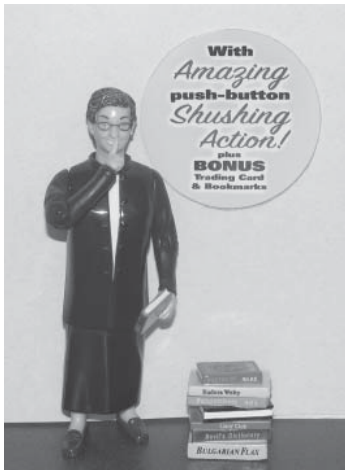


But ... You Don't Look Like a Librarian!

by **Ruth Kneale**
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Have you ever had someone say, “You can’t be a librarian—you don’t look like one!”? Or “Wow, yeah, I believe you’re a librarian.” Sure you have—we all have—at one time or another. Some think it’s funny, some think not—but I tell you, sometimes I just have to laugh! It amazes me what folks will say to us, what happens to us when we’re out and about, on TV, in bars, in comic strips—heck, they even make comments about our eyewear!

One bonus of researching the image of librarians over the last several years is that folks share their stories and experiences with me. Here are some comments forwarded to me during the course of my research:

- You sure fit the stereotype.
- I never would have guessed you’re a librarian.
- Libraries are really changing, huh?
- No, really, what do you do?
- You have a Master’s Degree?!?
- I like to read, I should be a librarian too!
- You dance really well for a librarian!
- Since you have a bun and glasses, it’s a good thing you don’t dress like a librarian!
- What are you doing in this field?
- I didn’t know librarians could be so young!
- If librarians looked like you while I was in school, I would have spent a lot more time in the library!
- Isn’t that a woman’s job?

- You’re not a typical librarian, are you?
- I never met a librarian who rode a motorcycle before.
- Where’s your bun?
- I didn’t know you had to go to school to be a librarian!
- You’re too (young, funny, noisy, messy, cute) to be a librarian.
- You don’t dress like a librarian.
- You dress too hip to be a librarian.

And, here are a couple of stories I received (as part of a survey of librarians) and that made me chuckle:

“Several years ago, while at an ILL conference here in Denver, I went into a restaurant with a colleague from a college library. After we sat at the bar and ordered beers, the bartender noticed our name tags (which we’d obviously forgotten about) and asked what sort of conference we were attending. We said that he had to guess and proceeded to give out lots of hints—about all the places one can find libraries, what we do, who we help, etc. During the 30 minutes or so that we sat there, he and a few other interested customers tried to figure us out, but with no luck. So, we finished our beers, stood up, tossed our heads, and said ‘We are LIBRARIANS!’ Everyone said something like ‘Wow!’ and we waltzed out.”

“I have a little game I like to play when I meet new people. I keep business cards from friends, vendors, professionals and I find it’s fun to place 5 or 6 from diverse female professionals (including my own) and ask which



one business card they think is mine. It's pretty interesting and fun. No one has ever picked my business card because 'I don't look like a librarian.'"

I am constantly on the lookout for things that reference or influence the image of librarians and it can be a thoroughly enjoyable pastime. There are the more obvious images, like the Librarian Action Figure (see Nancy Pearl's essay *My Life as an Action Figure* in this newsletter); there are also less obvious humorous references, like articles about Ella Gunderson, a young lady in Washington who appealed to Nordstrom stores for a *less racy* line of clothing.

"Fashion watchers such as Gigi Solis Schanen, an editor for *Seventeen* magazine, told the *Times* Gunderson should be pleased with the new trend on the horizon. 'If modesty is what she is looking for, it's going to come full force in the fall,' she said, adding 'tween and teen girls can expect to see fuller skirts, higher waist lines and more *layering* of tops. 'The 50s sexy-librarian look is in,' Shanen told the *Times*, and the Britney Spears-style exposed belly is out.'"

—Kristen Gelineau,
Associated Press;
WorldNet Daily
May 22, 2004

Just what we all wanted! The sexy-librarian look of the 50s! Yeah!

Does anyone these days NOT have a Conan the Librarian image somewhere in his or her office or on their computer? I was quite surprised to find an entire subculture devoted to this particular individual online. There are blogs, graphic art, stories, movie excerpts, even software applications (there's one where Conan the Librarian pops up and insults you if the volume on your workstation speakers exceeds a certain level).

Conan is even used in some libraries as a cartoon to show folks how to get library cards. Early credit seems to go to the clever folks of William Mitchell College of Law, who created the character for a library talent show under the pseudonym *Hadley V. Baxendale*, a pun on the famous law case *Hadley v. Baxendale*. Read more about their Conan the Librarian adventures at: <http://www.aallnet.org/chapter/mall/conan/conanhp.html>.

I was also highly amused by the excerpt from the movie *UHF* with a TV advertisement for an upcoming movie called *Conan the Librarian* ... "let's admit it, aren't there days when you really would like to be able to take a long sword to the patrons who just keep pushing your buttons?"

Speaking of television shows, in December 2004 TNT aired a made-for-TV movie called *The Librarian: Quest for the Spear*. Who didn't have fun watching Noah Wyle save the world as the guy who knows everything? Please don't send me any irate e-mails about how this was a horrible presentation of librarianship—I thoroughly agree. Then again, I wasn't expecting high literature or an accurate description of our profession, and that allowed me to laugh out loud several times during the movie. Perhaps not at the places TNT had intended, but still!

For those of you looking for more of an *Ooh, wow, ha ha, ouch!* change in image, you can always investigate Pierced Eyeglasses. Although not specifically intended for librarians, it certainly does bring a different twist to the bespectacled approach! The gentleman in this article decided he'd rather do something different with his eyeglasses, and being a fan of body piercing, thought he'd combine a bridge piercing (a piercing through the flesh at the top of your nose, right between our eyes—basically, right where the bridge of a pair of eyeglasses hits) with lenses. You can see pictures and read his



Let's not forget these comments made to folks who are in library school, wittily collected by Jane Gresham and shared in the June 15, 2004 *Library Journal*.

1. I'd love to be a librarian because libraries are so quiet.
2. I thought about becoming a librarian, but I need enough income to support myself.
3. You need a graduate degree for that?
4. I thought the Internet put libraries out of business.
5. Don't you have enough college degrees now?
6. I think it's wonderful that you can pursue a hobby like that.
7. You have to go to college for that?
8. I don't see much purpose to libraries; I buy all my books at Costco.
9. I'd love to be a librarian because I'd love to read at work.
10. You have to go to school for that?

story online at <http://www.bmezine.com/news/pubring/20041214.html>.

The issues surrounding the image of librarians can be serious ones; they can impact our job responsibilities, our salaries, even whether we get hired or not. But they can also be downright silly sometimes, and

often the best way to deal with the situation is to laugh about it! Being able to laugh at yourself is a valuable tool and can often be used to defuse a potentially sticky situation—and that's true for us as a profession as well. So remember—when in doubt, look at the funny side! 🌿

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