

REFERENCE BACKTALK

Democratizing Literature

By Michael Rogers

It is 29 years old and has 375 volumes, including 23 yearbooks and 45 documentary volumes, offering a total of 13,500 author entries totaling roughly 84 million words. It is hands-down the best overall literary reference work ever published, a proverbial diamond as big as the Ritz, and I'll bet many reference librarians have never heard of it—and shame on you! It is the *Dictionary of Literary Biography (DLB)*, and if you truly don't know it, sit down and get acquainted.

First, a little background. Though published and distributed by Thomson Gale, the *DLB* is produced in Columbia, SC, by Brucoli Clark Layman—serious bookmen whose names might be familiar. Brucoli is Matthew J. Brucoli, champion F. Scott Fitzgerald Boswell and top scholar of numerous 20th-century authors, including Papa Hemingway, James Gould Cozzens, and John O'Hara, whose works and personal archives he has collected. A visit to Brucoli's home to view his lifelong loot would

make many libraries—and the Smithsonian—green with envy. (You know that blue illustration of a woman's face and an amusement park that adorns the cover of *The Great Gatsby*? Brucoli has the artist's original painting hanging in his living room—how would you like to own *that*!)

The Jeffries Professor of English at the University of South Carolina (USC), Columbia, Brucoli not only has amassed his own remarkable collections—his Fitzgerald archive, now residing at USC, is the world's finest, bar none—but he long has

championed the school's Thomas Cooper Library, acting as its agent and benefactor in helping build that facility into one of the nation's outstanding literary archives.

Richard Layman is a top Dashiell Hammett scholar who authored the first and best Hammett biography, *Shadow Man: The Life of Dashiell Hammett*, and edited *Selected Letters of Dashiell Hammett, 1921–1960* and *Dashiell Hammett: A Daughter Remembers*. The late C.E. Frazer Clark Jr. started the company with Brucoli in 1969. Clark was a businessman who loved and collected books and also a superb researcher, compiling the major Hawthorne archive. While living in Detroit, Clark became active in the library's Friends group, where he met Gale founder Fred Ruffner. It was kismet. No one knows literary biographers like those who write it, and these guys are experts.

Despite the product's quality, the *DLB*'s producers have

been stumped by librarians' limited use of the series, especially since, to a large extent, it was designed specifically as a library product. The reason perhaps lies in the hefty price tag (but then many reference titles are pricey) and a lack of hard marketing by Gale. Brucoli has been dismayed by librarians' comments that the *DLB* is not available as single volumes. Not true, he says: "The series was planned from the start as stand-alone volumes so that libraries could acquire only the volumes they need or want. Gale is happy to have standing orders, but every *DLB* volume is a singleton!"

Many librarians have commented that they didn't stock the *DLB* because they didn't know where to shelve them. This is especially true of the yearbook volumes, which, heartbreakingly, have been discontinued. Why librarians couldn't figure out to shelve them with other literary reference materials is a head scratcher, especially since *Choice* has named the *DLB* an Outstanding Academic Book four times and the American Library Association's Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) twice has flagged it as an Outstanding Reference Source. (Reference librarians, wake up and smell the ink!)

Print and digital

While many large reference series have been morphed into electronic-only products, Frank Menchaca, senior VP and publisher, Thomson Gale, said that bell isn't yet tolling for the *DLB*. "We're continuing to print the books," he said. "Although we envision an electronic future for the *DLB*, we have no plans to drop the print." Hallelujah! The digital *DLB*, nonetheless, offers a handful of nice extras beyond the print, including remote access that should help lure 21st-century students who suffer from the mindset that physically entering a library and opening up a book is as appealing as going to the dentist for root canal. Along with remote access, the electronic format offers hyperlinked tables of content in each essay so that users can head straight to the information they want. In addition, there are continuous updates, intratext hyperlinks to other authors mentioned in the profiles for expanded study, and an overall index to the entire series, which offers multiple entries on a number of writers. There also are numerous search possibilities, and users can access the information by author name, birth year, death year, *DLB* volume title, ethnicity, full text, gender, nationality, subject/genre, and title. Gale also offers more sophisticated searching using combinations of the above and more for more refined results.

The articles/profiles typically run from 3000 to 5000 words and are produced by scholars and professional writers who are literary aficionados. Each profile sports basic biographical stats—birth/death dates, ethnicity/nationality—plus a list of principal works and sources for further study such as additional writings and interviews, lists of biographies, and a bibliography of titles about that author. The texts are buttressed with numerous illustrations, including portraits, facsimiles of manuscripts, revised typescripts, and edited proofs—as well as letters and

Dictionary
of
Literary
Biography

Yearbook:
1999

other documents. Users could spend hours—if not days—trying to amass all this information by scrounging around on assorted sites on Google, but the *DLB* offers everything in one neat, concise, well-written package.

The neatest, most concise of those packages are the documentary volumes. "When students, teachers, and good readers consult the *DLB* in 3006," insists Bruccoli, "the documentary volumes will be the ones they use." The documentaries bring together material not available elsewhere in one place. They democratize the study of literature." The documentary volumes, alas, are not available electronically.

Publisher Jim Draper told *LJ* that roughly 85 percent of the print series is online, but currently all books are lumped into one large database. That will change: "In 2007, we will be upgrading *DLB* Online to make it sortable by individual series volume. This will let you look at all the essays on a particular subject, e.g., American writers in Paris in the 1920s, in a single package. We'll also be updating the interface, etc., to make it more user-friendly and efficient, and

we'll be closing the gap between print/online." The *DLB* just keeps getting better.

Use it all the time

Although Bruccoli grieves that his baby isn't a staple in every academic library, many prestigious institutions are big fans. Among them are the Huntington, the Bodleian, Dartmouth's Baker Library (which has a *DLB* alcove), the University of Texas at Austin, the University of North Texas, the University of British Columbia, Columbia University, Pace University, and Boston College. Thomas Staley, director of the Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin, says that his staff and others performing research at the Center frequently turn to the *DLB*: "People use it all the time, and librarians use it all the time. It's a very good reference work. It's written in clear language and kept up to date. I think it should be in every major library." I couldn't agree more.

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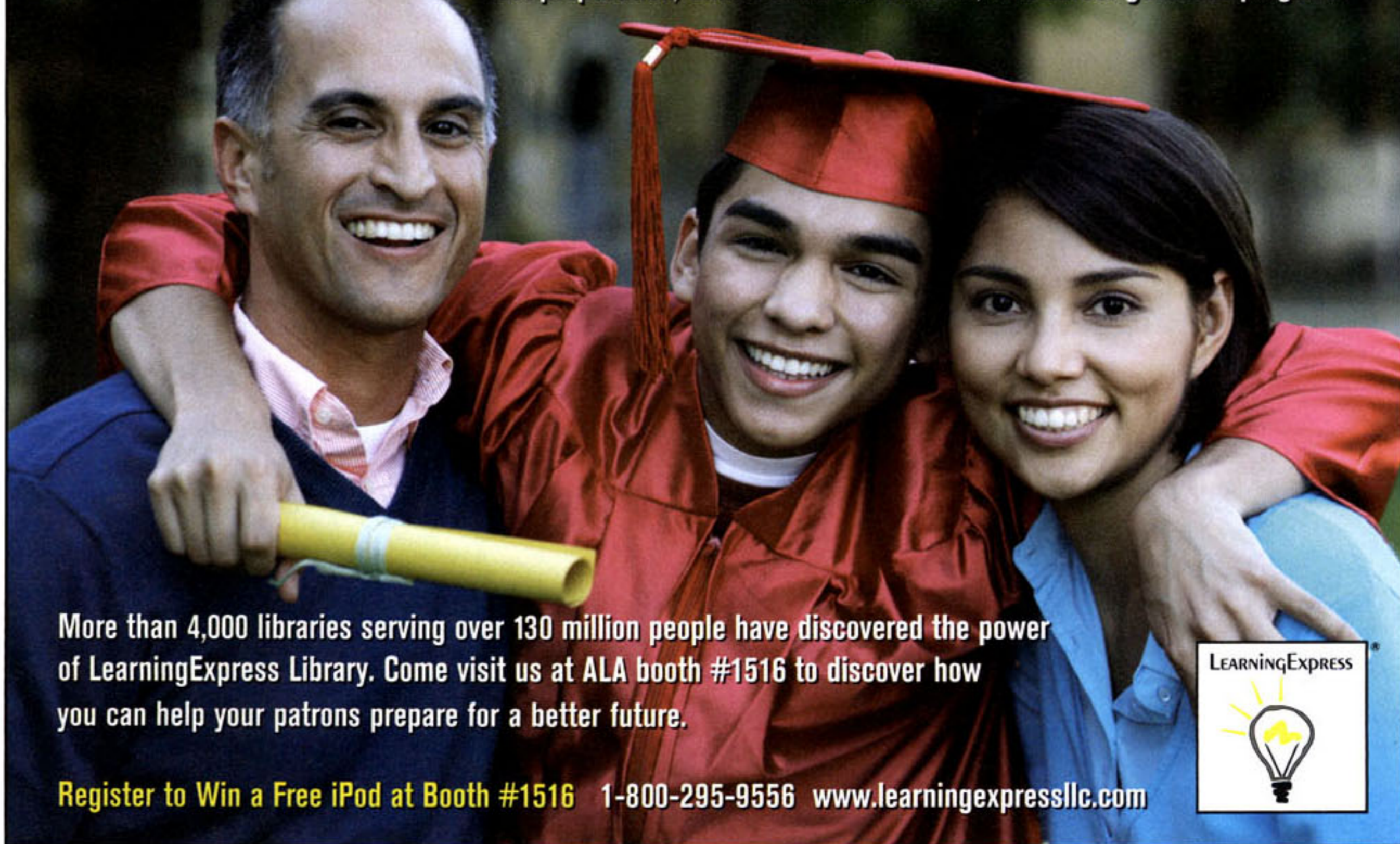
coverage, the book admittedly emphasizes materials of interest primarily to speakers of English in the United States and the United Kingdom. The set includes brief biographies as well as essays on genres, individual works, trends and themes, and traditions. Its 3000-plus articles are typically about 200-300 words long, though many are half

that length while others, such as the one on Mark Twain, run well over 1000 words. Illustrations and bibliographies abound, and appendixes include a selected bibliography, a list of awards, a list of institutions that specialize in collections of children's literature, a topical outline of the entries, and a very detailed index. **Bottom Line**

The book's superior breadth and depth distinguish it from such excellent reference books as the *Oxford Companion to Children's Literature* and *The Continuum Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*. Slated to become a part of Oxford's Digital Reference Shelf, it is an expensive set whose excellence makes it an essential purchase by any library that

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