



**Alma C. Ortega, *Academic Libraries and Toxic Leadership*. Cambridge, MA: Chandos Publishing, 2017, 98pp, \$55.00.**

**Nicole Eva**

*University of Lethbridge*

As someone who has worked under several different University Librarians and has served on the search committee for one of them, I have long wondered what the ‘secret’ to good library leadership is. We all know stories of bad library leaders, even if we have not experienced them first-hand. Ortega acknowledges this reality and wrote this book in the hopes of strengthening the leadership in academic libraries, therefore strengthening libraries’ position within the academy. It is an issue that is rarely discussed openly, and even less often formally researched and written about. And yet it can do so much damage to a central campus unit—not only in terms of employee morale and productivity, but in the provision of services and the library’s reputation. Ortega brings 15 years of academic librarianship experience to this topic, as well as many more years of work in other types of libraries. It is interesting to note that she does not currently hold a leadership position, though she is completing her PhD in Leadership Studies.

Ortega defines toxic leadership as leadership that is not merely bad or ineffective, but actually harmful—with knowingly egregious acts being performed that have long-lasting implications for the workplace and its employees. She ties the existing research on toxic leadership (something that is widely experienced in every industry and type of workplace) to an academic library context, something that has not yet been attempted in the literature. She also provides resources for further reading on leadership in general, including the good kind, as well as a thorough literature review on leadership in libraries, both good and bad. The abrupt transition from the introductory, theoretical/literature-review chapters to the more step-by-step practical aspects (for example, advising victims to gather evidence and witnesses before making potentially disputed allegations; creating policy changes once the toxic leader is ousted to prevent reoccurrences) makes reading the whole volume a bit disjointed; however, it easily lends itself to readers sampling the relevant chapters. From an interested bystander perspective, I found the whole book enjoyable to read.

The book is very practical, and presents ways to recognize, overcome, and heal from toxic leadership, as well as some illustrative case studies with discussion questions. The idea that those who have experienced toxic leadership in the past may still carry residual trauma and be in need of healing was a new concept for me, but it makes sense that if not rehabilitated, the poor morale and contaminated atmosphere will persist despite a change in leadership. Also included is a helpful list of examples of what does not constitute toxic leadership, which can save the wary reader from over-diagnosing a leader with whom they may not see eye to eye.

The author weaves anecdotes from her own original research throughout the book. This research includes interviews with those who have experienced toxic leadership in their own libraries and results from her survey of academic librarians in the US, which found that over 65% had experienced toxic leadership—lending credence to her assertion that this research is necessary. In Ortega's survey, the most common toxic traits presented by leaders were unpredictability, narcissism, and authoritarianism. She also includes quotes from librarians she interviewed. In closing, the author calls on LIS education, professional associations, and mid-career mentors to adequately train and prepare academic librarians to become not just non-toxic leaders of the future, but actually good ones. Ortega takes to task the practice of sending toxic leaders on their way with good references to their next unsuspecting employers, which of course might bring relief to those in the current institution but does not stem the problem—it merely passes it along to the next victims.

One quibble is that the book primarily focuses on the effects and experiences of librarians coping with toxic leadership. To be fair, this is what the author researched, but I found myself wondering about the other staff members present in the library. They of course would likely be more powerless to enact change than the possibly faculty-status, tenured librarians. I also occasionally wished for more information; for example, one anecdote cited a library in which the librarians successfully ousted their toxic leader, but didn't go into detail about how this was accomplished. It's possible that this was one of the case study institutions, but that link wasn't clear and should have been cited if that was the case.

The book is written in an engaging and readable style, and is short enough to digest in a couple of sittings. It is highly recommended for those in academic libraries, particularly those who have an interest in becoming leaders and those who have experienced the effects of toxic leadership. It would also serve as a good text for an LIS leadership course, particularly the case studies with associated discussion questions.