

Christopher J. Korenowsky

*On running a library in the
age of Kindles*

Interviewed by Mark Oppenheimer

Christopher J. Korenowsky became the head of the New Haven Free Public Library and all its branches in October. In late September I spoke with him.

Mark Oppenheimer: When did you become a librarian?

Christopher J. Korenowsky: The long answer is that I don't remember a time in my life where I had not been in the public library arena. I have memories of being a child of the public library. I don't remember a time when it wasn't in my life. There was a library staff member in my local hometown library in Findlay, Ohio, who I remember seeing at story time, and she really took me under her wing. Judy saw whatever interest I had in the public library. When I turned fifteen and got my worker's permit, I went right back to the public library and got my first job there. Judy was now a colleague, and I got to share with her what she did to instill that love in me. I moved to Columbus and got my undergraduate degree at Ohio State University in English literature. Went right down to the main library here in Columbus when I was eighteen, got a job as a shelver at the Columbus Metropolitan Library and spent the next seventeen years there. When I left, I was what they called a service area manager, and I was managing two of the regional facilities, and we definitely had a combined circulation volume of almost two million volumes annually. That is what I did until I transitioned to my current job at the Ohio Library Council. That is the statewide advocacy organization for all 251 libraries in the state. I am Director of Professional Development here.

It is not a line, and it is not BS, but whatever it was, I knew innately that public libraries would be my life. Going through undergraduate coursework, there was never a question that I would go on to get my master's in library and information sciences. It was never an option not to. A total gift to make it my career.

MO: What kind of stuff do you like to read?

CJK: I love adult contemporary fiction. I am a huge fiction reader, and very much interested in the genre currently called literary fiction. I get very enmeshed in realistic-based plots, character development; language is important. So you will definitely find me reading contemporary fiction. Love short story collections, and am never not reading a book.

There is a fantastic collection of short stories I recently read, called *Delicate Edible Birds*, by Lauren Groff. These collections of short stories are so distinct and individual. Her writing is sparse, but you really feel like you are almost reading poetry. I literally couldn't put that book down. I just finished *Red Hook Road*, it is by—I will spell her first name—A-Y-E-L-E-T Waldman. She is actually married to the novelist Michael Chabon. This is her second novel. She got into a lot of trouble a couple years ago because in an interview she said she loved her husband more than she loved her children, and there was a huge national outcry that really ripped her up and down. She wrote a collection called *Bad Mother*. I have to say, too, I just re-read *A Thousand Acres* by Jane Smiley, and it was so fantastic, modern-day retelling of *King Lear*, with the three daughters, set on an Iowa farm in the seventies. It was a million times better than I remember when it first came out in 1988. I couldn't wait to get home to finish it.

MO: Tell me about your background. Were your parents readers?

CJK: My parents were both educators. My father is a principal in Toledo, Ohio, and has been doing that for thirty-plus years. My mother, before she left the profession to raise myself and my sister, taught English literature at the University of Sidney. So I grew up with that educational background. It is ingrained.

MO: Do you think you'll miss the Midwest?

CJK: Boy, you know, I don't know if I am going to miss it. I am going to miss public libraries in the state of Ohio, which are very rich due to the good fortune of our state funding. No state in the nation has the robust state funding Ohio has. I am going to miss the exposure I have had in my current career to dynamic and innovative systems. But I'm going into this knowing that New Haven's public library system is hugely progressive. The five locations and the output the organization contributes to the spheres and communities we reach is so admirable, and I have nothing but the utmost respect for what New Haven Free Public Library has done up to this point.

What will be new for me is that the public library in New Haven is a city department, which is not the structure of public libraries here in Ohio. Having that element of city support will be new to me. It is a smaller organization than I am used to working in, but at same time I will be leading this, so that will probably be—how do I want to say this?—a good thing for me. I had the opportunity to spend a week in New Haven in August and honestly can't tell you the dedication I witnessed from the staff. The support the public library has from the city of New Haven and the board of trustees, who have a deep, deep, deep commitment to promoting the excellence of public library services, is really off the chart. And I can tell you, having had exposure to hundreds of libraries in the state of Ohio, that isn't always the case, so I am coming to a really good spot.

MO: Do we need more computers and fewer books?

CJK: I don't know that the answer is that easy. We can't say more computers, fewer books, more books, fewer computers. What I do know is public libraries are at a crossroads, and the makeup of industry will show you that in next three to five years, a lot of our library leaders will be retiring, so a huge amount of staff across the country will transition out of the industry. You have a new population of innovative, dynamic, excited librarians coming out of their master's programs who have no memory of what it was like before

the internet. And then you have people like me who remember life without internet and know life with it.

So because of the demographics of libraries and what will happen with new blood, for lack of a better term, we are in the fortunate position right now of defining what the industry will look like in the future. And certainly not being able to define a strong, robust, dynamic, truly global footprint will only be to our detriment. If we are to be relevant, we have got to be profession-leading in everything that is coming down the technology pipe regarding access to information, how it is managed, and what we take into the community.

Now all of that is not to say that the traditional aspects of librarianship should go away in any form. I am a firm believer that books are our business. Hopefully, when you think of a book, you think of a library, and maybe B&N and Amazon.com second. The trick is striking a balance between the old and the new. You don't want the traditions of the profession to not be honored.

MO: Are there some technology mistakes that librarians have made in the past, like perhaps investing too heavily in CD-ROMs, which are obsolete already?

CJK: That is a tough question to answer. With CD-ROMs, at the time that was "the wow," the next thing. If we hadn't jumped on that bandwagon, we would have been irrelevant. It is hard to forecast what will be a dinosaur five or ten years down the road. But in terms of things I made a mistake with—it is an easy answer—it was my not-100-percent-willingness to embrace new technologies. "I am a librarian, I don't have to think about Skype! I don't have to...." I am very much a book person, as an individual. I love the feel of the book, the physicality of the book, opening the book. But as a library leader, I have to make sure that perspective is just an individual one.

MO: In high school, I didn't want to go from vinyl to CD. I loved the cover art. CDs, who wants that?

CJK: But I was on the social-media scene fast, and I saw what that could potentially do for marketing, for telling the library's story in that framework. That has been really valuable. Good, bad or otherwise, that is a good example of a technology that the libraries have to embrace.

MO: How do you run a lending library with Kindles?

CJK: I don't know that that question has been answered. But it is incumbent on our profession to quickly have an answer to that question. Like every industry, the economy has in some cases decimated public libraries. One of the leading libraries in the U.S., in Charlotte-Mecklenburg County [North Carolina], they were in danger of having to close ten of twenty-two branch locations. And they were looked to as profession-leading, cutting-edge. It sent a shock wave across the country, as if it could happen there, it could happen anywhere. We are not exempt from what the economy has done to businesses.

MO: Solutions?

CJK: Public libraries have started looking at laptop lending. Perhaps you check out a laptop like you check out a book. Or you arrange to come to the public library and we have laptops you can book in two-hour blocks. So there is a recognition that we have to be able to provide not only software but hardware that meets technological needs in our community. But we have to be careful, because not everybody we serve knows how to use a laptop, sit down hook up to wireless, get going. We can't ignore factions of the community that perhaps don't have that access to technology.

MO: How much money should be spent on technology? Because it is an endless pit, right? Tech support alone eats up several salaries.

CJK: I have never been involved in laptop lending. But, as a pro-

gressive library team, we have to answer those questions. How do we devote resources? How do we cultivate a staff and team of employees that are fully developed to handle this offering? And how can we be forward thinking while still honoring those traditions?

The public library has to be able to create an exemplary customer interaction every time. From what I have seen, I am firmly convinced that our library team is very steeped in crafting that customer experience and promoting the resources of the library. I look at this as we're building on the best. I can't stress enough to you, my city officials, my board of trustees, that we compete for people's time and attention, and I want people to think about the public library as a first-choice destination.

NHR: Will you be looking to replace some people?

CJK: I am not looking to replace people.

NHR: Do you have the authority to?

CJK: Working with the city and the unions, the library can always look at staffing concerns.