

OLAQ

OLA Quarterly

Volume 14
Number 1

*Lively Librarians Loose in the Limelight:
Libraries in Popular Media (Spring 2008)*

July 2014

Who Do They Think We Are?

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Recommended Citation

Jasper, C. (2014). Who Do They Think We Are?. *OLA Quarterly*, 14(1), 18-19+. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1189>

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OLA Quarterly is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374

Who Do They Think We Are?

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Not long ago, an article in the local paper about our public library began with “Rid your memory of those dank, dusty rooms where stern old ladies shush anyone who coughs,” and then described the wonderful ways the library does not fit this image.¹ It hit me. So many articles about libraries open with this stereotyped image only to go on to contradict the image.

A search in Lexis-Nexis found hundreds of stories that opened with this same stereotype. I found “Most people think of libraries as places full of dusty, unreadable tomes, nerdy types and ... well, silence,”² from Australia. There was “Modern, colorful and welcoming, the library defies the stereotype of libraries as dusty, dull places where librarians tell visitors to ‘shush,’”³ from Wales and “At the age of 32, Cervantes is far from the librarian stereotype best characterized as an elderly woman who wears her gray hair in what would appear to be a painfully tight bun and glares sharply at anyone who dares to speak at audible volumes,”⁴ from California. From *The New York Times* there was “Librarians? Aren’t they supposed to be bespectacled women with a love of classic books and a perpetual annoyance with talkative patrons—the ultimate humorless shushers?” And surprise, the answer was, “Not anymore.”⁵ Marylaine Block, librarian and author, gathered hundreds of news stories about library events while working on *The Thriving Library*. She says, “Fully half of the news stories I’ve collected start with the reporter’s astonished announcement that the librarians don’t shush and the library events are fun.”⁶ Clearly, newspaper articles repeatedly rely on this stereotype for a hook.

If every example was of people and places not fitting the stereotype, why was the stereotype so widespread? Does the public stereotype us or is the stereotype just an interesting lead? To investigate I made a survey at Survey Monkey and posted to

non-library discussion lists. Also, I surveyed passers-by on the street. I avoided librarians, as I was not after their perception of their public image, as Ruth Kneale investigated in 2002 with her Librarian Image Study.⁷ The questions were simple and open-ended. I received 35 responses—17 local ones from Bend, Oregon and 18 from throughout the United States and Canada. Clearly, this is an unscientific sampling, but patterns emerged from these small numbers.

Librarians

Thirty-five responses yielded 105 adjectives to the question, “What are three words or phrases that describe librarians (the actual people)?” As with all the other questions, I grouped responses into categories. The number one category was Smart/Knowledgeable, with 18 people, more than half, describing us that way. In second place was Helpful (17) and in third place was Competent (14) though Nice was close behind with 11. Three people described us with stereotypes (glasses, sweaters, female, strict, old and short), but none of these are terribly negative. Nobody said anything about shushing. No one mentioned buns. No one called us grumpy. I was encouraged.

Libraries

The question, “What are three words that describe libraries (the place)?” yielded 35 responses and 105 adjectives. Again I was encouraged. The most common description of a library was Peaceful/Welcoming with 21 responses. Twenty people (57 percent) described the library as Quiet. Quiet was, in fact, the most common first word out of people’s mouths. All the positive associations that came right after—enriching, exciting, inspiring, interesting, productive, stimulating—convinced me that in today’s world of constant noise and input, quiet is a good thing. In third place were responses that reflected the library as a resource—for



books, information, and media.

No one said musty or dusty or dank. No one said boring or dull. Things were looking good.

What We Do

I next asked, “What are a librarian’s most important responsibilities?” and “Name three (or as many as you can) reasons you would contact a librarian.” Because of duplication, I combined these questions and ended up with 147 distinct responses. The only unanimous response of the survey was this one: All 35 people said librarians help people find books. Twenty-three people said Finding Information/Help with Research. In third place was Answering Questions about Library Resources. Checking Books In/Out (15) and Handling Library Accounts (12) beat out Develop/Maintain Collection (9), Readers’ Advisory (7), and Programming (5).

Are We Educated?

I asked, “How would one go about getting a job as a librarian?” to gauge awareness of our credentials. Fifteen people indicated a degree in libraries was required. Five people thought you had to have a college degree, but not in a particular field. Six people said you can just go to the library and apply. Eight people didn’t have a guess. One person said you “go down there and volunteer.” Combining these numbers, 60 percent of respondents thought librarianship requires some kind of a college degree.

Who They Think We Are

The public perception that emerged from this informal survey looks like this: We are smart, helpful, competent and nice. Libraries are welcoming, quiet and rich in resources. We help people find books and information, manage the materials in the library, and help people navigate the library. We probably have a college degree.

Not a bad public image, but some things are missing. Only one person mentioned technology skills. No one mentioned electronic resources. Services that we see as the heart and soul of our profession (collection development, readers’ advisory, outreach, programming) were named by very few people. No one mentioned the library as a place—free and open for gatherings. The public does not have a strong sense that we have a specialized body of knowledge and skill set. The pattern in my survey was consistent with a slightly larger survey, the 2005 *Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources: A Report to the OCLC Membership* which surveyed 3,348 people. Two, of many, conclusions from the survey are, “Books’ is the library brand. There is no runner-up,” and “Most information consumers are not aware of, nor do they use electronic information resources.”⁸ The public is not aware of the changes that have occurred in libraries, and we should work to change that.

I’m no longer bothered by the librarian stereotype. The media might be stuck on it, but I don’t think people are. It’s what the public doesn’t know about us that needs improving. We offer quiet and books, but we offer so much more. We need to work to inform people, not about who we are or aren’t, but what we can do for them. 🌿

Footnotes

¹Raff, L., A Library Evolution - Deschutes County Takes Facilities Beyond the Shelves, *The Bulletin*, February 4, 2007.

²Downie, S., Comedy’s New Chapter, *The Daily Telegraph*, October 31, 2007.

³Collins, P., State-of-the-Art Library Opens its Doors, *South Wales Echo*, January 3, 2007.

⁴Villicana, S.E., New Librarian Fosters Reading, *The Porterville Recorder*, July 26, 2007.

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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 

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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! 