Wondering about the future of libraries? You don’t need a crystal ball—just pick up Joe Janes’s new book

Those who know libraries know Joe Janes. A professor (and program chair) at the University of Washington’s Information School, Janes has been a popular speaker at conferences and events around the country for years, known for his insight, and his wit. Now he’s dabbling in futurism.

In his new book, *Library 2020* (Rowman & Littlefield), Janes was looking to get a glimpse at the future of libraries—so posed a simple question: the library of 2020 will be...? And he recruited a who’s who of great librarians to answer—in any way they wanted. And boy, did they. The resulting book cuts to the heart of the ever-changing library enterprise.

*PW* caught up Janes for a fun, wide-ranging talk about the book and the future of libraries.
So, first of all, why 2020? Was there something specific about that date?
Well, it's a nice round number. But also, it's not the day after tomorrow, and not so far out that it is science fiction. If it was 30 years from now, who can think that far out? But seven or eight years, you know, that's a strategic plan away. That's a technology or two away. That's a publishing model or two away. So, 2020 was enough time for people to kind of play with, but not so far that it was shiny jumpsuits and ray guns.

Backing up for a moment, where do you see libraries right now, as we head into ALA 2013?
You know, it's a very interesting time. I think in many ways you can look at the library landscape today and see a lot of strengths. Public libraries tell us that usage is up, circulation is up, their buildings are full. Academic libraries continue to roll out innovations like research commons and are moving into areas like data and repositories for research data and scholarship. But it's also not hard to find examples of libraries that are struggling. I think we've largely gotten past the layoffs and the shutting-down period. But we are still not always clear where we're going or where to look to figure out where we're going. It's a fraught time in many ways, but I think our communities have really come to understand the role libraries play. And if you see the kind of support that lots of libraries have received over the past several years from their communities and clientele, it's very encouraging.

A big part of the library discussion in the past two years or so has been the e-book question. How important, in your opinion, is that issue to libraries?
Well, the e-book lending issue, which is very important right now, is different from the e-book issue. There are two aspects to the e-book lending issue. There's getting publishers to realize that we are not going to take away their market. Publishers are finally opening those doors a bit, and I think ALA had something to do with that, through its engagement with the publishing community over the past couple years, in particular.

But then there's the technical aspect of e-books—all the different standards and formats and devices. For your average user in your average library, why does it take 37 steps to download a freaking e-book when you can go to Amazon and do it in four? That piece I think is particularly important; if we lose people now, because it is too hard for them to download a library e-book, then we will have lost them forever.

Great point—which brings me to my next question about technology: how much of the challenge for libraries is going to involve balancing their traditional roles with the need to keep up with technology and the tech needs of their patrons?
That's the broader e-book issue. And we're all in it together: authors, despite the occasionally unhelpful commentary by the Authors Guild; publishers, despite the occasionally unhelpful rhetoric out of the AAP; librarians; and readers. The overlay of e-books and print books is a much longer-term thing. We're going to live in a world with both formats for a long time. The more interesting thing to me is what digital storytelling is going to look like. And I don't think the e-book thing leads us down that path—I think the app leads us down that path. That's the form that's going to enable new kinds of storytelling that may or may not look like the novel or the short story or the anthology or whatever. As for e-books, sure, more things are going to come out in e-versions. More people will buy them. Innovations will happen within the e-book devices. Some of those will succeed, and some of those will fail. But it's the next thing I really wonder about: the way in which people will tell stories that don't look anything like books.

What does that future mean for libraries today?
It may be early in the game, but I think this is a chance for those libraries that see themselves as innovators to begin to think about that next generation of storytelling, and how we are going to be part of it. Not only that, but how do we encourage it? How do we help to shape those forms? How do we help to distribute those forms? Do we encourage authors to partner with us to develop and distribute these things? Trying to engage with authors and creators of these kinds of works, trying to engage with mechanisms by which they get distributed and shared and contributed, is certainly going to be social and constructive in nature. That's fertile ground, and a natural ground for libraries.

One of PW's contributing editors, White Plains library director Brian Kenney, wrote recently that the future of libraries will be much more about services than about the stuff they have. What do you think?
I think Brian is almost certainly correct. This is not a time to be a middleman. It is not about access any more. For a long time it was, because we were one of the few games in town. Now there's a diminishing amount of cultural material that we're in a position to provide access to that nobody else can get. But if you look at independent booksellers that are thriving, they are doing it with these specialty niche places that do children's books and cookbooks and mystery books and so on, places that
offer really great service, and bring people for book clubs and readings, and support local authors. That’s a model for us to think about, more than how do we outdo Amazon. Because we can’t outdo Amazon, nor should we particularly try.

You have some fantastic contributors in Library 2020. I’m not going to ask you to choose a favorite, I know that would be like choosing a favorite among your children, but were there any that really sort of blew your mind?

You’re right, I’m not going to name a favorite. But there were a couple who really struck me. When Cliff Lynch [director of the Coalition for Networked Information] said yes, he said, “You know, I don’t really know an awful lot about public libraries. Is that okay?” I said, “Cliff, you can write whatever the hell you want to.” And he wrote this fascinating piece about the shift in the marketplace for cultural objects from physical objects to licensed access. It’s fascinating.

I also took a flyer and asked the person who writes the Annoyed Librarian column...

Wait, so you know who the Annoyed Librarian is?
No clue. Signed a release form, did not sign a copyright. We did it all by e-mail in the dark of night with code.

How very Batman...

Yeah, I have no idea who that person is. But it’s a great piece that actually leads the book off because it’s very provocative, which is exactly what I would have expected. It is about the shift in form from print to digital and streaming and what that is going to do for us.

I also wanted to make a point of having younger people contribute. I didn’t want to have just the usual suspects. Courtney Greene is in there, she’s a user-experience librarian in Indiana, and I’ve been on a couple of panels with her. She’s just super.

James Rosenzweig [education librarian at Northeastern Illinois University], who is a former student of mine, wrote this great piece about how the library’s going to be like a base camp, and that it’s not about the stuff that we collect and maintain, it’s about helping people out in the wild. I loved that metaphor, and the more I think about it, the more I think it really holds water.

Loriene Roy [a professor at the University of Texas School of Information] wrote a piece about place, and it’s beautiful. It’s lyrical. It’s almost poetry. It gets better every time I read it because it’s just so sensuous the way she talks about libraries and the experience of libraries and people, and how she wants to experience her library. It’s just this side of natural realism, and it’s not quite Borges, but it’s in that mode.

Josie Barnes Parker, who is the director [of the public library system] in Ann Arbor, Mich., is an old friend and a former student. I think hers is the shortest piece in there, but manages to work in fiscal responsibility, generosity, and power. And wow, it’s like a dart, right to the head, and beautifully written.

Then Peter Morville [president of Semantic Studios] posted his online a few months ago—I think that got people thinking about the book. He coined the phrase “inspiration architecture,” that libraries are architected to inspire.

Overall, it’s quite a range, and I’m very proud of the whole thing.

Now I have two questions for you: how do you see the library in 2020, but also, say, in 2014? Because things are changing so quickly, even from 2012 to 2013—just to highlight what immediately is on the horizon. I wrote the concluding piece, and I asked everybody else to complete the sentence ["The library of 2020 will be..."], so I did, too. And mine says, "The library in 2020 will be..." period.
My perspective on this is that the institution of the library is so enduring, so deeply ingrained in how we interact with information and how we interact with each other, that the idea, the concept of the library will survive even as the technological environment shifts, the market shifts, the demography shifts, the social milieu shifts. But it’s got to change. And the ways in which we change and the ways in which we adapt and to some extent create the change in the environment around us are very, very important.

I can’t get beyond this notion that we have to move beyond access, that for so long we were the place you went. That’s no longer as necessary, or necessary at all in many cases. And it is never going to be the case again. So that means we have to engage people on more than access: on service, specialty, place, community, engagement, innovation, creativity—those kinds of things that we’re good at and we need to get better at. Also, we have to engage who we are and what we stand for: intellectual freedom, equality of access, privacy. We’re not going to follow you around. We’re not going to share your private information. We’re not going to out you. We’re going to help you. We can save you. We can still be a place of sanctuary and refuge. We’re worth it.

So... in 2014?

In the very short run, I think the next couple years are going to be a confusing period. There are just so many things—what do I pay attention to? What do I look at? What do I notice? Do I pay attention to e-books? Do I pay attention to journal subscriptions? Do I pay attention to Makerspaces? Do I pay attention to apps? Do I pay attention to social media? It’s paralyzing because there are 17 things you should be paying attention to, and if you don’t, you’re doomed.

I think the next couple of years are going to be spinning around. What I hope is that each of those 17 directions somebody pays attention to, that somebody really engages deeply with social media, that they really engage with Makerspaces, that people really engage with data science, that people really engage with the future of the book. And that we come together at meetings like ALA and other conferences and on social media, in all kinds of settings, and share those stories with each other and learn from each other.

You know, librarianship is nothing if not really strong cooperatively. Learning from each other as fast as we humanly can about all these things, and then being a part of the creation of this future we imagine, is super important—and feasible.