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All Lost at Keller's IGA

Like John Updike's A&P, Keller's IGA in Cincinnati's Clifton neighborhood has seven "check-out slots" at the front of the store. Passing the baggers, grabbing a basket, walking the building’s perimeter, you'll turn the first corner right after picking up your prepackaged lettuce. You'll pass "vine-grown tomatoes," the olive bar, and the deli (where pickled herring snacks in real sour cream cost only $2.95 a kilo). You'll pass Basic-Level Meats (steak, chops, lamb, chicken) and the turn the second corner into Subordinate Meats (bacon, hot dogs, Lunchables). Continue walking straight past Basic-Level Dairy (milk, cottage cheese), then turn the third corner at Subordinate Dairy (drinkable Trix yogurt, peach-flavored cream cheese). At last! It's on to beer (warm on the right, cold on the left), and the frozen section, with chicken tenders, family-style lasagna, and Tombstone pizzas on both left- and right-hand aisles. Then, to the left are designer ice creams; to the right are New-York-style bagels, egg substitutes, preformed piecrusts, and strawberry waffles.

Intuition would be enough to carry Keller's average shopper, an unemployed female college graduate in no hurry, through the store's thirteen aisles. A first-time visitor might be in for some trouble, though, because Keller's classification of products is not completely consistent. Non-frozen lemon and lime juice have been categorized in the classical way, among the other juices, rather than more associatively (since no one drinks lime juice at breakfast, as one would orange or grapefruit juice) with other liquid cooking additives like Karo syrup, Worcestershire sauce, and vinegar. On the other hand, toilet paper is categorized naturally, by function rather
than by form, among health and beauty items rather than among tree-consuming products like paper towels and napkins.

Despite its small size and the familiarity of most customers with the store's organization, Keller's provides expressive signage, with "Produce," "Meat," and "Dairy" painted on the walls near the ceiling. Signs above the aisles announce the eight most prototypical items in each. At Keller's, there's no offensive "Ethnic" sign above the African-American hair-care products. Since there's only a quarter of an aisle devoted to hair, it would be impossible for anyone to overlook any particular product. Wisely, Keller's has chosen an abridged classification scheme.

You'll need to backtrack to the second aisle from the left for your wine, which is categorized by quality, with imported .750-liter bottles to the right; and jugs, boxes, and bad-tasting grapes (concord, catawba, muskat) to the left. If you've got children with you, you'll want to stop at the second aisle from the right, where the battered freezer is, with the turkeys, "service meats," tubs of lard, pigs' feet, ham hocks, and cans of "potted" meat. "Eeeeeeew!" Your children will wriggle with delight. With time, you'll notice no one ever buys the pig's-feet jars; they're there only to amuse young children. This becomes clear when you see that right next to the pigs' feet are bags of Pillsbury's Goldfish, eaten only by children. It's another instance of natural categorization, with management attempting to imagine fundamental associations among foods by Keller's shoppers.

The frozen turkeys are not disgusting, of course, and are here only because the lard-and-pig-foot freezer is the only one in the store large enough for the big birds. It's analogous to how oversized library books are shelved: wherever there's enough room for the oversized stacks.

Now it's on to check out, with the twelve-or-fewer-item purchasers shunted to the far left station, cheek and jowl with the managers' counter. It's the big-spending shoppers who deserve
the rewards related to waiting at the more centrally located counters, equidistant from new
arrivals and other checker-outers both to the right and the left. Who is buying more than a few
bottles of diluted vodka? Why has that man, accompanied by no children, already opened the
Keebler's Soft Chocolate Chip Cookies?

The ATM's outside on the street, but it's not inconvenient because everyone at this IGA
has a debit card and understands clearly how to slide it through the machine.

The differences between grocery stores and libraries are hardly trivial. The grocery store
manager, for example, unlike the librarian, can easily understand the needs of most customers.
Most will come at predictable, frequent intervals and leave in less than an hour. Library users
might, on the other hand, come daily or once in a lifetime. They might stay for a minute or all
day. Moreover, library users have different needs at different times in their lives, while the need
for groceries stays relatively stable on a food-per-mouth basis for most of a person's adult life.

Then there's the obvious profit motive of a grocery store, compared with the more subtle
mission of the library. Even as an adjunct assistant professor at a community college, I have
great range in the number of libraries I can legally visit. There are the Consortium libraries in
Cincinnati, the public library, and the libraries at the University of Kentucky. Many books I
desire would be available at any library, so I choose libraries mostly for convenience-related
reasons. Still, when I check out a book from the University of Cincinnati, I have no thought that
I'm doing the public library any harm by rejecting its services. At Keller's, I'm constantly aware
that by shopping there I'm helping out a relatively small business whose profits have dropped
since the arrival of the massive Corryville Kroger in 1996.

Almost everyone needs grocery stores, whereas for many people, libraries are important
only in the abstract. In addition, a grocery store manager can be reasonably certain that many
customers will walk up and down every aisle, to be tempted by two-for-one sales and other special displays. Librarians, on the other hand, are often frustrated that patrons come in only to surf the Net, or to check their email. In addition, unlike at grocery stores, browsing is becoming increasingly difficult in libraries, as more and more libraries' collections are kept in storage. And librarians are glad when patrons return the books they've borrowed; at best, returns are a major hassle for grocery clerks.

Still, the ways in which grocery stores and libraries are similar outweigh any differences. Both allow entrance to almost anyone. Both must make allowances for frequent deliveries: libraries have their exciting freight elevators, and Keller's has its conveyer belts. Both must have some kind of security system: at Keller's, managers must discourage shoplifters and the inappropriately dressed. Librarians too must deal with property defacers and perverts. Like librarians, grocery store managers often keep popular items in more than one place. At Keller's, for example, Goldfish are not only in the frozen monstrosities aisle but also, more predictably, among the potato chips, Fritos, and Chex Mix.

The biggest similarity, of course, relates to the political and social climate necessary for libraries and grocery stores to flourish. In LIS 600, we've learned that libraries can exist only in a stable political environment where the most basic needs of the people are being met. The same is true of grocery stores. A three-mile walk across the steppe to barter for a black-market egg might be thrilling, but the lifestyle problems associated with this kind of shopping are probably no fun at all. The legendary Beriozka Gastronom of Soviet Moscow was closed to the general public. Similarly, although I imagine I could find some public place to read "Boy Meets Tractor" novels in Pyongyang, it's unlikely that I would be able to research many controversial issues, confidentially, without fear of reprisal.
A thriving grocery store has the same needs as a good library: a trustworthy supply system, a clientele with the means to access its products and services, desirable products and services, and a balance between cost of visiting and the perceived benefits or deficits associated with doing so. My guess, in fact, is that if the libraries were to pick up and leave, the grocery stores wouldn't be far behind.