

Running Head: A QUESTION OF IMAGE

A Question of Image
Librarians in Popular Culture

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Librarians have an image problem. Female librarians are seen as prim, intelligent, controlling, stern, glasses wearing, shy, and “only 38.” (Tevis, 2005). Men in the profession also suffer stereotyping: effeminate, possibly homosexual, having failed at other careers, balding, more tech savvy than their female coworkers, and likely to be in management (Wiebe, 2004). None of these stereotypes of the librarian is a particularly bad trait on its own, it is when these terms are combined, as they often are in popular fiction, that the perception becomes negative in many people’s minds.

I asked a linguistics graduate student from the country of Georgia what her perception of a librarian is and she said tall, thin, dark haired, physically awkward, female, quiet, loving, capable of broad conversations on many topics, childless, asexual, readers, and she sees the men as bearded, intelligent but not professorial (T. Khvtisiashvili, personal communication, April 13, 2008). Even with her mix of European and American education her stereotypes fit the usual pattern, including that I needed to ask specifically about male librarians.

Though simple web searches can find many examples of what librarians do both at and away from work, many people are influenced by fictional portrayals, which have a tendency to play off of stereotypes such as those mentioned above. Tancheva (2005) describes the position of the library, and librarian, in popular culture as fluid and dependent upon genre and other factors. This seems to be true for differences across media as well, with advertising being a source of negative stereotypes while film, book and television programming are more varied and generally positive.

Even in these positive depictions the actual work of librarians is hardly ever shown beyond occasionally checking out books, shelving them, and on rare occasions finding them for patrons.

Special libraries are all but absent from these media depictions. One of the less frequently mentioned stereotypes is that “when individuals have an information need, they do not think of libraries or librarians as a primary source of information (Rubin, 2004).” This also seems to be a media librarian problem, as librarians are rarely shown working at reference desks.

Popular media seems to have improved their perceptions of librarians over the years, but advertising still hold librarians in fairly low esteem. The current television advertisement for Philips Milk of Magnesia is a particularly bad example of this stereotyping. Though amusing on the surface, as their ad campaigns have often been, the librarian in this ad fits several of the worst stereotypes. The female librarian is graying, dowdily dressed, and suffers from constipation and taking the wrong treatment. Her discomfort causes her to lose control of a library cart which makes a clattering mess in the very quiet, orderly library.

Fortunately, from Charles Halloway to Lynn Wells the variety of librarians available in books, television and movies belies this advertising stereotype.

There do not seem to be as many librarians as main or recurring characters on television series than in books or on film. Rupert Giles from “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” and Barbara Gordon, aka Batgirl, who appeared in twenty-six episodes of “Batman” are among the few regular librarian characters. There have been occasional librarians on several sit-coms including “The Simpsons,” “Seinfeld” and “Friends” most of whom fit at least a few of the stereotypes.

Barbara Gordon (Yvonne Craig), recently graduated librarian, wears glasses, dresses conservatively and has short, precise dark hair that wouldn't dare be out of place. She seems to be very efficient as she helps Bruce Wayne and even takes time to carefully hang up her clothes as she changes into her Batgirl costume. As Batgirl, she wears a capped and form fitting super

hero costume, has long flowing red hair and takes the time to flirt with Batman in the middle of fights. As fits this series, Barbara is beautiful, in a quiet way despite the bright colored suits she wears at the library. It is her hair and the contrast of her librarian clothes to her Batgirl costume which make her appear mousy and quiet when she is in her civilian clothes.

Rupert Giles, as portrayed by Anthony Stewart Head, plays off librarian stereotypes in his dual roll of high school librarian and Watcher. He comes across as in control of his realm, is “only 38,” usually dresses in conservative ties and tweed jackets. Unlike many other fiction librarians he has an air of distraction about him, probably related to his watcher duties. He is also shown to have hobbies in his rare off hours. Giles is a wine connoisseur, who plays the guitar and even dates. Giles is rarely seen interacting with students who are not part of the greater plot arc in his role as the Sunnydale High School librarian, or performing any usual librarian duties. Rather, his students seem to be mainly Buffy and her friends and the bulk of the research he is shown doing involves identifying and determining how to kill different kinds of demons. In the ironic style of this show, anytime Giles is shown being a “typical” librarian, he or someone else finds occasion to make fun of his behavior.

In part because of the nature of the genre, novels seems to contain more librarians with a greater depth of character than other media I am discussing. Perhaps this is because novels allow for broader character development, even of minor character, or maybe it is because novelists know that their work will land in libraries. I found it interesting that there seems to be a greater percentage of male librarians in written fiction than there is in real life.

In Ray Bradbury’s *Something Wicked This Way Comes* Charles Halloway, the librarian-hero-father manages to overcome his personal desire to ride the dark carousel backward and

regain his youth in order to save his twin sons Will and Jim from the Dust Witch and Mr. Dark. Halloway's librarianship is part of who he is, his job, and specifics of his work are not discussed in the book. His knowledge of the Dark Carnival is personal. Halloway fits both the positive and negative stereotypes of the male librarian because he is intelligent and resourceful as well as middle aged and tired.

Malachi in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* is brilliant and possibly insane as shown in this quotation, "A perverse mind presides over the holy defense of the library" (Eco, 1983, pp 176). He sees his job as being to protect people from knowledge rather than disseminating the works in the library, "I accept the risk of damnation. The Lord will absolve me, because He knows I acted for His glory. My duty was to protect the library. (Eco, 1983, pp 471)."

The Librarian, who happens to be an orangutan, in several volumes of Terry Pratchett's Discworld series also protects people from books, in his case the chained, mostly magical books in the library at Unseen University. He also protects people from the library because it "contained perfectly ordinary books, printed on commonplace paper in mundane ink. It would be a mistake to think that they weren't also dangerous just because reading them didn't make fireworks go off in the sky. Reading them sometimes did the more dangerous trick of making fireworks go off in the privacy of the reader's brain (Pratchett, 1995)." Unlike Malachi, the Librarian is not a fanatic, rather he needs to be careful because too much thought, like too much uncontained magic, can wreak havoc in the Discworld.

The Librarian and Malachi both are concerned with what is perceived to be the problem of knowledge contained in books. Also, both of their libraries are labyrinths of which only the librarians know the depth and contents. Though the library in Pratchett is a fantastical place,

Eco's medieval library seems more distant to a reader used to modern library systems in the United States. Both the Pratchett novels and *The Name of the Rose* approach the libraries and librarians with fear and respect. One of the biggest differences between the Librarian and Malachi is that on occasion Pratchett's Librarian allows others to enter the librarian unchallenged, which Malachi would not do by choice. Both of these librarians fit the stereotype of controlling and protective of their stacks.

Cinema is an interesting case for librarian stereotypes. From Hilda Plowright's portrayal of an unnamed, probably Quaker librarian in *Philadelphia Story*, who is believed to be the first American film librarian to say "shush" on screen (Tevis, 2005), to Katherine Hepburn's fashionable, sassy Bunny Watson in *Desk Set* to Rene Russo's Lynn Wells in *Major League* librarians on film seem to defy as well as encourage stereotypes. Film, or reel librarians, (Walker, 1993; Tevis, 2005) defy stereotypes by being fairly young, attractive and having active social lives. They also fit the stereotype of being female as shown by Tevis (2005) when they show 90 male and 236 female reel librarians in movies released in the United States between 1917 and 1999.

The phrase "only 38" comes from the 1923 movie of the same title. Mrs. Stanley (Lois Wilson) is an academic librarian and recent widow. Having married young and become a mother right away Mrs. Stanley wants to have her own life, much to the dismay of her twin children who are entering college. She begins to dress in more colorful clothes, takes a job at the college library and falls in love with an English professor, Charles Giddings (Elliott Dexter). Mrs. Stanley seems ancient to her children, but at "only 38" does not feel old and wants to start her own life (Tevis, 2005). This movie was made at a time when the stereotypes of librarians were

less prominent in film, according to the Tevises (2005) there were 17 reel librarians in the 1930s all of them in their 50s and younger, seven of whom wore glasses and seven who had their hair in buns. Mrs. Stanley had her hair in a bun.

The librarian in *Philadelphia Story* (1940) only appears in one scene but is worth discussing because of the stereotypes she, and so many librarians in films of the era, engenders. She is graying, very modestly dressed, has her hair in a bun, and is presumably a Quaker because she uses the words “thee” and “thou.” Although she stops shelving to help Macaulay Conner (Spencer Tracy) she later, famously, shushes Conner and Tracy Lord (Katherine Hepburn).

Hepburn, as Bunny Watson, and Tracy, as Richard Sumner, are also the stars of the 1957 film *Desk Set*, which may have the finest quartet of researchers ever filmed with Hepburn, Joan Blondell as Peg, Dina Merrill as Sylvia and Sue Randall as Ruthie. Except for Bunny who says she studied at the Columbia Library School until the money ran out, these four are not necessarily educated as librarians. They are, however, good examples of workers in a corporate library. To put aside the stereotypes, all four are single, and only Bunny has her hair in a bun. These four librarians are generalists, with some specific knowledge, who work as a team. They are fashionably dressed, sharp tongued, very funny and not worried about drinking champagne at the office Christmas party. Although Bunny and Peg are “only 38” the other two are younger. After their showdown with the new computer, the quartet are happy to learn that that not only are they keeping their jobs, more people will be hired for the research department.

Rene Russo as Lynn Wells in 1989s *Major League*, does wear glasses, but her long hair is curly and only tied back in a few scenes. Lynn’s encounters with her former boyfriend, catcher Jake Taylor (Tom Berenger), show that she is spirited, witty and smart. The scene where she

looses her temper and yells at Jake in the library shows her human side more than is usual for reel librarians. Lynn is a former world class swimmer who is proud of her work and her library. Unfortunately, the other librarians in *Major League* do look like librarian stereotypes in the few minutes they are on screen.

Perhaps the easiest way to end these stereotypes is for the profession to quit believing them. Simply reversing the stereotypes could easily create “a new set of stereotypes, instead of telling America and the world the real value of librarians and libraries (Berry, 2001).” Another solution might be for librarians to proclaim their profession proudly and make people interested in who they are outside of the job, the fictional librarians I mention here, and a multitude of others, can be used as examples. Though simple web searches can find librarians with a multitude of hobbies and attitudes, people need to be interested enough to search and find out that on April 13, 2008 youtube.com showed 2,140 hits for the word librarian, 2,280 for librarians and 47,400 for library or that on the same day there were 71,200 hits for the word librarian on MySpace. The answers are not to be found online or in fiction; real librarians in real libraries need to break down the stereotypes, not by throwing them all away, but by embracing our inner Bunnys and Lynns, not to mention the occasional orangutan.

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Librarians in popular culture can be found across many different mediums, including film, television, music and literature. Their portrayal is varied and can represent or subvert various stereotypes. According to Ann Seidl, director of the documentary *The Hollywood Librarian*, librarians in film are often portrayed as meek, timid, and unassertive in nature. After indexing hundreds of appearances of librarians in film, she found that "the shorter the reference to a librarian in a film, the worse the Librarians are a surprisingly important part of pop culture - from the nerdy to the badass." Librarians are usually thought of as quiet, bookish types. If there's any pushback on this image in the public mind, it's the aggressive shusher of noisy children. However, this doesn't do justice to what librarians do. Librarians are information scientists, researchers, teachers, crusaders. Also, book nerds, but that's not the story's end! A Master's in Library Science is what makes someone a librarian. As Doctor Who's Alice Obiefune was fond of reminding The Doctor, without the MLS you're a library assistant. These guys, though? Conceptions of librarians in professional literature, mass media and popular culture are examined. The ongoing dialogue upon the nature of the professional role within the professional press and email discussion lists is also discussed. Presenting librarians as professionals, as well as the image librarians have of themselves, is caused by the existing notions and images of librarians in media and public opinion. Likewise we can say that the profession itself is to some extent responsible for the survival of these images, whether for the lack of the diverse workforce or the existing sensitivity about their own image (Luthmann 2007). Stereotypes of librarians in popular culture are frequently negative: librarians are portrayed as puritanical, punitive, unattractive, and introverted if female, or timid and effeminate if male. Such inaccurate stereotypes are likely to have a negative impact on the attractiveness of librarianship as a profession to young people.[1][2]. In modern times, the archetype of the "sexy librarian" has also begun to gain some traction, introduced in an effort to subvert the popular matriarchal image and make them more appealing to the average consumer. Both archetypes boil down to a similar idea This chapter explores popular images of librarians. Such images provide librarians with insight into how the general public understands their work. How librarians have been depicted in popular culture has been an object of some discussion within the LIS literature (Luthmann, 2007). Popular images of the profession provide librarians with insight into how the general public understands the role of librarians within society, but a closer examination of how librarians themselves react to these popular images can provide insight into how librarians understand their own identities. Using examples of popular images of librarians, this chapter will explore the question of the professional identity of librarians and their relationship with techno

Reviewing depictions of libraries and librarians in popular culture, especially in animation and anime, to counter stereotypes and increase public understanding of the library field. Menu + — expanded collapsed. About. The latter seems the case, but it does raise the question of why the Horde wouldn't even care about the library at all, since the information within it could have helped them better conquer Etheria. But, I digress. The self-declared historians, but actually family librarians, George and Lance, give them the information they need to defeat the Horde. Stereotypes of librarians in popular culture are frequently negative: bookish characters who may be prim and introverted if female, or timid and mild if male. Such stereotypes are likely to have a negative impact on the attractiveness of the drab and innocuous look of the stereotypical librarian is perfect for avoiding suspicion, while their research skills and ability to ask the right questions allow them to procure and put together the information necessary to solve the case. The knowledge they have gained from wide reading successfully competes with a private investigator's personal experience. Stereotypes of librarians in popular culture are frequently negative: librarians are portrayed as puritanical, punitive, unattractive, and introverted if female, or timid, unattractive, and effeminate if male. Such inaccurate stereotypes are likely to have a negative impact on the attractiveness of librarianship as a profession to young people. This article provides a collection of descriptions of librarians in popular culture, i.e., literature, film, television, and games. Keywords: librarian stereotypes, librarian image, discourse of fear, librarian myth, discourse analysis Citation: Kalsi, A. (2014). Pervasive Myth or Pop Culture Relic? College students' Experience of the Librarian Stereotype. Stereotypical image/s of librarians are perpetuated by media and popular culture (e.g. movies, novels, children's stories) and perhaps those within the LIS profession are also culpable for not having done enough to combat the stereotype. Cullen (2000) warns. The key research questions driving the data collection and analysis were: What are the discursive practices /symbols /language that reinforce the librarian stereotype? How is the stereotype experienced by students if at all?