New and Noteworthy

Coming to Terms with Librarian Stereotypes and Self-Image

Jennifer A. Bartlett

Attendees at the 2013 American Library Association's Midwinter Meeting in Philadelphia may have noticed a small photo booth run by local photographer Kyle Cassidy, who invited passersby to sit for a photograph. The resulting images speak directly to the diversity of the profession. "I realized I had a stereotype in my mind of what a librarian looked like," said Cassidy, "which is one of the reason I wanted to do this project. Whenever I think something is true, I'm often wrong…The field was broader than I had gone in there thinking."[1]

Cassidy's initial impression of librarians and what they are "supposed" to look like is, unfortunately, still a fairly common topic of discussion. For most of us working in the library and information profession, the popular representation of librarians as repressed, unfriendly, socially awkward, bun-headed, aging white spinsters with glasses became obsolete a long time ago. One could also argue, however, that the new stereotype of librarians as young, tattooed hipsters with rainbow-colored hair is just as irrelevant and misleading. Why do we still need to talk about librarian image?

As library managers, we need to be aware of not only how we and our employees present ourselves to patrons, but how our patrons' own preconceived notions of "what we should look like" affects our work with them. The perception gap between how we think of ourselves and how our patrons see us can be very wide.[2] Of course, stereotypes of librarians (whether antiquated or hip or any other category) are just as unrepresentative of the profession as stereotypes of lawyers, accountants, or any other easy-to-label occupation. However, remaining sensitive to them can help us identify areas of service we most need to focus on with our patrons.

Nicole Pagowsky and Erica DeFrain, writing in the blog "In the Library with the Lead Pipe," discuss how student and faculty perceptions of librarians affect student learning in information literacy programs.[3] Individuals who project a sense of "warmth" tend to foster improved student

learning, however, librarians as a population are generally labeled as distant, unfriendly and introverted (i.e., "cold"). But even if a librarian is perceived by students and faculty as being "warm," that does not necessarily translate into an impression of overall competence in the organizational power structure. Pagowsky and DeFrain observe, "We seem to be in a paradox of demonstrating warmth through caring for students and reversing expectations from our cold stereotype, yet perhaps to some degree, warmth hinders us in striving for status, respect, and greater collaborations on campus."

Anecdotes about librarian stereotypes are certainly everywhere. Numerous blogs such as *In the Library with the Lead Pipe* feature discussions and/or parodies of this "cold" stereotype, or the traditional librarian image (i.e., white, middle-aged and female), and the portrayal of librarians in popular culture. [4] *American Libraries*, the magazine of the American Library Association, includes a semi-regular opinion column called "What They Said" (formerly "How They're Seeing Us"), which features quotes, cartoons and other content related to society's view of librarians.

Ruth Kneale's *You Don't Look Like a Librarian*[5] is a light-hearted look at typical stereotypes, focusing on those in films, television, advertising, and the media; for example, the Nancy Pearl action figure, Buffy the Vampire Slayer's Rubert Giles, the "Unshelved" daily comic strip, and the Conan the Librarian parody. The book doesn't proffer much new insight into the already old, tired tropes already surrounding librarianship, but Kneale's chapter "Thoughts on the Future" offers some interesting food for thought on possible directions the profession might take. Librarians' roles and skill sets are indeed changing, whether they want them to or not; the possibilities of physical and virtual community spaces, as well as library presences in online platforms such as Second Life have not yet been fully realized.

Published in 2009, the book already seems a bit outdated, especially given its lack of acknowledgement of the problem of underrepresented populations in library science. For example, very few of the library professionals she profiles as "today's librarians" in Chapter 3 are minorities. Also, some of the websites she mentions now appear to be defunct, sadly, including "The Bellydancing Librarian," "The Laughing Librarian," and "Librarian Avengers." [6]

Kneale offers a well-designed (although infrequently maintained) webpage and Facebook page to supplement the material in her book at http://www.librarian-image.net, which includes further documentation of sources in her book, useful links, and information about speaking

engagements. In short, although Kneale does not delve into any deep social meaning underlying librarian stereotypes, her book and website can serve as a useful introduction to those new to the field.

Less common in the literature are in-depth academic analyses of the background and implication of librarian stereotypes.[7] Nicole Pagowsky and Miriam Rigby have compiled just such an interesting, well-researched group of studies in a new title from ACRL, *The Librarian Stereotype: Deconstructing Perceptions & Presentations of Information Work*.[8]

"Librarians are in the business of presentation," Pagowsky and Rigby state (1). Along with other businesspeople, information professionals are constantly proving themselves to their clients/patrons through their presentation of information and related services. Part of that process is turning an eye on self-presentation, and to realize when librarian stereotypes take the focus away from the actual value of the work itself. To that end, the collection features 12 essays covering key topics including librarianship as a "pink collar" profession; LGBTQ issues; perceptions of librarians of color; the "sexy librarian" and "cat lady librarian" tropes; and student opinions of librarians.

The editors' goals for this collection is to fill "a gap in the literature, going beyond a documentation of popular culture stereotypes of librarians and how to craft a personal brand to a scholarly examination of how these stereotypes exist in this decade, what they mean, and how to use and shape them advantageously for the profession" (5). *The Librarian Stereotype* fulfills that promise and more, serving as a well-researched, intelligent introduction to key issues of librarian image, as well as an excellent springboard for further discussion and research.

A similarly well-researched, albeit older book is 2002's *The Image and Role of the Librarian*, edited by Wendi Arant and Candace R. Benefiel.[9] Its sections on professional roles, cultural images, popular perceptions, and future trends feature a well-rounded, thoroughly-cited overview of key issues, most of which are still surprisingly relevant twelve years after publication. Particularly interesting are the introductory chapters by Gary Mason Church and Daniel Liestman giving a much-needed historical perspective on perceptions of librarians and their libraries over the past hundred years, as well as the chapter "Looking at the Male Librarian Stereotype," by Thad E. Dickinson, which traces the legacy of men in librarianship from the 17th century to the present. Other topics include librarians as "know-it-alls," common personality

types among information services workers, librarians in comic books, and librarians as portrayed in children's literature.

"The librarian is one of the most visible yet most misunderstood professionals in the world," (174) asserts Ashanti White, whose *Not Your Ordinary Librarian: Debunking the Popular Perceptions of Librarian*s [10] more than supports this statement. The book provides a good overview of various issues, with a particular focus on librarians of color. The author discusses four prevalent tropes that have become relatively mainstream: the old maid librarian; the policeman (or "shushing") librarian; the withdrawn, inept librarian, and the psycho librarian (which includes an interesting, if vaguely disturbing, discussion of some librarians' affinity for cats). In a chapter of the history of American libraries, White emphasizes that the beginnings of the profession were not devoid of highly individualistic librarians; she mentions in particular Belle de Costa Greene, an African-American librarian to J.P. Morgan and the first director of the Pierpont Morgan Library in 1924. White also examines librarians in film, television, and literature; useful appendices list films featuring librarians, films featuring librarians as minor characters, films mentioning librarians, foreign films featuring librarians, and librarian websites. Discussions of alternative images of librarians and the effect of stereotypes round out this entertaining book.

Jennifer Bartlett (jen.bartlett@uky.edu) is Head of Reference Services at the University of Kentucky Libraries

---

[1] Teicher, Jordan G. 11 Feb. 2014. "This is What a Librarian Looks Like." *Slate.com*. http://www.slate.com/blogs/behold/2014/02/11/kyle_cassidy_photographs_librarians_at_the_american_library_association.html. For more information about Cassidy's project, see Melamed, Samantha. 27 June 2014. "Photographer Brings Libraries into Focus." *Philly.com*. http://articles.philly.com/2014-06-27/news/50887782_1_librarians-gun-owners-budget-cuts.

[2] A fascinating study involving the difference in image perception between librarians and non-librarians is Ramirose Ilene Attebury's study "Perceptions of a Profession: Librarians and Stereotypes in Online Videos" (*Library Philosophy and Practice 2010*, http://www.webpages.uidaho.edu/~mbolin/attebury.htm). Attebury analyzes 100 library-related videos posted on YouTube created by librarians, and 100 created by non-librarians. Most librarian-created videos portray librarians as heroes or heroines to their patrons, whereas non-librarians generally cast their librarians as inept, psychotic, or old maids.

[3] Pagowsky, Nicole and Erica DeFrain. 3 June 2014. Ice Ice Baby: Are Librarian Stereotypes Freezing Us Out of Instruction? *In the Library with the Lead Pipe* (blog). http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2014/ice-ice-baby-2/.

[4] Popular blogs, of which there are many, include The Lipstick Librarian (http://www.lipsticklibrarian.com), Mr. Library Dude (https://mrlibrarydude.wordpress.com), Libraries at the Movies (http://librariesatthemovies.blogspot.com), and Reel Librarians (http://reel-librarians.com).

[5] Kneale, Ruth. 2009. *You Don't Look Like a Librarian: Shattering Stereotypes and Creating Positive New Images in the Internet Age*. Medford, N.J.: Information Today, Inc.

[6] "Librarian Avengers" creator and user experience designer Erica Firment is also the author of the pithy negation of librarian stereotypes, "Why You Should Fall to Your Knees and Worship a Librarian" (http://librarianavengers.org/worship-2).

[7] A good example of research in this area is Marie L. Radford and Gary P. Radford, Librarians and Party Girls: Cultural Studies and the Meaning of the Librarian (*The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy*. 73.1, (January 2003), pp. 54-69). In this article, the authors analyze the 1995 film "Party Girl" from a cultural studies perspective, positing that "this film provides an example of the ways in which stereotyping creates a 'regime of representation' that ultimately constricts the power and economic status of a gendered profession – librarianship" (59).

[8] Pagowsky, Nicole and Miriam Rigby, eds. *The Librarian Stereotype: Deconstructing Perceptions & Presentations of Information Work*. 2014. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries. ISBN 9780838987049. See also Pagowsky's "Librarian Wardrobe" website at http://librarianwardrobe.com/.

[9] Arant, Wendi, and Candace R. Benefiel. 2002. *The Image and Role of the Librarian*. Binghamton, NY: Haworth Information Press.

[10] White, Ashanti. 2012. *Not Your Ordinary Librarian: Debunking the Popular Perceptions of Librarians*. Oxford, U.K.: Chandos Pub.