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A Librarian Mom's Thoughts on Librarian Images in Preschool Television

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How do our children learn about libraries and librarians? From many sources—not just from school, the public library, or family and friends. Images are regularly communicated to our children that create and reinforce ideas and opinions about librarians. As librarians, we all know and believe that libraries are central to a community, foster literacy and learning, and promote community building. As a librarian, I want all children to embrace libraries and librarians and recognize that we are valued contributors to their environment.

Recently I was watching *The Many Adventures of Mr. Mailman* with my 3-year-old. This show acquaints children with geographical and cultural information about places in our world through the mailman's route. On this day, we watched the mailman make a delivery to the library. Mr. Mailman found a very upset woman, dressed as a stereotypical librarian who shushed him for asking a question above a whisper. What does this show my daughter? Will she ever want to ask a librarian a question now that she has seen this unpleasant woman? This “educational” show presented a horribly negative image of libraries and librarians to my child. How many other similar images of librarians are out there for preschoolers to subconsciously absorb?

Of course, not all representations of libraries and librarians are wholly awful; it's a mixed bag. *Higglytown Heroes* presents community members as heroes that help Higglytown children solve problems. These “heroes” include a plumber, firefighters and—a librarian. The librarian in Higglytown is a positive and helpful character. Unfortunately, he is also a stuffy person wearing an argyle sweater and a monocle. (The creators should be given some credit, however, for making the librarian a man.)

Thankfully, when we flip our channel to *Dora the Explorer* the images change: librarians are fun, exciting, and helpful.

The images reinforce the positive role of the library within our communities and our children's lives.

In *Dora the Explorer*, Dora receives a special backpack to return her library books. She is very excited to receive her special backpack and has fun returning the books. With Dora, our children observe exciting events and parental reinforcement of libraries. However, we can't forget that the negative messages are only a few clicks away. For children at this developmental stage, who are trying to make sense of their world, television is a common source of information. Whether that information is negative or positive, our children draw upon the images on the screen to help form their views on the world around them.

We can help strengthen Dora's message and contradict the Mailman's. I took my daughter to get her library card last month. She was excited and placed the card in a place of honor, her princess box! Her excitement about the card, and her love of books and libraries, are fed through a variety of sources: characters on television, the people around her, and her innate desire to discover.

I think it is vitally important that our children—our future—receive appropriate messages from the world around them. Presenting images of scary librarians is detrimental to our communities. The lasting effects of these messages can lead to adults with ingrained ideas about librarians that present a barrier between the community and libraries. For instance, I work with a university student who plans on going on to library school next year. She was recently asked, quite seriously, “don't you need glasses to be a librarian?”

With college students still thinking of librarians as the woman in the bun and glasses, we need to ask: where does that image still reside, and resonate so, that our




²Schwartz, Greg. Blogs for Libraries. *Web-Junction*. Available at <http://www.webjunction.org/do/%20/DisplayContent?id=767>. Posted February 22, 2005.

³Schnell, Eric. Where is my manuscript? Part 2. *The Medium is the Message*. Available at <http://ericschnell.blogspot.com/2007/08/where-is-my-manuscript-part-2.html>. Posted August 7, 2007.

A Librarian Mom's Thoughts

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college students still think of librarians in such stereotypical ways? And, what does this mean for those students and adults who need assistance but won't ask because of this image? What does it mean for the future of libraries if their caretakers (librarians) are viewed as unapproachable?

Will our children, and their children, see libraries as welcoming community spaces? We must keep trying to reach children and adults through our services and resources to create richer communities—and to create an image that outweighs the weight 

Who Do They Think We Are?

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⁵Jesella, K., A Hipper Crowd of Shushers, *The New York Times*, July 8, 2007.

⁶Block, M., from Party People, accessed on Ex Libris at <http://www.marylaine.com/ex-libris/>.

⁷Kneale, R., Librarian Image Study at <http://www.infotoday.com/mls/nov02/kneale.htm>.

⁸De Rosa, C., et al., Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources: A Report to the OCLC Membership (Dublin, Ohio: OCLC Online Computer Library Center, 2005), Part 6 (Conclusions), page 3. Accessed at <http://www.oclc.org/reports/2005perceptions.htm>.

Librarians and Pop Culture

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Emily Lloyd shares the stories of Jan, who is trapped behind the reference desk, and her clueless boss; the questions and situations Jan deals with regularly make me glad I'm not on a reference desk myself!

There are plenty of other things out there—toys, books, movies, even search en-

gines “modeled” on librarians, one of which was released in late 2007 (findingDucinea, which bills itself as “Librarian of the Internet”). Keep your eyes open—as long as these activities are going on, then librarians have pop relevance! 