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David M. Salinero

Delta State University, dsaliner@deltastate.edu

Jill E. Grogg

University of Alabama, jill@wedogg.com

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May the Bun Be With You: An Annotated Bibliography of Librarians and Their Image

David M. Salinero, Jill E. Grogg

David M. Salinero is currently the Reference/Government Documents/Instructional Services Librarian for the Roberts-LaForge Library at Delta State University. He can be reached at dsaliner@deltastate.edu.

Jill E. Grogg is currently the Electronic Resources Librarian for the University of Alabama Libraries. She can be reached at jill@wedogg.com

Introduction

Melvil Dewey commented in *Library Journal* in 1876, “the days of the librarian as a mouser in musty books must pass.” Nearly 130 years later, however, librarians continue to combat the same image. A very real tension exists between librarians’ attempts to alter their image(s) and the popular press’ and the public’s lingering preference for Marian the Librarian similes. In June 2003, the *Toronto Star* published an article discussing the 2003 American Library Association/Canadian Library Association Joint Annual Conference, “Forget the Sensible Shoes, Librarians Turn a New Leaf.” In the article, Kerry Gillespie specifically addresses a 2004 calendar, *Hot Picks @ Your Library*, which showcases 16 librarians in different settings; among these is a librarian astride her Harley Davidson. This image of a hard-ridin’ motorcycle librarian is juxtaposed with the standard references to repressed old maids. Gillespie, while framing her conversation about the changing image of librarians, relies on a tired stereotype and comments that librarians in Toronto were “out to prove just how wrong the spinsterish image of Marian the Librarian really is” (2003, A01).

As the *Hot Picks @ Your Library* calendar indicates, librarians take creative opportunities to dissuade the public of the “image of a dour-faced matron behind a forbidding desk” (Gillespie 2003, A01). But how do librarians attempt to frame their own discussion of the classic caricature? The authors wanted to know how librarians themselves have considered and researched the impact of the stereotype on the profession. What follows is a literature review of materials published over the past 20 years. These materials span the gamut of libraries and librarians, from the real to the imagined,

including materials such as students’ perceptions of academic librarians, the public’s misconceptions of librarians in Canadian public libraries, and portrayals of librarians in fiction. By reviewing materials published over a 20-year time period, the authors have captured a microcosmic glimpse of the changing image(s) of librarians.

The articles and books included in the following annotated bibliography represent both scholarly studies and opinion pieces; this list is by no means comprehensive. The authors chose to include a wide variety of publications and types of articles in order to paint a broad picture of how librarians have considered and studied their own stereotype.

Annotated Bibliography

Abram, Stephen and Maggie Weaver. 1990. “Professional Image: Ms. Wiggins Must Go.” *Canadian Library Journal* 47 (December): 401-402.

Stephen Abram and Maggie Weaver offer several examples of how the information industry bites one of the biggest hands that feeds it by bashing librarians in many of its advertising campaigns. The authors argue that other industries do not negatively portray their core customer base; therefore, librarians must insist that the producers of information technology refrain from attacking their primary audience. By understanding and asserting their collective buying power, librarians can force advertisers to change tactics.

Adams, Katherine. 2000. “Loveless Frump as Hip and Sexy Party Girl: A Reevaluation of the Old-Maid Stereotype.” *Library Quarterly* 70 (July): 287-301.

Even with technological changes and advances in their profession, librarians still feel oppressed by the old maid image. Adams advocates a process of parody, mimicry, and “ironic redeployment” (293) which will confront, and possibly redefine, the stereotype while also empowering librarians. The study of stereotype is covered in more detail in Radford and Radford’s “Librarians and Party Girls: Cultural Studies and the Meaning of the Librarian.”

Arant, Wendi and Candace Benefiel, eds. 2003. *The Image and Role of the Librarian*. Binghamton, NY: Haworth Information Press.

This monograph duplicates a 2002 issue of Haworth’s *The Reference Librarian* which considers the roles, cultural images, and popular perceptions of librarians in ten informed articles. Several of these articles are included in this annotated bibliography.

Berry, John. 2001. “Tell ’Em What Librarians Do Each Day.” *Library Journal* 126 (17):6.

In response to a 2001 New York Times article, John Berry claims that the new “hip” image for librarians, developed by the American Library Association’s ad campaign, damages the profession as much as the bun-wearing old maid does. Instead of wasting so much money on a misleading image that accomplishes very little, ALA and librarians should publicize their very real and very important day-to-day activities. Images and stereotypes are irrelevant as long as librarians accurately convey their value and service to their communities.

Boardman, Edna. 1991. “‘Are You Keeping the Books Straight?’ Our Enduring Image Problem and How We Can Reshape It.” *Book Report* 10 (1): 14-16.

Edna Boardman addresses the image problem from a school library media specialist’s perspective. By “watching, listening, and scanning,” (14) Boardman came to realize that school librarians do not adequately promote themselves using professionally respected terms or research that directly relate to the concerns of their constituencies. In order to change the outdated image of the marginalized school library, school librarians must discard the

“media specialist” and reclaim the “librarian” by convincing the public that they are more than custodians of straight bookshelves.

Bourkoff, Vivienne and Julia Wooldridge. 1986. “The Image of Libraries and Librarians: Is It Changing?” *Public Library Quarterly* 6 (4): 55-63.

Even by 1986 standards, librarians’ images seemed contradictory to what they could offer society in the Information Age. Authors Bourkoff and Wooldridge researched how libraries and librarians were being represented in three major newspapers: the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. The results could be interpreted as mildly depressing. Most references pertained to exhibits, performances, or other cultural events. None truly focused on library services’ positive influence, and certainly none attempted to change the public’s limited perception of the librarian. The authors still put a positive spin on the evidence by writing that the media saw “librarians as vital, active, and progressive.” (62) Librarians need to be more proactive and discover ways to improve their representation in the media.

Brewerton, Antony. 1999. “Wear Lipstick, Have a Tattoo, Belly-Dance, Then Get Naked: The Making of a Virtual Librarian.” *Impact: Journal of the Career Development Group* 2 (10): 158-164.

Antony Brewerton provides an annotated bibliography of sorts of Internet sources dealing with the librarian’s image. According to Brewerton, two types of image sites exist: studies of the image and “image-busting” sites. The studies range from scholarly analyses to coverage of librarians in comic strips, movies, and TV. The image-busting sites take a more aggressive stance on promoting various types of librarians. Some of these sites are simply for fun, but they can also lead to a more positive image and serve as a recruitment tool for the undecided.

Brown-Syed, Christopher and Charles Barnard Sands. 1997. “Some Portrayals of Librarians in Fiction-A Discussion.” *Education Libraries* 21 (1-2): 17-24.

Brown-Syed and Sands study the dramatic appeal and portrayals of librarians in 120 novels. For those interested in librarian fiction, numerous descriptions of selected individual works will prove entertaining and insightful. Positive images include cleverness and public recognition of a librarian's skills while the negative images tend to overemphasize stereotypical traits and menial practices.

Burns, Grant. 1998. *Librarians in Fiction: A Critical Bibliography*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company.

This exhaustive endeavor compiles citations and annotations of 226 books, 103 short stories, and 12 plays. Although positive images abound, Burns concludes that the picture of librarians falls easily on the negative side by relying heavily on caricatures and stereotypes. These depictions may convey the authors' own attitudes or they may indicate acquiescence to what sells.

Church, Gary. 2002. "In the Eye of the Beholder: How Librarians Have Been Viewed Over Time." *Reference Librarian* 78: 5-24.

Church's research-heavy article attempts to encapsulate the multifaceted image issue in one small package. The author highlights public perceptions as well as librarians' self image before covering his main topic, librarians in the academic world. The paper could be much stronger had Church limited himself to studying only the academic image. Public thought and librarians' self-image are worthwhile topics unto themselves, but here they only detract from the main issue. The author does, however, bring some clarity to the confused, muddled situation that librarians' image has become. Misconceptions regarding "responsibilities, roles, traits," (6) all contribute to librarians' difficulty in solving or even addressing the problem.

Fagan, Jody. 2002. "Students' Perceptions of Academic Librarians." *Reference Librarian* 78: 131-148.

Before launching into the results of a study done at Southern Illinois University, Jody Fagan provides a brief review of previous literature that focused on the image of librarians. Although

image remains a popular topic among librarians, Fagan's research focuses on students' perceptions of academic librarians, a rarely studied topic. According to the results, students lacked full understanding of librarian's duties, educational background, or professionalism. They did, however, see librarians as helpful and important. Fagan ends by including a few suggestions that might improve students' attitudes and willingness to cooperate with librarians. An appendix includes the survey used in the study.

Flagg, Gordon. 1999. "Librarians Share Image Issues with the Popular Culture Association." *American Libraries* 30 (5): 28-29.

At the 1999 annual conference of the Popular Culture Association, several PCA members presented papers on the amusing images of librarians. On screen, or in print, librarians are usually detective types and/or borderline recluses. Librarians attending the conference found something in common with pop culture scholars: lack of respect in the academic world. To correct academia's misconceptions, librarians should publicize their work more often by making the campus community aware of the skill and research involved in librarianship. Also, Richard Lindemann, librarian at University of California/San Diego, suggests librarians should attend non-library conferences in order "to attract a broader audience" (29) and to gain respect in the wider academic community.

Fountain, John. 2001. "Librarians Adjust Image in an Effort to Fill Jobs." *New York Times*, August 23, A12.

As part of a 1999 campaign to attract new hires, ALA began to modernize the image of librarians by showing them as cool and "happening" folks. Unfortunately, this article reads like a bad personal ad. Instead of trying to rid the profession of the homely maternal figure, author John Fountain and ALA replace it with an equally disturbing and superficial image. Attracting intelligent and sophisticated college graduates to librarianship, while prudent, if not necessary, will take more than alluring descriptions of surfing, dreadlocks, or nights out on the town.

Freeman, Mike. 1996. "To See Ourselves as Others See Us." *International Information & Library Review* 28 (June): 177-180.

Mike Freeman reviews two International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) publications: 1) "The Image of the Library and Information Profession: How We See Ourselves -- An Investigation" by Hans Prints and Wilco de Gier; and 2) "The Status, Reputation and Image of the Library and Information Profession." Freeman indicates that these two volumes attempt to address the questions of status and image, age-old concepts that have seemingly always dominated the profession's conscious. These studies have the added benefit of covering librarianship on a global level.

Gordon, Rachel Singer. 2004. "Find Your Image Between the Extremes." *Library Journal* 129 (5):52.

Gordon stresses the presence of individuality and variety in the library profession. If librarians are true to their own identities and have found professional settings that suit them best, then stereotypes would be harder to develop, thus making the discussion of image moot.

Hutchins, Dan. 2000. "We Aren't a Stereotype." *Library Journal* 125 (2):57.

Dan Hutchins is looking for a few good men and women. Although the Army had success with a similar slogan, libraries have not been so lucky. Most ads for libraries perpetuate the old stereotype of librarians rather than highlight the new innovations and technology available at local public libraries. If anyone is to blame for those stereotypes, it is the librarians – not the public. The author provides a few tips on improving librarians' image. 1.) Change the job title to something that appropriately reflects the nature of the position, such as "public information consultant." 2.) Employ top media advisors to sharpen the profession's image. 3.) Graduate schools should start teaching courses on social skills in order to improve interactions and ensure patron satisfaction.

Kalan, Abby. 2002. "Are We Sabotaging Ourselves with Our 'Professional' Image?" *American Libraries* 33 (5):42

In response to a portrait of the traditional frumpy librarian in the March 18, 2002 issue of *Business Week*, Abby Kalan asks some tough questions about librarians' choice in clothing, workplace demeanor, and image. Kalan urges librarians to "think like a capitalist" and learn to sell themselves.

Liebold, Louise. 1997. "Changing the Librarian Stereotype." *Library Imagination Paper* 19 (2): 4.

Images are hard to shake once they are embedded in the popular culture. Librarians encounter this problem every day. Movies and commercials propagate these images and rarely shed any light on the daily activities of a real librarian. Author Louise Liebold offers some suggestions for changing the stereotype. Instead of showing off only during National Library Week, libraries should treat all 52 weeks of the year as National Library Week. Librarians should continually show the public who they are and what they do. The profession should not be afraid to show its human and social sides.

Liestman, Daniel. 2002. "Looking Back to the Future: Turn of the Last Century Librarians Look Ahead to the Twentieth Century." *Reference Librarian* 78: 25-46.

Studying the literature of the late nineteenth century, Daniel Liestman takes a unique look at the roles, perceptions, and expectations that the public had of librarians, and more importantly, what past librarians saw for the profession's future. While libraries would be places of learning and scholarship, librarians would hold a high and well respected place in society as teachers and missionaries. Quite obviously, librarians today are still striving for what their forefathers predicted over a hundred years ago.

Lofton, Lynn. 2004. "Librarians Changing Image from Shushers and Book Shelves." *Mississippi Business Journal* 26 (47):30.

In addition to being a well-intentioned plug for Mississippi's only ALA-accredited library science program at the University of Southern Mississippi, Lofton's article raises the important question of how library schools can combat the image problem and increase interest in the

profession. These schools must vigorously promote librarians' true worth and portray librarianship as the "hard working [and dynamic] profession" (30) that it is.

Mosley, Pixey Anne. 2002. "Shedding the Stereotypes: Librarians in the 21st Century." *Reference Librarian* 78: 167-176.

Responding to the changing nature of the workplace, Mosley takes a look at organizational changes for the next generation of librarians. Although traditional roles will remain the same, methods will change according to the new generation's values, expectations, and philosophies. The new generation will force the public and management (regardless of library type) to change their perceptions of librarian interests, appearance, work ethic, and even salary.

Nilsen, Kirsti, and Lynne McKechnie. 2002. "Behind Closed Doors: An Exploratory Study of the Perceptions of Librarians and the Hidden Intellectual Work of Collection Development in Canadian Public Libraries." *Library Quarterly* 72 (July): 294-325.

Using the results of a study done on the public's perception of librarians' collection development responsibilities as a backdrop, authors Nilsen and McKechnie revisit librarians' image problems and highlight the necessity of an improved image. A literature review shines a bright light on the public's misconceptions of librarians' prestige, power, professionalism, and knowledge base. Low visibility and lack of promotion remain two factors influencing the public's attitude. The authors feel that librarians must make themselves and their combination of knowledge and expertise more visible in order to protect proper staffing and funding.

Noble, Jon. 2001. "From Tom Pinch to Highliber Zavora: The Librarian in Fiction." *Orana* 37 (November): 23-28.

Noble first concentrates on the origins of librarians in fiction and then continues by evaluating librarians' image by genre: detective fiction, romance novels, children's literature, horror, and science fiction/fantasy. Interestingly enough, Noble finds that science fiction writers most accurately assess a librarian's worth. One

such author refers to librarians as the "hidden masters of the world." (27)

Radford, Marie and Gary Radford. 2003. "Librarians and Party Girls: Cultural Studies and the Meaning of the Librarian." *Library Quarterly* 73 (January): 54-69.

In an attempt to expand the scope of library and information science research, Radford and Radford explore how the profession can learn much about itself through cultural studies, and more specifically, through the use and effects of stereotyping. To do this, the authors study the dichotomy of librarians and party girls in the movie, *Party Girl*. According to the work of Stuart Hall, the authors' primary inspiration, stereotyping "reduces people to a few, simple, essential characteristics" (58) which tend to remain fixed. Through some cinematically necessary transformation, Mary, the central character, eventually exhibits all of the negative librarian stereotypes, which ultimately limit the "power and economic status of a gendered profession." (59) No wonder librarians are upset over their portrayal. There are three ways to challenge stereotypes: 1) Reverse the stereotype. This would involve showing librarians as young and modern professionals. 2) Replace the negative images with positive ones. Evidence of this can be seen in photos used in Arant and Benefiel's *The Image and Role of the Librarian* with happy, thoughtful people using computers. 3) Use the stereotype to "contest it from within." (68) This would include librarians making light of their own image (Library Action Figure made famous by librarian Nancy Pearl) or by doing something outrageously contradictory to the stereotype.

Scherdin, Mary and Anne Beaubien. 1995. "Shattering Our Stereotype: Librarians' New Image." *Library Journal* 120 (12): 35-38.

In 1992, Mary Jane Scherdin conducted a personality study that included 1,600 librarians. After compiling results from both the Myers Briggs Type Indicator and Strong Interest Inventory, Scherdin found the results to be quite different from earlier studies that reinforced the negative images of librarians. With these new results, Scherdin linked introversion to librarians' difficulty in expressing their and the library's value to the public. That said, the

results also found a positive outlook. Librarians, with a full arsenal of varied qualities and characteristics, will be able to “meet the challenges of the Information Age” (38) and gain respect through their accomplishments.

Schuman, Patricia. 1990. “The Image of Librarians: Substance or Shadow?” *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 16 (May): 86-89.

Why are librarians so concerned with their image? A poor image can hinder the profession’s growth and status and prevent awareness necessary for attracting recruits. The general public usually has no idea what skills librarians use to complete their work successfully. However, all too often, librarians focus on correcting the physical image of the old shushing spinster instead of getting people to see the relevance and value of the library in everyday life. Rather than being seen as gatekeepers, librarians should promote themselves as gateways. Through “public service and community relations programs” (88) librarians can increase “awareness of librarianship as a dynamic and important information profession.” (88)

_____. 1990. “Librarians: Images and Realities” In *Library Education and Leadership: Essays in Honor of Jane Anne Hannigan*, ed. Sheila S. Intner and Kay E. Vandergrift, 27-34. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press.

Patricia Glass Schuman confronts the enduring image problem of librarians and offers personal vignettes to elaborate her points. In broad strokes, Schuman outlines the general problems facing librarianship in the late 1980s and purports that the “image we worry about most – that of the spinster librarian – is irrelevant and unimportant.” (30) Instead, it is the image that librarianship is boring that is most damaging. Librarians should not concentrate on changing the public’s opinion of physical appearance but rather on changing the perception of how useful and necessary librarians are to everyday life.

Stout, Nancy. 2004. “Profession on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown.” *Serials Librarian* 47 (1-2): 45-55.

“Be smart, not pretty” (50) is Stout’s answer to the professional crisis over image. In an

increasingly outsourced environment, librarians are struggling to redefine their positions and status while also fighting derogatory and disrespectful stereotypes. In Stout’s words, librarians are humiliated and angry. This profession needs to stake its territory and prove that its worth transcends “decorative purposes.” (49)

Wallace, Linda. 1989. “The Image: And What You Can Do About It in the Year of the Librarian.” *American Libraries* 20 (1):22-25.

Linda Wallace, a public relations professional, writes that librarians need to put things in perspective and grow thicker skin when it comes to images and stereotypes. All professions have negative images. Wallace suggests that librarians’ negative stereotype comes from the public’s bad childhood experiences. Since (according to a recent Gallup Poll) most adults do not use the library, it should not surprise anyone that the profession’s portrayal is quite possibly a direct result of those lasting negative childhood experiences. As a relief from focusing too much on image in the future, librarians should instead focus on the valuable services which they can provide and the “image thing” will take care of itself. Wallace provides two insets: “Tips From a Pro on Promoting the Pro” and “What You Can Do.”

Williams, Wilda. 1991. “Too Old? Too White? Too Female?” *Library Journal* 116 (14):150-151.

Williams addresses the profession’s aging demographic and its “poor job of multicultural recruiting.” (150) The decline in numbers can be linked to low salaries, but also to the image problem and the failure of library schools to recruit a younger, vibrant body to the profession. The bun-wearing old lady rears her shushing finger once again.

World Wide Web

The World Wide Web introduces yet another medium for both serious consideration and playful satire of the librarian’s image. Since its inception, librarians have been using the World Wide Web to discuss and change their stereotype. Personal Web sites and weblogs, publications and news digests: these venues

allow a degree of immediate and bi-directional communication which is unprecedented. A plethora of images of librarians exists on the Web:

- Personal sites and weblogs such as the Bellydancing Librarian (<http://www.sonic.net/~erisw/bdlib.html>), Free Range Librarian (<http://freerangelibrarian.com/>), Laughing Librarian (<http://www.laughinglibrarian.com/>), Librarian Avengers (<http://www.librarianavengers.org/>), librarian.net (<http://www.librarian.net/>), Lipstick Librarian (<http://www.lipsticklibrarian.com/>), Modified Librarian (<http://www.bmeworld.com/gailcat/index.html>), Street Librarian (<http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Cafe/7423/>), or You Don't Look Like a Librarian! (<http://www.librarian-image.net/>).
- Publications and news digests such as Bookslut (<http://www.bookslut.com/>), Library Juice (<http://www.libr.org/Juice/>), The Progressive Librarian (<http://www.libr.org/PL/>), or Warrior Librarian (<http://www.warriorlibrarian.com/>).

As one would expect from the ephemeral Internet, some of the off-the-wall sites appear and fade quickly. Other sites, especially publications and some weblogs, are updated quite frequently. All sites listed above were current as of August 16, 2005.

Conclusion

References

- Adams, Katherine. 2000. "Loveless Frump as Hip and Sexy Party Girl: A Reevaluation of the Old-Maid Stereotype." *Library Quarterly* 70 (July): 287-301.
- Gillespie, Kerry. 2003. "Forget the Sensible Shoes: Librarians Turn a New Leaf." *Toronto Star*, June 14, A01.

As Adams' and Radford and Radford's research indicates, stereotypes are persistent and tend to remain inflexible throughout time. This alarming fact comes as little surprise to librarians who have fought for ages to bolster their image. *American Libraries* even ran "Image: How They're Seeing Us," a recurring column in the 80s and 90s that focused on librarians' images in society. Unfortunately, since the bun-wearing, colorless image still remains today, it is doubtful that the column succeeded in chipping away at the stereotype. Along with the previous 30 annotations, the *AL* column does, however, prove that librarians like to "preach to the choir" when addressing their image. So while librarians stay well informed on the subject, the public, the target audience whose opinions librarians want to change, remains in the dark.

What will it take to change or eradicate the image? Some suggest mounting an aggressive PR campaign to send out an anti-bun image such as the Hot Picks @ Your Library calendar or the ALA campaign depicting a happy, diverse, and "with-it" group. Others, such as Katherine Adams, want to "embrace it [the image] and make it our own" (2000, 291). Embracing the image, while possibly a clever inside joke, would hardly register with patrons who already buy into the negative stereotype. Finally, there are others like John Berry and Patricia Schuman, who think that librarians should forget about the physical image and promote the skills, dynamism, and modernism of the profession. If librarians can properly and publicly champion the profession, then it will cease to appear boring or menial, recruitment will be much easier, and the physical image will then become inconsequential.