

FOREWARD:
HOW DO YOU DESCRIBE A LIBRARIAN?

*by Steven J. Schmidt,
Guest Editor*



They [librarians] are subversive. You think they're just sitting there at the desk, all quiet and everything. They're like plotting the revolution, man. I wouldn't mess with them..." —Michael Moore

Originally, the word stereotype was used to describe a method for making a copy of a page of type so that exact duplicates could be made. It wasn't until 1922 that Walter Lippman first used the word to describe groups of people. Less than a decade later, social scientists had begun to look at the accuracy of stereotypes. Many of these early studies found that overall; stereotypes were "simplistic, inaccurate, [and] not based upon personal contact with a group."

For over nearly a century, librarians have waged all out war on the image of the hair-in-a-bun & shhing librarian, to the point that our profession has become obsessed with eradicating this image. A 1989 American Library Association long range planning survey ranked the image of the librarian as one of the top five concerns of the profession, along with access to information, intellectual freedom, library finances and personnel.

Before you read any farther, I am going to ask you to try a little experiment. Close your eyes for a moment and concentrate on the first picture that comes into your mind when you think of the word "librarian."

Chances are that since you are reading this issue of *Indiana Librar-*

ies, that it is safe to assume that you either work in a library, or work closely with a library or at least visit a library with some regularity. And yet I'll wager that the image you conjured up belongs to a character you've run across in a movie, a cartoon or even a book, rather than one of the people you work along side of everyday.

Everyone knows what a "librarian" is, or more importantly, what they are not. So why do these stereotype images jump to the fore when we are asked to describe the profession? Why? The pervasive impact of the movies, television and the other forms of mass media on modern society are well documented, so it is no wonder that these images are among the first to spring to mind.

Questions about the librarian's image and our role in society are not new. Long before the term "Cyberian" was bandied around as a new label for our professions, other terms have been suggested to replace the title of "librarian." In 1905 Robert Louis Stevenson suggested that the term "librarian" be replaced by the phrase "virgin priest of knowledge," which definitely conjures up a specific image. The 1991 film *Salmonberries*, also offers the positive, if over long, title of the "beautiful educated princess of the world of books."

What ever you call us, this issue of *Indiana Libraries* is dedicated to exploring some of the many faces that we present the world.

SIDEBAR: While you have that picture in your mind, let me set the record straight on one issue — I am a librarian. I have been one for nearly twenty years, and despite the typical stereotype for our profession, let me state for all time that I am not now, nor have I ever been female. Nor am I a spinster. I have never worn my hair in a bun. I don't wear. . . Well, okay, I do wear sensible shoes, but they are not orthopedic. Finally, never, ever, in my entire professional life have I ever gone "Shhh!" during the course of my duties.

-Steven J. Schmidt-