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Librarians in the Looking Glass: Reflections of our Profession in Popular Culture

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Abstract

A number of years ago I started a PhD on the image of librarians in literature. However, I ended up withdrawing to pursue a career as an actual librarian. This unfinished thesis still follows me around, and I find that I am constantly collecting references to librarians in books, comics, films and TV shows.

This presentation aims to explore the image of librarians in popular culture. By looking at the gap between perception and reality I will identify some possible pathways to a new cultural identity.

I will be referring to a set of texts that undermine the negative stereotypes of our profession and move librarians into a new realm. Who are our new heroes, and what can we learn from them?

LIBRARIANS IN THE LOOKING GLASS: INTRODUCTION

BOOKMAN: I remember when the librarian was a much older woman: Kindly, discreet, unattractive. We didn't know anything about her private life. We didn't want to know anything about her private life. She didn't have a private life.

(*Seinfeld*, episode 22, "The Library", 1991)

Ten years ago I started a PhD on the image of librarians in literature. My original inspiration was the work of the man I consider to be the modern patron saint of libraries: the writer Jorge Luis Borges, who was famously appointed head of the National Library of Argentina despite having lost his eyesight due to glaucoma.

Reading his short stories, such as "The Library of Babel", lead me to Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, with its medieval homage to Borges, the blind librarian Jorge of Burgos. Once I started down this path I uncovered a huge body of literature which contained references to libraries and librarians, as well as books and book collecting, and even bibliomania. I realised this is because most writers love books (naturally) and therefore have a high regard for libraries and librarians. The more I looked, the more I found. It seemed like every literary author had at some point included libraries in a novel, poem or short story.

I then broadened the scope of my thesis to include images from popular culture, not realising that this would ultimately be my undoing. I had no idea that librarians spent so much time thinking and writing about their image and it's place in popular culture. The trickle of information soon became a flood, and it was impossible to hold back the deluge. My supervisor expressed some concern about where my thesis was headed, but I assured him that it was all under control.

It turned out that I was wrong. During this period I started working in the UWA Library as a student casual, then accepted a half-time position as a library officer. When it became clear that my shelving skills were progressing at a much faster rate than my actual PhD-writing-skills, I fell on my sword by withdrawing from the PhD to complete a

Graduate Diploma in Library and Information Studies and pursue a career as an actual librarian.

However, this unfinished thesis still haunts me, and I find that I am constantly collecting references to librarians in books, comics, films and TV shows. My friends and colleagues are always alerting me to the latest pop culture references, just in case I missed out. I am indebted to these people, as without them I never would have discovered the comic *Rex Libris*. But more on that later.

I started this paper for the New Librarian Symposium with the intention of exploring the pervasive stereotype and what it means, but as I went further into the research I noticed a very definite divide between two schools of thought:

- those who write about the negative image of librarians
- those who wish to move past the negative image

Originally I would have classified myself as being in the first camp, but I have now pulled up my tent and moved over to the second camp.¹ So the direction of my paper changed.

In July 2000, Katherine C. Adams wrote an excellent article that set out to answer three interrelated questions:

- (1) what are the particulars of the old-maid stereotype...?
- (2) how close is this representation to reality?
- (3) what should librarians do to combat these negative representations?

(p. 289)

For this paper I will gloss over (1) and (2), as these have been explored in detail elsewhere. Instead I will concentrate on question (3) by looking towards some new cultural images that encourage librarians to rediscover their sense of humour and to

¹ Apologies for stretching that metaphor so thin.

proactively deal with the professional insecurity that may arise from focussing on outmoded stereotypes.

THE CLASSIC STEREOTYPE

KRAMER: Look at her. This is a lonely woman looking for companionship. Spinster. Maybe a virgin. Maybe she got hurt a long time ago. She was a schoolgirl. There was a boy. It didn't work out. Now she needs a little tenderness. She needs a little understanding. She needs a little Kramer.

JERRY: Eventually a little shot of penicillin.

(*Seinfeld*, episode 22, "The Library", 1991)

If you work in a library, I imagine you would have heard complaints that librarians are continuously misrepresented in popular culture. Radford and Radford (2003) rightly point out that "the stereotype of the librarian is one that has a long history and has remained remarkably consistent... even against the astonishing technological changes that have taken place... and the rise of the so-called information age" (p. 60).

While there is a plethora of writing that supports this assertion, I would contend that this is actually a *perception* held by librarians, rather than an empirical reality, and that the people who pay the most attention to the stereotype are librarians themselves.

There is certainly no shortage of descriptions of the classic librarian stereotype. Nearly every source in my reference list has a paragraph dedicated to describing the all-conquering cliché of the librarian. Although I am loath to perpetuate the myth, allow me to amalgamate and distil this down to its essential points so that we can acknowledge it and move on.

Let's call her "Ms Librarian", for convenience sake. Ms Librarian is an old spinster with her hair in a bun, glasses, twin set, pearls, and sensible shoes ². Ms Librarian engages

² To show you the other side of these kind of descriptions, this could easily be rephrased as "mature, single, with tidy hair, well dressed, practical..." And does anyone seriously use the word "spinster" anymore?

in “three predominant activities... shelving, stamping and shushing” (Radford & Radford, 2003, p. 60). So far, so good.

But alongside this image we also have the younger version, “Miss Librarian”. She has a fair bit in common with Ms Librarian, but with a different slant. Miss Librarian is often quiet and timid, but when her true nature is unleashed she can transform into the “Nympho Librarian” that is apparently so bizarrely popular in pornographic media, perpetuating the myth of the wanton female hidden behind a prim, innocent and almost untouchable exterior.³

So what about the rarely-heard-of “Mr Librarian”? All we know about him is that he is in the minority in his feminised workplace (although he may be the head librarian, often promoted ahead of his far more competent female peers) and displays many of the same characteristics as Ms Librarian, although maybe with more tweed and less pearls. Perhaps Rupert Giles, the “well (if fussily) dressed” (DeCandido, 1999, p. 45) librarian from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is one of our only clear examples of Mr Librarian, and we will return to examine him in more detail later.

I see these three images as funny rather than threatening, but I do understand that this is just my opinion and that others are genuinely concerned or hurt by the classic stereotype. Perhaps I have a different view because the strongest images are female and therefore don't relate to my gender in the same way? I don't feel the stereotypes bear any real relationship to me or my profession, in much the same way that I don't consider Turk from *Scrubs* or Jack from *Lost* as being accurate representations of surgeons.

Adams (2000) correctly points out that “the old-maid stereotype can be neither wished nor willed away no matter how digitally savvy any of us might be or become” (p. 288). So we had better reclaim it as our own.

³ See <http://www.riverofdata.com/librarians/porn/index.htm> for more on this strange phenomenon, but only if you have a very broad mind.

OBSESSION AND INSECURITY

Librarians tend to be obsessed with “the stereotype” when everybody else doesn’t really care. (Dupre, 2001, p. 1, introduction by J. Benedicto)

There is a seminal work by L. Wallace (1989) referring to ALA surveys which show that the image of librarians consistently ranks among the top five concerns of the profession, alongside finances, personnel, information access and intellectual freedom. From the reading I have done, I have no reason to doubt that this is still true more than fifteen years later.

I often wonder if other professions share this same kind of concern about their professional image? Doctors, lawyers and police saturate our TV airwaves, but do they agonise over how they are portrayed in the same way we seem to? So far I haven’t seen any articles on this topic in the professional medical literature, but I do imagine that police have to consider their public image for more serious reasons. But we won’t follow that thread any further for now.

One of the elements of this apparent obsession is the fact that librarians don’t seem to appear that often in popular culture. Graceanne DeCandido (1999) states that “it is a heady experience for any profession to find itself an integral part of a wildly popular TV series. How much more so for librarians...” (p. 44). Although I can see what she is saying, I would argue that librarians appear in popular culture more than most people would think, and it is therefore not really that “heady” an experience. On Martin Raish’s website dedicated to librarians in the movies there are over 150 entries in the main grouping alone.⁴

I believe that the majority of librarians are very keen consumers of culture and like to express themselves through writing. This has become especially clear since the advent

⁴ Group A is defined as “someone says or does something that clearly identifies himself or herself (or some other character) as a librarian. This person may be a professional, a clerk, a student assistant, a director or some other type of librarian. Some have major roles, others have barely a dozen words to speak.” See <http://emp.byui.edu/RAISHM/films/introduction.html> for the full list.

of the Web, and particularly the explosion of blogs, where librarians can engage in ongoing online conversations about themselves with each other.

Deirdre Dupre (2001) makes a very convincing case when she states that “it’s not the stereotype that’s the problem, it’s the *obsession* with the stereotype” (p. 5, my emphasis). Dupre came to this conclusion after embarking on a survey of the current literature on the topic, where she noticed a “disturbing theme: librarians are very insecure about their profession – so insecure that it has become a pervasive anxiety throughout the field of librarianship” (p. 2).

Once you start to look, the paradoxical nature of this paranoid feedback loop becomes more apparent:

Since a good number of these written communications focus on the lack of status of the library profession, how to improve librarians’ status, image, stereotypes of librarians, and similar themes, these writings are a supremely effective way for members of the library profession to obsess about their status anxiety. (Dupre, 2001, p. 4)

Although I don’t completely agree with Dupre’s argument that all library science students and new librarians are doomed to perpetuate this obsession in a never-ending cycle of professional insecurity, I do support her suggestion that we can move away from the preoccupation with the image, and display a solid confidence in our own identity:

When a person is utterly convinced of the value of his profession he does not need to force others to believe in his professional pride with lots of loud proclamations. Instead his actions, like encouraging others to join the profession, remaining with and succeeding highly at his organization, and exuding confidence that his profession is valued by his peers and society, show that he has no professional insecurity. This way, librarians can convince their peers and the outside world as to the greatness of what they do. (Dupre, 2001, p. 10)

Dupre's most insightful point is that we need to separate "the issue of professional insecurity from the issue of distaste for the physical-image stereotype" (p. 7). The stereotype can be annoying, insulting or unsettling, but there is no real reason to allow it to dominate our thinking. The paradox is that you perpetuate the myth the more you actively fight against it. As one of my colleagues wrote in an email to the ALIA New Grads mailing list:

I chose to be a librarian because its what I believe in. I know I rock. I don't, however, need other people to know how much I rock. I don't need them to think of me as a professional like a lawyer. I realise other people do, and if you want to fight the good fight for the right to be treated like doctors, more power to you, but I'm not interested in it...To me, it isn't important, and more, it's likely futile, because everyone will still compare me to Giles on *Buffy*, and he couldn't even turn a computer on. (T. Ferguson, personal communication, 20 July, 2006)

I identify with the confidence and humour of this statement,⁵ and it conveniently leads me to the first of the new images I will be discussing: Rupert Giles.

NEW IMAGES: Rupert Giles in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

GILES: Things involving the computer fill me with a childlike terror. Now, if it were a nice ogre or some such, I'd be more in my element.

(*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, episode 1.08, "I Robot – You Jane", 1997)

From my experience, Giles appeals to librarians on several levels, especially those in the female audience, like Graceanne DeCandido: "Here is a librarian who is elegant, deeply educated... handsome, and charged with eroticism..." (1999, p. 45). While I don't have quite the same reaction to his gentlemanly charms, I can attest that this attraction is confirmed by many of my women colleagues and friends. DeCandido also

⁵ Although I would also like to quote N. Clugston from the same email conversation who said "I think librarians aren't necessarily defensive, obsessive, or elitist if they reflect on their work. There's nothing wrong with caring about it - no one else is going to!"

expansively declares that Giles is the most important popular culture librarian of the past 50 years.

However, this view is not to everyone's taste. John Cullen (2000) wrote an exaggeratedly pointed response to DeCandido's gushing paean to all things Giles, stating that:

It is a tragedy that the character of Rupert Giles provides one of the most negative and oversimplified images of a librarian ever depicted by the entertainment industry... He is a Luddite working in a field reliant on information technology... he has no concept of reader service and is always surprised when students enter the library to do real research. If Giles actually spent one day fighting the battles that real librarians face, all the bloodcurdling demons in hell wouldn't faze him. (p. 42)

Andrew Pace (2000) also declared that he would rather not "go on and on about how much good (*Buffy*) has done for our profession" (p. 63). While I can understand where Cullen and Pace are coming from on one level, there does seem to be an unnecessarily serious tone to their statements, which could be balanced by a little levity.

I must admit that I'm not really a true *Buffy* fan⁶ but I watched enough to get the general idea, and I was always interested in what role Giles played in the show. Joss Whedon is a very clever and erudite writer, and like most well-read writers he shows a special affinity for books and library-lore, especially when it helps move the plot along. Texts are always a good way for characters to find out vital plot elements without relying on someone to spout a whole ream of boring exposition. Get the character to read from an arcane book found in a library and the scene feels much more natural.

So part of the reason that books, libraries and librarians appear in popular culture is because they represent the trope of information seeking, often playing a vital role in the progression of plots. Like hospitals, courtrooms, bars, police stations and restaurants,

⁶ Unlike my wife...

libraries form part of the shared experience of society, and therefore are often used as settings for scenes of drama or comedy or even supernatural fantasy like *Buffy*. Rather than get uptight because a librarian is shown stamping books, we should instead think of the poor forensic scientists who have to endure their intensely complex and important work being reduced to the mind-numbing level of *CSI Miami*.

NEW IMAGES: *Party Girl*

MARY: Excuse me, sir... it looked like you were just putting that book away. I guess you didn't know we have a system for putting books away here. No, I'm curious... you were just randomly putting that book on the shelf, is that it? You've just given us a great idea. I mean, why are we wasting our time with the Dewey Decimal System when your system is so much easier? We'll just put the books anywhere! Hear that, everybody!? Our friend has just given us a great idea! We'll just put the books any damn place we choose!! We don't care, right!?

HOWARD: (soothingly) You didn't take a break today. Take a break.

MARY: I just want to do a good job, Howard.

HOWARD: You *are* doing a good job. I'll cover you.

(*Party Girl*, 1995)

Party Girl is one of my favourite cult movies. I'll admit that it isn't a masterpiece, but it really struck a chord with me when I first saw it in 1997 (at the beginning of my library career) due to its low-key honesty and humour, and I still feel it holds up well today.

Mary (played with aplomb by Parker Posey) is a 24-year-old orphan existentialist New York party girl who earns her rent money by throwing illegal parties in her loft, until she gets arrested. Desperate for bail money, Mary calls her librarian godmother (fairly godmother?), Judy,⁷ for a loan. Mary visits Judy in the library to thank her, but finds herself on the receiving end of a tirade denouncing her lackadaisical attitude and "lack of common sense, just like her mother", suggesting that she wouldn't be responsible enough to work in the library. Mary decides to prove Judy wrong by accepting a job as a library clerk. At first she treats the job as a joke, but her natural determination to

⁷ Interestingly, Judy is played by the director's mother.

succeed takes over and leads her to break in to the library for a late-night, beer-and-joint-fuelled hallucinatory encounter with the great mind of Melvil Dewey. She opens up the first volume of DDC 20 and reads that “Dewey Decimal Classification provides a system for organising a universe of items, be they books, documents or objects.” Filled with these new insights, she spends the rest of the night exploring, shelving and dancing on tables. Adams (2000) contends that “unlocking the order and organisation of the classification system sets her free” (p. 295). After this experience, it is clear that Mary’s appreciation of Dewey’s work is genuine (Radford & Radford, 2003) and with the encouragement of her colleagues she decides to take the path to professional librarianship.

Radford and Radford (2003) point out that the movie isn’t really concerned with exploring librarian stereotypes as such; instead it looks at what happens when one stereotype (the party girl) is placed into another stereotypical context (the library) and a balance has to be struck between the two. The librarians portrayed are well-drawn characters in their own right, and while Judy is the antagonist for much of the movie, she has her own personal motivations outside of the library. The movie is an affectionate and quirky comedy that includes insightful observations on the place of librarianship in the modern world, rather than a serious concerted attempt to deconstruct the image of librarians, and that, to me, is why it succeeds.

My favourite scene involves Mary and Leo, her DJ room-mate. Leo is in a hurry to get to a career-making club gig and is shocked to find that his previously chaotic record collection is no longer in random piles as he left them. Instead, his collection is all neatly stored and arranged in crates:

MARY: Surprise!

LEO: Did you f**k with my albums? There was a stack right here!

MARY: But they’re organised by the Dewey Decimal System, which is perfect for small collections like yours, unlike the Library of Con-

LEO: Small collections!?! There are over 1000 albums here!

MARY: I know. It took me all day to do it, Leo. They were a mess.

At first Leo is livid because this newly imposed order means that he won't be able to find the records he needs. However, Mary has not only tidied up and classified the albums with her own version of Dewey, she has also created a detailed card catalogue that cross-references all the records by artist and music style, allowing a whole new form of controlled access. She proves this point by getting Leo to name albums he needs for his gig and then quickly locates them by using the cards. After initially declaring that Mary has ruined his life, Leo comes to the realisation that the new system is actually a vast improvement over the previous chaos.

Because I am also a DJ, this scene inspired me to immediately go and reorganise my own records. I didn't go as far as using DDC 20, but I did create my own (slightly less complex) system for classifying my records based on genre and intended audience.

The organisation of the record collection also resonates with the scene I quoted in the header, where Mary chastises a user for reshelving a book in the wrong place. As Radford and Radford (2003) describe it, Mary is seeing first hand the tension between the integrity of the collection and helping the user ("archive" versus "access" are the terms I often use). By the time she works on Leo's records, she has found a balance between the two extremes and discovered that her real strength lies in helping people find what they need. Through these connections and juxtapositions, *Party Girl* gives us "an appreciation of both worlds of party girl and librarian and, in the end, challenges our stereotypical understanding of both" (Radford & Radford, 2003, p. 67). The movie ends with Mary heading to library school to do her Masters, but sadly there isn't any sign of a sequel yet.

NEW IMAGES: *Rex Libris*

"Sapere Aude (Dare to know)" – Official motto of the Ordo Bibliotheca

The author of the new comic *Rex Libris*, James Turner, has been kind enough to give me some of his time after I emailed him to praise his work. I assumed that James must be a librarian, but he assured me that he isn't a "real librarian" but "just an illustrator

with a hobby” (J. Turner, personal communication, 20 October, 2006). So why did he decide to create a comic based around an inter-galactic, time-travelling library cop?

I like libraries. I like adventure. I decided to combine the two. Throwing together two disparate elements to create something new is a time honoured tradition in creative circles... Cops are a favourite element in these kinds of combos, and have been paired with just about everything. Time cop. Robo cop. Android cop. Space cop. Monster cop. Psychic cop. Alien cop. Thug cop. Future cop. Dog cop. Forensic cop. Crazy cop. Magic cop...the fun is endless. Anyway, this is the pool of thought from which Rex emerged. (Boudreau, 2005)

Turner’s work is based on a deep and detailed semi-historical mythology that librarians have been guiding human civilisation since ancient times, influencing intellectual development through the preservation of knowledge. At the same time, librarians have all been members of a secret society called the Ordo Bibliotheca, which originated in Ptolemaic Egypt. In 1921 Litteratus Magi Rex Libris discovered the teleportation crystal and interstellar book loans became possible. By 1960, over ten thousand volumes of extraterrestrial origin had been collected and stored at the Middleton Book Repository, a ceramic encased bunker deep beneath the Middleton Public Library.

At the same time that Turner is exploring this fantastic universe of literary gods and monsters, he is very aware of what libraries offer to society:

A good library system is to be treasured, as it gives you access to tens of thousands of books. The sum of human knowledge available at our finger tips...We sit atop a mountain of knowledge... It gives equal access to both the poor and the rich. It provides social opportunity, as Amartya Sen might say, which is one of the essential ingredients in the development of a prosperous human society (Boudreau, 2005).

I am pleased to say that James kindly asked me about my experiences working in libraries, and we may even see future *Rex Libris* stories that delve into the mysteries of document delivery:

I quite like the inter-library loan detective idea. Have to have Rex in that role at some point, trying to track something down. An awesome MacGuffin⁸ to set a story rolling with. Can add in the competitor angle, Indiana Jones/Beloch style, as loan-detectives struggle to find the lost text of the legendary Zohandzoh... (J. Turner, personal communication, 15 October, 2006)

Keep an eye out for that issue!

LEARNING TO LAUGH AT OURSELVES

BOOKMAN: Well, let me tell you something, funny boy. Y'know that little stamp, the one that says "New York Public Library"? Well that may not mean anything to you, but that means a lot to me. One whole hell of a lot. Sure, go ahead, laugh if you want to. I've seen your type before: flashy, making the scene, flaunting convention. Yeah, I know what you're thinking. Why's this guy making such a big stink about old library books? Well, let me give you a hint, junior. Maybe we can live without libraries, people like you and me. Maybe. Sure, we're too old to change the world, but what about that kid, sitting down, opening a book, right now, in a branch at the local library and finding drawings of pee-pees and wee-wees on the Cat in the Hat... Doesn't HE deserve better? Look. If you think this is about overdue fines and missing books, you'd better think again. This is about that kid's right to read a book without getting his mind warped!

(*Seinfeld*, episode 22, "The Library", 1991)

The common thread with these new texts (including the classic *Seinfeld* episode "The Library" that I have featured in the header quotes) is a wry sense of humour tinged with respect. They have all been created by non-librarians with an intelligent and observant point of view based on a clear admiration for the role of librarians in society.

⁸ Alfred Hitchcock coined the term MacGuffin to describe a plot device that motivates the characters and advances the story, but is otherwise irrelevant. The mysterious suitcase in *Pulp Fiction* is a good example, or the stone in *Romancing the Stone*.

For me the important point is that this kind of informed humour is really a form of flattery. The key is to embrace the joke rather than be offended by it. A young female colleague of mine has been told by her friends that her graduate diploma is the “Shush Degree”. She responds to this with good grace because in the end she thinks it’s pretty amusing. It’s a light-hearted and affectionate way for her friends to show that they are actually interested in what she is doing, even if they poke a bit of fun while doing so. Dupre (2001) goes even further when she argues that by treating the clichés as jokes “librarians can focus on healing the professional insecurity that is so pervasive in the field” (p.7).

Andrew Pace (2000) also makes the point that there are stereotypes and jokes for all occupations (lawyers, doctors, teachers etc) but in the end, society still relies on their services. I had often thought this, so it was gratifying to see that we had independently arrived at the same conclusion: we should move past jokes about our public image and start “concentrating on the portrayal of the services that libraries provide” (Pace, 2000, p. 64). Adams (2000) goes a step further and advocates reclaiming the stereotypes as “part of our collective identity and professional history” (p. 288) in order for us to leave it behind and forge ahead into a new era of librarianship. I also feel that we shouldn’t be ashamed of the term “librarian” and I will always try to avoid being in a job where I am known as an “information manager” or any of those other wordy and ambiguous titles.

Just the same as any other profession, librarians are “complex, contradictory, multifaceted people who cannot be adequately contained by a stereotype” (Adams, 2000, p. 298). In my experience they are also usually people with a good sense of humour. And to prove it I will leave you with a quote from a very funny librarian, Scott Douglas, who writes a column for McSweeney’s⁹ entitled *Dispatches from a Public Librarian*:

At some point in my infinite bored searches, I find myself reading about Casanova and I dream that one day I will join his ranks as the greatest librarian who ever lived. Sure, there are those who argue that there were other librarians who contributed more to the profession... But when I think of famous

⁹ <http://mcsweeney.net/>



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librarians... I think of Casanova, because he makes the whole profession seem sexy. In truth, Casanova didn't really like being a librarian and didn't contribute anything to the profession. Still, he is the only librarian to have Heath Ledger play him in a movie, which has to count for something" (Douglas, 2006).

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