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How Hip Can You Get?

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“A Hipper Crowd of Shushers”... huh?!

How cool are librarians? Way cooler than we thought, apparently. Seriously—we are a cool bunch of people. In the *New York Times* article written about our coolness, there we are in the picture, looking hip and aloof, drinking drinks that we’ve renamed using Dewey Decimal classifications. Oh, didn’t you know ... we talk Dewey. Even McSweeney’s, the Über-cool publishing house founded by Dave Eggers, the literary illuminati, if you will, has a Web column that tells people about what wacky days we have working at the library ... and oh, did I mention that we are really hip?


After doing some research like a good librarian, I discovered that we don’t know how cool we are, nor do we care. Any and all kinds of librarians wrote reactions to that article. Some thought it was cute, some didn’t think twice about it, and some, like me, felt like rolling their eyes. Unlike most professions, it seems for librarians, stereotypes are the only way people can deal with us; which, I guess, most of us are used to. We have to be either serious workers who are shushing people into oblivion or hip twenty-somethings who refer to their alcoholic drink as “613.96 C.” You should see the list of stereotypical librarians listed on the “Librarians in Popular Culture” page at Wikipedia. Personally, my favorite is Barbara Gordon, AKA Batgirl, AKA Oracle—she was tough and smart. But, I digress.

As I was saying, we’re used to being stereotyped. We’ve seen the Librarian Action Figure and laughed. We’ve smiled politely when we hear, “Don’t you just read all day?” For the most part I can handle it. But when I read that article, I was bothered by two quotes. First, Rick Block, an adjunct professor at two graduate schools for librarians, said this: “When I was in library school in the early ‘80s, the students weren’t as interesting.” Unfortunately, in

order to seem hip, we’ve now started alienating fellow professionals in the field, creating an “in” and “out” mentality, just like in high school. I don’t need to seem cooler than anyone I work with. Nor do I think that identifying yourself as more interesting than co-workers is going to win you any prizes—unless they decide to give you the “I’m Cooler Than Everyone” award.

The second quote that bothered me was Brooklyn Museum librarian Sarah Gentile’s response to the question: “Why become a librarian?” Her answer? “Because it’s cool.” Wow. So many great answers to that question ... here’s a good one to start with ... to uphold a standard of a truly democratic society. Come on, “because it’s cool??” Apparently, the only thing cooler than being a librarian is being inarticulate.

Unfortunately, in our society, making something cool is akin to making something socially acceptable. I mean, if it’s not cool or making me cool, what’s the point? There’s nothing wrong with liking the things in the article; it’s just the elitism that oozes out of it that’s upsetting—that being young and hip is better than everything else. I’m afraid that librarianship is going to turn into one of those ironic things that people liked just to be ironic and then when it wasn’t ironic anymore, it suddenly wasn’t cool.

I will keep on thinking being a librarian is hip. And, after I’m done writing this piece, I won’t spend another minute thinking about the coolness factor of librarians. But, hey! How cool is it that I wanted to be a librarian before it was cool?! 

References

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