, no matter how you spell it. That’s why we’re anal-retentive. That’s why we hemorrhage over the use of “space-semicolon-space” as opposed to “space-slash-space” in a field 505 contents note, or why we cough blood selecting the proper first indicator in a main entry personal name field: so you ungrateful pricks can bat one- hundred, find everything about anything, every time. Information nirvana.

*A beat.*

At least, that’s how we rationalize our behavior. But to be honest, it’s a sickness, our neurotic little obsession. The rules don’t serve us, it’s the other way around. It’s a goddamn cult.

*With increasing intensity.*

Rule 2.0B1. The chief source of information for printed monographs is the title page or, if there is no title page, the source from within the publication that is used as a substitute for it. For printed monographs published without a title page, or without a title page applying to the whole work (as in the case of some editions of the Bible and some bilingual dictionaries), use the part of the item supplying the most complete information, whether this be the cover (excluding a separate book jacket), caption, colophon, running title, or other part. Specify the part used as a title page substitute in a note (see 2.7B3). If, and only if, no part of the item supplies data that can be used as the basis of the description, take the necessary information from any goddamn available source.

*Robert rises to his feet, haranguing the audience.*

We worship rules. We cling to them with white-knuckled fervor, aghast at the chaos that roils just beyond the shuddering portals of our hushed, dull cloisters. We scuttle like rats, speechless with terror, too panicked to pause for breath or relieve our clenched, aching, bursting bladders. Rules, rules, almighty rules... all hail! Oh, what passionate, touching,

fraught devotion, right? Hah! Ours is fervor inspired not by love but dread, our anxious zeal compelling us to bear the ark of the law aloft through howling wilderness upon hands bruised and chafed raw, lest we allow the word within to crash and wither upon profane ground. Bar the gates! Draw the bridge against the taunts and humiliations of a hundred schoolyards, the casual atrocities perpetrated by knuckle-dragging troglodytes and their whorish, doe-eyed consorts. Ah, blessed regulation! Form and logic! Order! Grace! Salvation!

*Emotionally spent, he collapses to his knees. A long, tortured silence.*

How do we get a handle on the world?

*A revelatory beat.*

We start by naming stuff. Mmmmma-ma. Da-da. That's how a baby makes intellectual contact: verbal cues get associated with stuff in his environment. Mama. Dada... Poopoo. One imagines our prehistoric ancestors inventing similar abstractions: "Adam called out names for all the beasts, for the birds of the sky and all the living things of the field." Names are proxies, metadata: accumulate enough of them in your head and you call forth a simulacrum of the entire world. But we don't just accumulate information, we process it. We mash it together, see how pieces fit or don't fit. We want stuff to mean stuff... we need stuff to mean stuff, the world has to make sense. Mama-Dada-Sissy-Buddy. Baba-binkie-blankie-booboo. Cocky-doddy-pishy-tushy.

*He gets up from the floor.*

Threads of causality, hierarchical pyramids assembled like toy blocks: this because of that, that because of this; that belongs to this and that, and that and this go together, families, ancestors, children; set, subset, superset: "And unto Enoch was born Irad; and Irad begot Mehujael; and Mehujael begot Methushael; and Methushael begot Lamech." Names, names, names. We're hard-wired to catalog, it's our genetic inheritance. Like Adam, our job is to number the beasts of Eden, to corral the wild horses of the infosphere, lash and harness them to our will...

*A beat.*

No. I have an even better metaphor. Information is slippery business, easily corrupted. It demands vigilance, ruthless determination to maintain its integrity. It's a greased pig. My job is to wrestle and subdue the greased pig of information into abject, squealing submission.

*The image takes hold in his imagination.*

Yes, submission... excellent. Hoist it by the hind legs, cap it between the eyes with a captive-bolt pistol, butcher and dress it, and harvest pounds of tasty, tasty informational bacon.

*Dreamily.*

Mmm, bacon.

*A beat.*

Excuse me.

*Robert exits the stage and returns a moment later with a box of pre-cooked bacon, munching on a slice. He takes his seat at the desk.*

Mmm, names. So let's say you're searching for something specific. Logically, title is your access point of choice, but what if you don't know the title? Take that Tchaikovsky song that gave you a boner: after a couple of fruitless hours googling every keyword you can think of, you only manage to locate a 30-second sound clip at amazon.com, basically by accident. Of course you're too cheap to actually buy the CD it comes from, but now you know the song title, and you're closing in for the kill.

*Robert pushes the play button on the boombox and plays Lensky's aria.*

Amazingly, you squander yet another hour in hapless pursuit. You find references to the song everywhere, so you know it's not some obscure rarity, but still, there's no free mp3 to be found. Finally you admit defeat, fire up iTunes, type in "Lensky's Aria," and bam! happy day, up pop a half-dozen recordings, ninety-nine cents apiece. The pain of actually having to pay for music is mitigated somewhat by your savvy consumer sense: of the files offered, you choose the longest one, based on your calculation that each of those seven minutes of operatic ecstasy will set you back a modest 14.14 cents, while the other mere three-minute ripoffs will stick it to you for an exorbitant 33 cents per minute. In art as in life, bigger is better. Brilliant. Alas, your triumph is short-lived when you discover that the song you've downloaded is not Lensky's hot-blooded love confession from act one of Evgeni Onegin, but an untelevised, and therefore colossally boring and irrelevant, second act aria.

*He stops the boombox.*

Ehhhh! [*i.e.* "penalty buzzer" sound]. You lose. And what have you learned from this travesty? First, that uncontrolled information such as you encounter on Google, Amazon and iTunes can be a colossal waste of time and money. And second, you are still an ill-informed idiot.

But what is a thing's true, essential, and unique name? How do I know that what you think I'm talking to you about is the same thing that I think you know what I'm talking to you about? Take that goddamn piece of music.

*He plays the song again on the boombox.*

As you learned the hard way, "Lensky's Aria" is a piece-of-crap title. It's not specific, it's non unique. Same goes for its vernacular and/or commercial equivalents: "Lensky's arioso," "Arioso of Lensky," "Ariozo Lenskago," "Stsena I ariozo Lenskogo." The only way out of this ontological Tower of Babel is standardized nomenclature, viz:

Rule 25.27A1. Use as the basis for the uniform title for a musical work the composer's original title in the language in which it was presented;

and:

Rule 25.32A1. Use as the uniform title for a separately published part of a musical work the uniform title for the whole work followed by the title or verbal designation and/or the number of the part as instructed below.

a) If each of the parts is identified only by a number, use the number of the part being catalogued.

b) If each...

You are taking notes, aren't you?

b) If each of the parts is identified only by a title or other verbal designation, use the title or other verbal designation of the part being catalogued.

c) If... no, wait, that's it, we have our rule, b: title for the whole work followed by title for the part of the work. In this case, "whole work" equals opera in question, i.e. *Evgeni Onegin*, and "part of the work" equals aria, i.e. *Ia liubliu vas, Olga*... which, you should understand, is not the title Tchaikovsky gave it. He didn't call it anything. Apparently, in his perverse and inscrutable oriental wisdom, he didn't feel it necessary to give it a name. We, however, do feel it necessary, and we've taken it upon ourselves to call the aria *Ia liubliu vas, Olga* because he's dead, we're not, and there ain't a friggin' thing he can do about it now, is there?

*A beat. Then, with sneering contempt.*

Is there?

*He glares at the audience for a moment,  
then snaps out of it.*

So. There you have it, our uniform title: *Evgeni Onegin. Ia liubliu vas, Olga*.

*A beat. Robert drums his finger on the desk.*

You're not impressed.

*A beat.*

Disambiguation, kiddies: that's the ticket. We've just constructed a form of identification unique to this work. Stick that sucker up your OPAC, and when you search for the song at the library, you'll find that song at the library, every spastic, over-the-top, strangled-tenor-with-a-bulging-vein-in-the-forehead performance, no matter what dumb-ass title the record company slaps on the disc: "Lensky's Aria," "Arioso Lenskago," "Stsena I ariozo Lenskogo," it's all *Evgeni Onegin. Ia liubliu vas, Olga*.

*Slams fist on desktop.*

Now that's "authority control," goddamnit: the bracing fragrance of napalm in the morning, the iron fist in a velvet glove, the ruthless, brute efficiency of soulless LC bureaucrats keeping their metaphorical trains running on time. Authority control...

sounds ominous, doesn't it? Authority control. Authority... control. Authority... control! Booga-booga! But it's not really that threatening, so don't piss your pants. In fact, it's not threatening at all; this high-falutin' jargon was cooked up by wankers in white socks whose life experience comprises neither authority or control. Pardon my dime store psychoanalysis, but "authority control" is plainly the lexical expression of some juvenile revenge fantasy, in all its glorious, sputtering, impotent ineffectuality. Have you noticed our fetishistic attachment to acronyms and initialisms? There's MARC, FRBR, NACO, IFLA, IAML, BIBCO, OLAC, AMICUS. O-C-L-C. L-C-S-H, L-C-R-I, A-P-P-M... uh, wait, A-P-P-M was superceded by DACS, of course, D-A-C-S. I mean, I appreciate the convenience of professional shorthand, but there's something not quite kosher about being so cryptic, especially in profession whose raison d'être is information access. I think the habit has less to do with efficient communication than with a need to shroud our vulnerable little fraternity in a cloak of protective mystery.

*Conspiratorially.*

Can you keep a secret? Libraries are refugee camps for geeks... Quelle surprise! It's where we flee to escape getting beat up for lunch money. Obviously we have a vested interest in keeping our sanctuary free of sociopaths, and nothing makes a Neanderthal's eyes glaze-over faster than talking over its pointy little head. "Well, in general I recommend delimited subject-heading searches in favor of keywords linked with Boolean operators, buuuuuut that's going to depend upon the MARC FRBR NACO NACO of your OPAC OLAC, aaaaaaand to some degree there's always a IFLA IAML between BIBCO OLAC OLAC AMICUS. Wouldn't you agree, Attila?

*Robert imitates a knuckle-dragger with a deer-in-the-headlights look in his eyes.*

You have no idea how empowering that feels. We may have been four-eyed, two-left-footed spazzes in gym class, but within these walls I am Robert, Master of Library Science, my fingers fleet as gazelles upon the Plains of QWERTY, my nostrils flaring at the blood-perfumed scent of information felled by the barbed tip of my inquiry. And you, you are the bewildered, helpless oaf. Ha! There'll be no wedgies in this locker room, Genghis, no swirlies in the lav. No getting the shit kicked out of us during dodgeball or being stuffed into lockers. Earning that MLS was like being tapped for Skull and Bones, or getting inducted into the Crips: I got brothers watching my back now, chump. Yo, you be in my 'hood, suckuh... Although, now that I think of it, maybe it's more like a bar mitzvah. Without the chopped liver. Mmm, library paste. But consider the parallels. Like a seminary or yeshiva, in library school you study scripture,

*Holds up AACR2.*

and commentaries upon scripture, and commentaries upon commentaries upon scripture. You apply yourself diligently to the task of self-illumination, beating your head against a wall trying...

*Slams the book against the table.*

to...

*Slam louder.*

get...

*Slam louder.*

it...

*Slam louder.*

right!

*Slam loudest.*

And in the process, you subsume your identity to the law, whose edicts you transgress at your soul's peril. And for all that effort, for all that sacrifice, you're rewarded with initiation into an exclusive, spiritual community. A reviled and persecuted community. A community that has spent most of its history extricating itself from gym lockers. But the similarities don't end there. Like most religions, cataloging is intolerant of error. It holds its adherents to high... inhumanly high, inhumanely high, standards. Your ascent to sainthood depends upon a willingness to suppress your individuality, to crush, to expunge, to annihilate every trace of God-given creativity, and just... follow... the... rules. Which is why, like religion, it's less a sacred profession than a personality disorder. And that's just one argument I have with the misnomer "library science." The presumption... what, are we curing cancer? Just because we're space cadets doesn't mean we're fit to colonize Mars. Of all people, we should be sensitive to the abuse of language: "Hey dude, let's party, I've got mixing margaritas down to a science." Mixology is not science, and neither is cataloging. It's just... technology, pedestrian bullshit. But inventing the margarita, now that's science. Science takes nourishment from the imagination, from inspiration and leaps of intuition; the only teat we suck at is dogged methodology... and boy, do we suck hard at that bitch. Science is about those ecstatic life- and world-changing "a-ha!" moments. Trust me, there are no "a-ha!" moments in cataloging, no "eurekas," no mind-blowing epiphanies, just "ah-shit-fuck-goddammit!" moments, lots of them. But... and here we have yet another example of life's capriciously ball-busting income disparity: the dreamers of this world wouldn't be able to enjoy their epiphanies if it weren't for drones like me in the trenches. Where would all you geniuses be without grunts to do the dirty work, huh? Who's gonna organize your reference literature, compile your indexes, update your syllabi, load your spreadsheets, generate your bar graphs, your data tables, your pie charts, your tasty, tasty pie charts, hmmm? You get the glory, we get the guts...

*Robert emits an explosive, plegmy cough.*

the phlegmy, congested, mucous-slimed guts from inhaling all this paper dust and mold and shit all day. Goddammit.

*He clears his sinuses.*

Yech. Enough of this depressing shit. Let's think happy thoughts.

*A pensive moment as he drums his fingers on the desktop.*

Bet you'd all love to trade places with me right now, wouldn't you? Suits me. Nothing gets my nipples harder than pandering to your bourgeois fantasies.

*A beat. Inspiration strikes.*

That's it. That's just what we'll do, we'll play a game. A little therapy, some transformative role-playing. You can't put a price on mental health.

*Robert gets up from the desk.*

Consider this my gift to you, the gift of empathy, a gift of spiritual insight. See, I want you to experience my daily ordeal not as some abstraction. I want you to feel it in your bones, in your gut. I want you to see the world through my bleary, computer-ravaged eyes. I want to make better human beings out of all of you. That's my mission, to serve.

*A beat. With sneering irony.*

Can you feel the fucking love?

*Back to business.*

I'm deputizing you all as ace Information Para-professionals, Dewey decimal demigods, the lot of you. Let's get you up to speed so you can walk the walk. Okay: Vassar-Dickinson classification system for music, invented by one George Sherman Dickinson, born 1884, died 1964. The ten classes and major subdivisions of the system are as follows: Class zero, miscellaneous shit, including Denkmäler and Gesamtausgaben. Class one, keyboards. Class two, bowed strings. Class three, winds. Class four, plucked strings, percussion, etc. Class five, chamber ensembles. Class six, orchestral ensembles. Class seven, vocal solo and solo ensembles. Class eight, choral ensembles. Class nine, dramatic ensembles. Got that? Great, now repeat it all back to me.

*A beat. No response from the audience.*

Come on, come on. "Class zero, miscellaneous shit, including Denkmäler and Gesamtausgaben."

*He gestures for the audience to repeat his words.*

*They comply, falteringly.*

Stellar. Okay, "Class one, keyboards."

*Again, he prompts the audience to repeat. They do.*

"Class two, bowed strings."

*The same.*

"Class three, winds. "

*The same.*

"Class four," oh fuck this, you're never going to get it. Look, let's keep this within the bounds of reality. Given that you're, shall we say, demographically "atypical" for Information Professionals, you're obviously not run-of-the-mill librarians. So think of yourselves as... punks. Punk Librarians. You're punk librarians... from Paramus. And... you're on a mission to breathe life into this semi-comatose culture. Yes, you're going to revolutionize the workplace, overthrow the ancien régime, bring it kicking and screaming into a new millennium... maybe last millennium, but a new one in any case. And while you're at it, you're making a fashion statement too. No cardigans. No floor-length frocks. No spinster 'dos. Frump is out. Dead. Extinct. No more bow ties, elbow patches, little-girl headbands, rhinestone pins, rose-scented eau-de-toilet, no fucking sensible shoes. You sport dreadlocks, ripped jeans, "Information wants to be free" t-shirts, body jewelry, pins and studs inserted in places we don't discuss in polite company.

You curse like a sailor. You smell like a sailor. You subvert the Patriot Act. You're young, you're hip, you don't take shit from nobody. Pretty damn special, ain't ya?

*A beat.*

Well, motherfuckers, meet your match.

*Robert whips out a Nancy Pearl Action Figure for all to see.*

Heeeeere's Nancy. You all know Nancy, don't you? Your boss. The living fossil. Monomaniac of indeterminate gender. Grendl to your Beowulf, Javert to your Valjean, Riddler to your Batman, Roadrunner to your goddamn Wile E. Coyote. And nobody-but-nobody's sweetheart.

*Robert stares Nancy in the eye.*

Don't tell me she's "nice." I know how "nice" she is, "nice" is what she does, she murders you with "nice." That's how she sucks you in, devours you with that... that clenched sphincter of a maw.

*Robert demonstrates "clenched sphincter of a maw" for the audience's benefit.*

She feeds off your life force... like the Borg.

*He shudders with revulsion.*

Nancy's what you'd call an "obsessive." Obsession is her drug of choice, her favorite med. The object of obsession doesn't matter, it's the exercise that counts. It could be anything: scrapbooking, birding, jigsaw puzzles... Victorian erotica... collecting potato chips that look like famous people... anything to blunt that sickening, vertiginous free-fall you and I mundanely refer to as "life." Somehow the rest of us manage to muddle through, but to Nancy it's just unspeakable horror: the paradoxes, the damned contradictions, the murky inconsistencies. That's why library work suits her "personality"... I use the word loosely. The conceptual rigor of librarianship stimulates her fascistic fetish for order, its rote routines satisfy a reflexive need to suppress any and all expressions of spontaneity. In other words, she stands for everything that Punk Librarians abhor and unconditionally reject.

*Points accusingly at the audience.*

So what are you going to do about it? Yes, you. What are you going to do? Are you going to sit on your fat asses and get steamrollered? Are you going to allow her to flatten the landscape of your potential, let her obliterate every vestige of joy from your life, iron out every exciting, eccentric, perverse warp and wrinkle? Are you? Well, are you?

*The audience responds in the negative.*

Are you mice, or are you angry, angry librarians?

*The audience replies, "Angry, angry librarians."*

Let me hear you. Are you angry, angry librarians?

*The audience responds in the affirmative.*

What are you?

*The audience replies, "Angry, angry librarians."*

I said, what are you?

*Again, the audience replies, “Angry, angry librarians.”*

And are you going to take it any more?

*The audience responds in the negative.*

I said, are you going to take shit from Nancy?

*The audience responds in the negative.*

Hell yes, you are. You haven't got a fucking chance. Jesus H. Christ. You obviously have no idea who or what you're dealing with. Ding-dong, the witch is not dead.

*Robert displays Nancy to the throng.*

Evil has a face, punks. If you've survived this business as long as I have, you know the score, you've been baptized by fire. A day in the trenches with Nancy is no picnic, let me tell you, it's a spread-eagled twirl on a popsicle suppository. Abandon hope, all ye who enter Library-land. If you manage to even remember your own name by quitting time, you're ahead of the game. But, as Nietzsche failed to observe, what doesn't kill you makes you numb, and thus better equipped to acclimate to the oxygen-starved dead zone of the workplace. In fact, the skills you hone in such an environment are, in the broader context of life, tools for survival. You develop heightened awareness, notice details that elude others, discover chinks in the enemy's armor, uncover hidden connections and relationships you can turn to your advantage. You transform the iron bars of your oppression into weapons... of liberation.

*Robert feigns a flashy martial arts move.*

Hai-ya! But all that takes time, it takes experience and discipline. And I know whereof I speak. You see, I learned the hard way, it's not about surviving an insufferable boss or enduring a ball-busting job, or even enduring a ball-busting boss at an insufferable job. It's about finding peace, inner peace, cultivating transcendent consciousness, seeing things as they are, not as we wish them to be. It's about encountering naked, unmediated reality.

*Lapsing into Yoda-speak.*

No good it does to emotional get in dealings with Nancy.

*Back to Robert.*

Getting worked up is a big mistake. That just plays into her vulnerable, “innocent spinster” routine, makes her the victim. You have to be the master of mental jiu-jitsu, dispassionate and analytical, not her. Nancy's the all-time Olympic champion of the mind-fuck.

*Yoda again.*

All-time mind-fuck Olympic champion of, she is.

*Robert again.*

Let's face it, Dewey-boy, you're at a powerful disadvantage in this wrestling match. She may be post-menopausal and have fat ankles, but she's formidable. She knows her shit cold. You're never going to catch her on issues of bibliographic practice; she actually reads Library of Congress Rule Interpretations for their entertainment value. So you have to bear your ignorance with humility. But you ought to bear it with grace and self-

forgiveness, too. You don't have to do The Evil One's bidding, you do not have to beat up on yourself. You are not a robot. You are not a cog in some infernal machine. It is not your highest aspiration to conform to some petty martinet's construct of perfection. Your humanity, your vulnerability and your creativity are not handicaps. Your feet, unlike Nancy's orthopedic-shoed meat-slabs, are planted squarely on planet Earth. Look, this is not a competition, not a game of conquest. You're not out to vanquish an enemy; Nancy is not the enemy, she's a damaged soul, twisted by fate, crippled by a lifetime of social and emotional neglect and two years of library school. The challenge you face is the test of self-mastery, of self-knowledge, of cultivating compassion and recognizing your shared humanity.

*Robert looks thoughtfully at Nancy, and after a moment, addresses her.*

Listen, bitch...

*Nancy speaks through the boombox in a schoolmarmish but subtly menacing tone.*

NANCY

Robert?

*Robert is speechless.*

NANCY

Robert, would you please quote me the rule for using a period before a subfield v?

ROBERT

Mommy?

NANCY

What is the rule, Robert? Can you cite for me the rule from AACR2?

*Robert looks abashed.*

NANCY

In this 650 subject added-entry topical term heading, you put a period before the form subdivision. Where is the rule for using a period before subfield v?

ROBERT

I, uh...

NANCY

We never guess at the correct use of punctuation, capitalization, or form of abbreviation; we always conform to AACR2. This is extremely important, Robert. Do you understand? Please look it up the rule.

ROBERT

Yes, mommy.

*Robert goes back to his desk.*

I love you mommy.

*Robert shoves Nancy under his armpit while he frantically pages through the AACR2 volume on his desk.*

Subject, subject, subject headings... subject added-entry... subject added-entry... subject added-entry... topical term, topical term, topical... What the fuck... sorry, Mommy. I mean, what the gol-durned heck am I looking for?

*After a few seconds of frantic page turning, Robert has an epiphany.*

What the fuck am I looking for? Why am I even looking? There is no goddamn rule for using a period before subfield v, it's supposed to be space/subfield v. I know that. She knows that. She knows that I know that.

*He plucks Nancy from his armpit and confronts her.*

It was a fucking typo, asshole, a mind-fart. Like your brain never misfires? Jesus.

*He stuffs her back into his armpit.*

Instead of acknowledging my dignity as a human being and simply pointing out, "this is incorrect, please fix it," it's "What's the rule, Robert? Quote me the fucking rule, Robert. Please correct me if I'm wrong, Robert, even though we both know I'm not. Why are you such a moron, Robert?"

*He plucks Nancy from his armpit and confronts her.*

Listen, you're not the boss of me. I don't have to listen to you.

*He stuffs her in his armpit again.*

I really don't have to listen to her. It's just a job, not my life. It's not anybody's life. I refuse, and I resist.

*He plucks her out again.*

What the hell is the matter with you? Nobody's health and well being are at stake. Stop making such a big goddamn deal out of every trivial detail. If I forget a period or use a colon instead of a semi-colon, don't act like civilization is on the verge of collapse. The computer's not going to blow up. The world's not going to blow up. I'm going to blow up if you don't back off. So back off! Stop assuming that I care about my goddamn career. I don't care about my career, this career, except for the paycheck, pathetic as it is. Don't pretend you have any sense of life, mine or anyone else's, outside this catacomb, don't patronize me with your killing, faint praise, and don't bore me with chitchat about library associations, meetings, working groups, roundtables, any of that clubhouse shit. I'm an actor, goddammit, not a librarian. An ac-tor! I act! I am ac-tive. I act on impulse, inspiration and irritation. I am irrational, emotive, mercurial, and not to be fucked with. Do you understand? I am not to be fucked with! Do you understand me? No? Then to the bowels of hell with ye', woman!

*Robert tosses Nancy into the air.*

Hai-ya!

*With a mighty karate chop he propels the airborne figure into the wings. Robert pumps his fists in triumph, then takes his seat at the table.*

Lesson two, fixed field codes. Listen up, punks. “Comp,” a.k.a. Form of Composition, is a MARC 2-letter fixed field code used in bibliographic records for printed and manuscript music and musical sound recordings, based on the terminology in the work itself. Comp provides a coded approach to the content of the work. In addition to codes for forms...

*Robert pauses; some wayward thought has hijacked his attention. He gets up, walks offstage, and re-emerges with the Nancy Pearl figure in hand. Robert sits at his desk, contemplates the icon for a moment, and plops her down in front of him on the desk.*

In addition to codes for forms, e.g. canons, chorales, concertos, pavenes, polonaises, preludes, etcetera, etcetera, the list includes codes for musical genres, e.g., blues, bluegrass, country music, ragtime, gospel, rock, folk, jazz...

*He picks Nancy up and talks to her.*

Jazz, Nancy. Jazz. You know I’m not a fan of the genre, but I have enough respect for art to appreciate the atrocities you perpetrate upon it. Who could possibly be less jazz-inflected than you, less improvisatory, spontaneous, and in-the-moment? What gives you the right to decide what’s jazz and what isn’t?

*Nancy speaks through the boombox.*

NANCY

Jazz: a popular, originally African-American musical genre deriving from ragtime and blues, often featuring improvisation and syncopation; use for Dixieland, big band, swing, bop, cool, progressive, third stream, Latin, Afro-Cuban, avant-garde jazz, and jazz-oriented boogie-woogie...

ROBERT

Shut up.

*He hurls her off stage again.*

Asshole. How pointless can you get? “Use for Dixieland, Afro-Cuban, and jazz-oriented boogie-woogie.” Well, that makes things perfectly clear, now don’t it?

*Yells in Nancy’s direction.*

Semantics, baby! Empty words.

*Back to audience.*

What’s the point of defining a category so broad that everything falls within it? If I’m searching for New Orleans jazz, I want New Orleans jazz, not Afro-Cuban, not jazz-oriented boogie-woogie, not Gershwin-esque symphonic pseudo-jazz. I want my New Orleans jazz. So why not define a code for New Orleans jazz in the first place? And a code for big band. And a code for swing, for bop, for cool, progressive, and third stream? I’ll tell you why: librarians don’t swing. We don’t swing, we waddle. We saunter. We

shuffle around like there's a pole stuck up our ass. We cook up codes for madrigals, marches and masses up the wazoo, all that archaic Eurocentric crap, but God forbid something doesn't resonate inside our eccentric little butterfly-chasing brains; if we don't get it, it just doesn't exist for us. And therefore it doesn't exist for you either, bubbie. Remember, we're the gnomes manning the gates of knowledge, we're the bridge trolls. If it doesn't get cataloged,

*Screaming at the audience.*

you can't find it!

*Calming down.*

Remember those nasty remarks I made about Wikipedia? Well, I sort of take them back. Sort of. Wikipedia's a howling wilderness when it comes to mainstream scholarship, but if you happen to be hooked on pop ephemera, that's the place to get your fix. You know how many MARC Comp codes there are for electronic pop music? Zero. Nada. Bedwetters like us don't listen to electronic pop music, it doesn't exist. You know how many electronic pop music genres are listed on Wikipedia? One hundred and fifty-six. One hundred and fifty-six, divided into fourteen categories, which is an astonishing feat of subject analysis for a gaggle of disorganized, geographically scattered bibliographic amateurs. Synthpop, Downtempo, Acid jazz, Lounge, Chill out, Glitch, Nu jazz, Trip Hop, the list goes on and on... I know what you're thinking. "Now wait a minute buster, didn't you just ream Nancy for being an obsessive, a life-denying, anal-retentive neurotic? What makes these guys..." and let me add parenthetically, these electronica nuts are probably all guys, guys with questionable hygiene and who couldn't get a date if their lives depended on it... "what makes these guys any different?" Well, I contend there is a difference. I contend there's a distinction to be made between obsession relative to matters of form, and obsession relative to matters of content. I contend that the unhinged nature of the artist's psyche and of the psyches of those in love with art are qualitatively different than the compulsions of the i-dotter and t-crosser. The artist's obsessions are ecstasy unfolding in real time; Nancy's hang-ups are just mental constipation. Which side are you on, punks? Which side are you on?

*Robert turns on the boombox. The aria "Ia liubliu vas, Olga" is heard. He speaks over the music.*

You're exposed to a lot of theoretical crap in library school, which on the face of it is a waste of time. You don't need immersion in information theory to catalog Tchaikovsky scores, just a brain like an industrial robot. Library work is hands-on business; you learn it by doing it, not by reading about it, and certainly not by exercising your intuition, your creativity, or, God help you, your poetic imagination. In fact, you'd be better off exterminating those tormenting little demons before you even considered this way of so-called life. Most of the people I knew working on their MLS were para-professionals with years of experience behind them, so by any reasonable standard, they were already full-fledged librarians. They didn't need no stinkin' metaphysics, or even the diploma, except for the associated "income boost" it allegedly provides.

*He laughs to himself.*

Income boost, that's rich. But maybe those platefuls of hot, steaming theory our professors served up were necessary for a balanced mental diet, to keep our souls from becoming too parched and mundane. Every library student learns about an alleged hierarchy of apperception from which our brains attempt to make sense of the world. At the low end of the ladder reside Data, raw bits that mean nothing in themselves. Then there's Information, molecular clusters of fact that tell us something about reality. Farther up sits Knowledge, which is constructed out of Information and is in turn the stage upon which Understanding rests. And finally, in the palace built out of Understanding resides Wisdom. Data, Information, Knowledge, Understanding, Wisdom, neat, sweet, complete. My feeble purpose in this cosmic scheme is to provide access to Information, or on a good day, maybe Knowledge. If it's the spiritual ambrosia of Understanding and Wisdom you're after, well my friend, you're on your own. Nobody can put the pieces together for you. The terrible paradox of what I do is that I neuter beauty in order to make it accessible. I suck the vitality out of art in order to preserve it: call numbers, uniform titles, statements of responsibility, edition statements, subject headings... the metadata, the sterile, skeletal representations of reality, scripted according to the rules and neatly folded into the catalog so you can locate and reanimate it as need or desire compels.

*The music stops.*

MARC field 700, Name-title added entry. First indicator: Arabic numeral 1, surname. Second indicator: blank, no information provided. Subfield A, Personal name: Tchaikovsky comma-space, Peter space Ilich, comma-space. Subfield D, Dates associated with a name: 1840 dash 1893, full-stop. Subfield T, Title of a work: Evgeni space Onegin, period-space. Subfield P, Name of a part-slash-section of a work: Ia space liubliu space vas, comma-space Olga, full-stop.

*The stage lights fade.*

I love you, Olga, as only the mad soul of a poet is still doomed to love.  
Always, always the same dream,  
the same familiar desire,  
the same familiar sorrow!  
As a boy I was captivated by you,  
when heartache was still unknown;  
I witnessed, with tender emotion,  
your childish games.  
Beneath the grove's protecting boughs  
I shared those games.  
Ah,  
I love you,  
I love you with that love  
known only to a poet's heart.  
For you alone I dream.  
for you alone I long,

you are my joy and my suffering.  
I love you,  
I love you, eternally, and nothing -  
not the chilling distance,  
the hour of parting, nor pleasure's clamor -  
can quench that heart  
aflake with love's virgin fire!

I love you,  
I love you,  
I love you.

END