

## Welcome Back, Bob

You can imagine my surprise when I returned to Earth the other day (I had forgotten my pajamas), and discovered that my overdue books at the Boston Public Library had not been returned.

The lady at the desk was none too helpful, referring to me repeatedly as being "delinquent." I assured her that my "delinquency" was due, almost entirely, to my having died while still in possession of the books.

"Mr. Benchley," she advised me, "your death is a personal matter, and besides, you had plenty of time to return the books before you died."

How, I wondered, did they know?

That's when I saw the machine. At first, it seemed innocent enough, a rectangular box with a small movie screen in the front and a keyboard beneath. A typewriter with pictures, I thought, all rather harmless.

Then she began typing rapidly, making changes to the movie screen, and the next thing I knew, there on the screen was a picture of me, wearing the mournful look of someone who knew he had books overdue at the library.

Beneath the picture was the notation:

Benchley, Robert C.  
Books checked out: September 18, 1941.  
Died, November 12, 1945.  
Status of account: delinquent.  
Amount due: \$17,653.28.

"That's preposterous," I said, "I don't have \$17,000. I don't have any money. I don't need any money. I'm dead!"

"There's no need to raise your voice, Mr. Benchley," the librarian said, noticing a crowd gathering. "You're making a scene."

I guess I had expected a difference response. "There's old Bob," I thought they'd say. "Are they feeding you well *down* there? Ha! Ha!" I was even prepared to offer a little joke: "They make us watch 'Abie's Irish Rose' three times a day," I would say.

"Mr. Benchley?" the librarian asked.

I was stumped, to be honest. Then the strange machine began making gurgling noises, and the librarian became agitated and vexed with it. Soon, the screen turned a pale blue, and she said, "Well, Mr. Benchley, our files have crashed. You no longer exist."

"Precisely my point," I said.