

STEREOTYPES? WHAT STEREOTYPES?

In the public psyche, a librarian is a woman of indeterminate age, who wears spectacles; a person with either a timorous disposition or an austere disposition, wearing a long sleeved blouse buttoned to the neck; someone who loves silence, likes books, and suffers people. Librarians don't laugh. They are covered with a thin film of dust. They have pale skins, which, when touched (as if one ever could) might flake and prove to be reptilian scales.

—Barry Bowes, *Between the Stacks* (1979)

Even if you aren't working in the field, chances are that you've run across the commonly held stereotype of librarians. Ask any Joe or Jane Q. Public what comes to mind when they think of a librarian. They'll inevitably describe an older woman, her hair in a tight bun, wearing glasses, a cardigan, and sensible (meaning ugly) shoes, who wouldn't know a computer from a cat (of which she owns many). She usually says "Shh" a lot, too!

As for those of us who don't quite match this image, the usual response is along the lines of: "But you don't look like a librarian!"

What, exactly, are we supposed to look like? This is an interesting question, and feeds into many societal expectations: gender, age, sexuality, type of work, level of work, professionalism, education, social ability, and so much more. But, you may wonder, "So what? Why should it matter to me what someone thinks a librarian should look like?" Well, I'll tell you why. It matters:

- When a patron doesn't ask you for help on the computer because "you're a girl."
- When someone approaches a library help desk but waits for a woman to arrive because "everyone knows that men can't be librarians."
- When two people who do the same tasks are paid differently if one of them has "librarian" in their job title (and you know which one is paid less).
- When librarians are reclassified at a lower pay rate, as happened in February 2008 at the Marathon County (WI) Public Library (www.lisnews.org/node/29261), because their board thinks librarians today "do less complex work."
- When "the services and functions that librarians provide in their day-to-day work and the value they play to those they serve are often overlooked,

by both those inside and outside the profession”
 (*The Image and Role of the Librarian*).

- When recent computer games continue to show interactive librarian characters as cranky, shushing, old ladies. The librarian character in the September 2007 game *MySims* for the Wii, for instance, is an older lady with bunned hair and glasses; her idling animations are reading, stamping books, shuffling paper, and telling people to be quiet.
- When patrons lose out on knowledge and learning because they assume we can't help them. As Linda Absher notes, “in the mind of the patron, the stereotype of the librarian as gate-keeper impedes access to services.”

It's all about the marketing ... marketing, marketing, marketing! The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines marketing as “the sum of activities involved in directing the flow of goods and services from producers to consumers” (www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/365730/marketing). Speaking at the 2008 SLA Annual Meeting, marketing guru Seth Godin tells us to “Be remarkable” and that “Ideas that spread win, and librarians know how to spread ideas.” We need to get busy spreading the great ideas about our remarkableness, our profession, and our capabilities. On a one-to-one basis, things may not seem that bad. Librarians tell me about receiving effusive thanks from a patron for helping them—generally, a patron who hadn't realized before what librarians could

do. This makes me wonder, though, how many patrons are being shortchanged just because they *don't* know all the things we can do.

In the bigger picture, we're still lacking. How we are perceived and thought of *directly* affects how our patron groups, whatever they may be, approach us and use our skills. How we are represented has a direct impact on our day-to-day existence. How do we look? How do we sound? What are we wearing? What do we do when we're not shelving books? Whether we like it or not, whether we agree or not, all of these things and more affect what our patrons think of us—which directly impacts how our patrons interact with us. According to Maura Seale, “User perceptions negatively affect the ability of librarians to meet information needs, simply because a profession cannot serve those who do not understand its purpose and expertise.”

Another issue involves our various job titles, most of which aren't very descriptive of librarians' actual duties. (Then again, I suppose you could say that about almost any job out there these days.) Marvel at the giant list of job titles being used today by librarians by visiting and contributing to Michelle Mach's “Real Job Titles for Librarians and Information Science Professionals” (www.michellemach.com/jobtitles/realjobs.html). The librarians I interviewed for this book (you'll meet them in Chapter 3) go by titles as varied as:

- Assistant librarian
- Digital services librarian

- Government documents librarian
- Head of reference
- Information consultant
- Information resource specialist
- Librarian
- Mathematics and life sciences librarian
- President
- Teen services librarian
- Vice president
- Youth services librarian

As I've discovered over the course of many surveys and conversations throughout the years, this is just the tip of the title iceberg; find more discussion of job titles in Appendix A.

Librarians are called anything and everything these days. But, what does this really mean? I worked long and hard for my advanced degree in librarianship, so was disturbed and depressed after graduation to realize I could make a lot more money doing exactly the same work in the corporate world—in a job that didn't have “librarian” in its title. Perception directly influences salaries and promotion opportunities in the workplace. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS; www.bls.gov), the

2000 median salary for librarians in the U.S. was \$42,730. The 2000 occupation definition (stats.bls.gov/oes/2000/oes254021.htm) states that librarians: “Administer libraries and perform related library services. Work in a variety of settings, including public libraries, schools, colleges and universities, museums, corporations, government agencies, law firms, non-profit organizations, and healthcare providers. Tasks may include selecting, acquiring, cataloguing, classifying, circulating, and maintaining library materials; and furnishing reference, bibliographical, and readers’ advisory services. May perform in-depth, strategic research, and synthesize, analyze, edit, and filter information. May set up or work with databases and information systems to catalogue and access information.”

This nicely summarizes a huge number of responsibilities. Let’s pay attention to that last line, though. “May set up or work with databases and information systems to catalogue and access information” is also often a job requirement for database administrators. Looking at the median salary for database administrators in 2000 (stats.bls.gov/oes/2000/oes151061.htm), at \$51,990, it’s 21.5 percent higher than that of librarians. On the (slightly) up side, the same data for 2007 (www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes254021.htm) shows that librarians’ median salary rose to \$50,970—but the median 2007 salary for database administrators has risen to \$67,250 (www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes151061.htm), which is 32 percent higher than that of librarians. Librarians often also serve as webmasters, web designers, or web developers for their organizations, which the BLS lumps

into the category “Computer Scientists and Database Administrators” (www.bls.gov/oco/ocos042.htm). The 2007 median salary for web administrators is listed as \$62,250; for web developers, \$68,125; and for web designers, \$59,250—all quite comfortably above librarians’ median salaries. The discrepancy seems to be growing larger, rather than smaller, as time progresses.

Yes, but that’s the government. What about in the real world? Let’s take a look at some current job advertisements. Now, as we all know, librarians have about a zillion different job titles. To keep things evenly measurable, we’ll look for jobs using the same keywords as used by the BLS. As of this writing, the huge job clearance site Monster (www.monster.com) listed:

- 156 jobs for librarians: Monster’s stated median expected salary for “a typical librarian in the United States” is \$55,018 (tinyurl.com/6bcylr). (Higher than the BLS numbers.)
- 2,607 listings for database administrators: Monster’s median expected salary for a typical database administrator in the U.S. is \$83,706 (tinyurl.com/6j7x77).
- 157 jobs for webmasters: Monster.com’s median expected salary for a typical webmaster in the U.S. is \$64,049 (tinyurl.com/6e9n6k).

Even in the “real world” of competitive employment, salaries vary substantially based on job title. You can rearrange job duties; you can stuff a lot into “performs a

variety of tasks” and “other duties as required,” but the job title, in most cases, determines salary.

This leads to another problem, as well. Compare tech-savvy librarians’ skills to their salaries, and some are concerned about a “brain drain” of librarians into the corporate world, where they can do the same tasks at a higher salary—and without the “L word” in their title. This is a tough decision for many of us: Are we in the profession for the money, or are we in it for the satisfaction of the work? Another perceived appeal of the corporate world over libraries is simply technological excitement. We’ve all heard of, or experienced, library workplaces with restrictive policies on installing new software or interacting online (disallowing instant messaging or Firefox, anyone?), and we’ve all seen environments that fail to encourage innovation. As Jonathan Rochkind puts it in one entry on his Bibliographic Wilderness blog (bibwild.wordpress.com/2008/02/04/brain-drain/), “If libraries can’t hold on to smart future-oriented people who understand the role technology can play in creating an exciting future for us—the prospects of libraries accepting the mantle of innovation also seem dim.” Thankfully, we’re seeing more and more libraries opening their arms (and their IT restrictions) to tech-savvy librarians, encouraging them to help create that future and helping keep our best and brightest in the library world. You’ll read about some of these librarians in Chapter 3 and about forward-thinking libraries seeing increases in usage and positive press. Many of us also thrive on challenge—and the challenge of bringing our libraries forward into the networked world is very enticing. I can report that there

are a lot of folks itching to stay in librarianship and advance that techno-excitement!

Popular Perceptions

We've seen a lot of discussion over the past 10 years or so about appearance, impressions, and image. As noted in so many places, we are a navel-gazing profession. We see these topics come up repeatedly in articles and columns in professional publications, but much more so these days in participatory discussions on blogs and wikis. Some seminal resources include:

- Antony Brewerton's 1999 article, "Wear Lipstick, Have a Tattoo, Belly-dance, Then Get Naked: The Making of a Virtual Librarian," in *Impact: The Journal of the Career Development Group* (tinyurl.com/6lffhk), pulled together a comprehensive collection of the online resources available at the time. Some are still around and are still having an impact on us. He comments that "friends—and strangers—are always willing to give me fresh examples of (usually quite appalling) representations of libraries and library workers in the popular media." (I find myself in the same situation these days!) His article was also the featured headliner in Volume 1, Number 1, of *NewBreed Librarian* (scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/dspace/handle/1794/1071), a webzine active

from 2001 to 2002 (sadly, now defunct; it was a great resource for new librarians).

- In 2001, Heather Acerro, Adrienne Allen, Cheryl Bartel, DarLynn Nemitz, and Dana Vinke put together a great website investigating the “Image of Libraries in Popular Culture” (besser.tsoa.nyu.edu/impact/f01/Focus/Image/index.htm). Their site looks into “what these images signify about our profession and about the culture which produces them.”
- Volume 78 of *The Reference Librarian*, consisting of 10 articles on the topic, was collected and co-released as the scholarly publication *The Image and Role of the Librarian* in 2002. As editors Wendi Arant and Candace Benefiel say in the preface, “There seems to be no profession as preoccupied with self-examination as that of librarianship. While some of it may stem from an identity crisis, the refrain heard over and over is startlingly similar to Rodney Dangerfield’s ‘I don’t get no respect.’ This seems to be true of all types of librarians—from public librarians who (often rightly) complain of being treated like servants by the patrons they serve, to the academic librarians who are always trying to establish their ‘faculty-ness’ to the teaching professors.” We’ll see that the passage of a few years has had little effect; modern librarians share recent stories (in Chapter 3) that strikingly parallel

the examples Arant and Benefiel used when they wrote their preface.

- A short-lived blog “SSSSHHHHHH!!!!” (stereotypicallylibrarian.blogspot.com) from 2006 collected stories and photos from librarians and library workers related to the stereotype—and showed how they emphatically did *not* fit that stereotype.
- In 2007, Kathleen Low published *Casanova Was a Librarian*, a “light-hearted look at the profession.”
- In the spring of 2008, the Oregon Library Association’s *OLA Quarterly* newsletter focused on “Lively Librarians Loose in the Limelight: Libraries in Popular Media”; many other professional library publications have also recently published articles on the topic. (In other words—not even counting the blogs—our preoccupation with stereotypes is pervasive.)
- A regular column in *Library Journal* called “NextGen” (go to www.libraryjournal.com and search for “NextGen”) often discusses issues related to image and the profession.
- The Popular Culture Association has a section called Libraries, Archives, Museums, and Popular Culture Area that regularly discusses librarians in popular culture (www.pcaaca.org/areas/libraries.php).

Interestingly—and vaguely creepily—there's an entire sub-stereotype related to sexuality. One perception of librarians is that of a sexually repressed middle-aged (or younger) woman, just waiting for the right guy to come along so she can take off her glasses, let down her hair, and release the wild sex-crazy animal within. *Playboy* especially seems to use the “sexy librarian” concept a lot, and an entire pornographic subculture (both books and movies) is devoted to librarians (and yes, there's a website that catalogs them all!). It turns out that several dominatrices advertise being a librarian among their specialties (“She likes a little disorder with her Dewey.”). Jessamyn West, librarian and biblioblogger extraordinaire, hosts a collection of bookplates and images of naked librarians at her site ... and there are a lot of them. (Find links to both the librarians in porn site and Jessamyn's collection at www.libraryunderground.org/sexuality.htm; be aware that this link contains adult content.)

On the other side of things, if you're a male librarian, no matter your age, people assume you must be gay. I can't tell you the number of emails I've gotten from gay librarians (not guybrarians, thank you very much) over the years who've told me that this is their only experience with the stereotypical image.

We're More Than Our Stereotype

I've talked to a lot of librarians over the years. Just about every one of them has a story to share about confounding people's perceptions, whether their tale is about the time

a patron was amazed when the librarian found an answer to his question using a computer database, or about how at a casual gathering she heard the inevitable comment “But librarians can’t do X” tossed around. Here are just a few of their stories:

- From a school librarian: “I once had a 7th grade student library aide who was definitely not the sharpest knife in the drawer. I almost always had to undo the work that she had done, but she obviously loved ‘helping,’ so I used to save the easiest tasks for her to do. Open House night arrived, and her mother dropped in to talk to me. She gushed on and on about how much her daughter enjoyed being a library aide, and crowned it all by saying, ‘You know, my daughter is not very bright, so I figure when she grows up, maybe she can be a librarian.’ I SWEAR this is true—a word-for-word quote. I was speechless!”
- From a public librarian: “I was closing down a bank account in one town because I was moving to another town where I was just hired to work at the public library. The teller asked me what my occupation was, and I told him librarian. He offered the title ‘media specialist,’ saying that sounded much better than librarian, because of all those things you (are supposed to) think of when you think of the term ‘librarian.’ I am sure I did not provoke him to this. All I wanted was to close my bank account, not hear some discourse on the stigmas

associated with being a librarian. One thing about the incident that I thought was weird was that he never even bothered to ‘catch himself’ in the process of his insult. He just carried on and thought that his assessment of the profession was the norm.”

- From a technology librarian: “I helped a friend who is a small business owner find some marketing information and she said ‘I had no idea librarians knew how to do this stuff!’”
- From an academic librarian: “The most difficult one for me was perhaps the gentleman who was there with his son (who was probably in middle school—between 10 and 13 [years old], perhaps). He asked me if I could type up his son’s paper while his son found pictures to use in the report because I didn’t have anything to do other than read all the time. Luckily, I happened to have a stack of work to do at the desk that evening—while I would have loved to explain to him in a much stronger manner that I wasn’t a secretary, I couldn’t, because he was very sincere. I ended up explaining that I had a lot of work to do, and no, I couldn’t type up his son’s paper.”
- Even the law librarians can’t get away from the stereotype: “When I was working in another law firm, the associates decided that they wanted me to look like a librarian. So, they bought me a hair clip

and horn-rimmed glasses and asked me to wear a long dress with a high collar so they could see me once as a librarian!”

I’ve also received a number of stories about the business-card game (mix up a bunch of business cards including yours and see if someone new, perhaps on an airplane, can pick yours out of the bunch; they never do because ... yeah, you know) and the bartender guessing game (gather a bunch of librarians to go to a bar—from a conference, meeting, whatever—and try to get the bartender to guess what they do; once again, nope, the poor bartender never guesses they’re librarians).

In reality, librarians are so much more than the stereotype, in so many ways. Times have changed dramatically since the era of Marian the Librarian (*The Music Man* was released in 1962), and yet, even now, that outdated image persists. Why is that? Why do we see almost identical representations of librarians today? Why can’t we shake Marian?

You may be shaking your head and thinking, “Yeah, but that isn’t really the case now, is it? Those are outmoded, out-of-date ideas. Today’s public sees the modern librarian for who he or she is.” Well, think again. Following are some of the quotes posted in the early months of 2008 to just *two* of the worldwide Facebook sites about librarians: “No, I Don’t Look Like a Librarian!” (www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=2251972614), which has 2,070 members at this writing, and “Yes, I Do Look Like a Librarian!” (www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=2272645001), which has 436 members and is growing:

- “I knew I was destined to be a librarian when I realized that I already dressed like one. Still, people usually say to me: ‘You don’t look like a librarian.’ I reply: ‘Yes I do; this is what a librarian looks like.’”
- From a librarian in Ireland: “Usually, I get ‘Librarian? Sure, you’re only a child!’ I assure you I am not a child ...”
- “Because I’m a guy, I always get the WT*???? look.”
- “It’s hard for people to grasp that a 21st century librarian is not necessarily curled up in a corner, nose in book.”
- “I work in a high school library and had a parent ask me if they could speak to an adult.”
- From a male librarian in Australia: “Lady walks in, looks at me and suddenly points dramatically: ‘You’re not a woman!’ ‘Um, I guess not ...’ Lady then turns her attention to the other guy on desk, gesturing wildly: ‘You’re not a woman either!’ ‘Not really, thanks for noticing!’ Lady continues to stand there with a bewildered expression. We smile politely, nonplussed.”
- From a London-based librarian: “So pleased to have found this group. Over the years, I’ve awarded myself a point each time someone says to me, ‘Okay cut the bull***t, what do you really do for a

living?’ or similar when I tell them I’m a librarian. So far I’ve earned enough points to buy a Bentley Continental convertible or a holiday home in Nassau.”

This is just one small sampling of librarians posting anecdotes and stories about the reactions they get when they reveal their profession; visit librarians’ blogs or one of the other popular social networking sites to find similar stories. Here are some responses from my 2008 survey of librarians (read Appendix A for more):

- “I was sitting at the reference desk, just having come in from lunch, with my elbow-length curls flowing free and my John Lennon sunglasses still on, when two 50-something ladies came to the Circulation Desk and asked if we had a certain book. The student clerk pointed in my direction and said, ‘You’ll have to check LaserCat’ (our CD-based OPAC). So the ladies came over and very gingerly asked, ‘Excuse me sir—are you LaserCat?’”
- “My cell ringtone is a recognizable guitar part of a Guns & Roses song. I was offsite giving a training session to a group of high-level executives, and my cell rang. Embarrassed, I grabbed it and ran out of the room (thinking it was an emergency while I was away from home). When I walked back in and apologized, I was about to resume the session and noticed they were all smirking (all male meeting; I

am a 'younger' female). The head of the meeting said 'I knew you weren't like the other librarians.'"

- "Folks expect me to be clueless and are shocked when I rock their worlds!"

Not a week goes by that I don't get an email, a Twitter, or a comment on my blog about yet another instance of "But you don't look like a librarian!" On the upside, we're starting to see some better portrayals, better representations, and a better understanding by Joe Q. Public about what it is librarians do. It's slow going, and for every positive portrayal in a book there are three unflattering portrayals in ads and movies, but at least we're moving forward. I would love to live and work in a world where anyone and everyone can be accepted as a librarian for their amazing skills, regardless of how they look or what they do for fun. But what else can we, as a profession, do to educate Joe and Jane Q. Public, and what are some of the varied ways we're portrayed in popular culture? Read on!