



Photo courtesy Accoutrements.

The Librarian Action Figure is based on a real-life librarian—Nancy Pearl, director of library programming at the Washington Center for the Book at the Seattle Public Library.

Image and the Librarian

From Marian the Librarian to the Librarian Action Figure, the Profession through the Public's Eye

by Holly M. Riccio

Many people, when asked to describe or conjure up an image of a librarian, remember Marian the Librarian from the musical *The Music Man*. The lead character, Marian Paroo, a librarian and music teacher, is a self-proclaimed spinster who has to fight off the attempts of everyone, including her own mother, to find a man for her. She is characterized as “picky, hardworking, bookish, and pitiable.” The phrase comes from the song bearing her epithet, and although it is more than 40 years old, the image still remains as the prominent librarian stereotype.

But librarians have been portrayed in all kinds of flattering ways—in film and the popular media—both recently and in the past. Although there may not be a clear answer for the image problem that the profession faces, it is clear that librarianship is changing and evolving, and the way that librarians are perceived by the public and portrayed in the media is changing and evolving with it.

I'm Ready for My Close-Up

There have been many portrayals of librarians in movies. Numerous Web sites exist that track and trace librarians in the movies, including *Librarians in the Movies: An Annotated Filmography* at <http://emp.byui.edu/raishm/films/introduction.html>. This site breaks down movies into subcategories based on how prominent librarians or libraries appear in the films. For a more scholarly and analytical approach, see an article published in *MC Journal: The Journal of Academic Media Librarianship* titled “The Librarian Stereotype and the Movies” (<http://wings.buffalo.edu/publications/mcjrnl/v1n1/image.html>), which looks at 30 films to determine how librarians were stereotyped in Hollywood movies.

One of the earliest positive portrayals of librarians in the movies (and probably one of the more well known among librarians) is found in *Desk Set*. In this 1957 film, engineer Richard Sumner (played by Spencer Tracy) is hired to install a new computer system in the reference department of a TV network. The librarians (one of whom is played by Katherine Hepburn) are smart, capable professionals and engage in some very witty dialogue.

However, there are also some other unflattering portrayals of librarians, including a spinsterish librarian that shushes Holly Golightly (Audrey Hepburn) and Paul Varjak

(George Pappard) when they are in the New York Public Library in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961); a small town librarian (portrayed by Barbara Stanwyck) who, on her way to work, is called “old lady four eyes” by local kids in *Forbidden* (1932); and the world's meanest archivist, Bertha Anderson, a woman who wears her hair in a bun and has an intimidating stare on her face in *Citizen Kane* (1941).

The overall portrayal of librarians in film in recent years has been overwhelmingly positive. Just look at *Foul Play* (1978), where Goldie Hawn plays Gloria Mundy, a shy San Francisco librarian who helps solve a crime. Another film, *Black Mask* (1996), has Jet Li playing a gentle, mild-mannered librarian who is also a superhero. Librarians have also begun to be portrayed as attractive, desirable, and sometimes even sexy. Some examples include *Head Over Heels* (1979), in which Mary Beth Hurt portrays a librarian who is obsessively loved and pursued by the hero (played by John Heard); *Hammitt* (1983), where Marilu Henner plays a sexy librarian; and *Major League* (1989), which stars Rene Russo as a young, beautiful librarian with a master's degree. However, the image of the sexy librarian can be traced back to 1932, with the release of *No Man of Her Own*, a film that starred Clark Gable as a con man who goes to live in a small town and meets the local librarian, played by Carole Lombard. This film became famous for the scene in which Gable ogles Lombard's legs while she stands on a ladder to retrieve a book.

Librarians Sell

In addition to seeing librarians in the movies, we can also be seen in the media in advertisements and commercials. Of course, as with most ads, each one can be seen as either negative or positive, depending on your point of view. Take for example the print ad that Honda ran in a variety of magazines and locations a few years ago for its Accord V-6 Coupe. The text of the ad read, “The automotive equivalent of a really hot librarian. Good-looking, yet intelligent. Fun, yet sophisticated. All in a very eye-catching, 200-horsepower package” (<http://people.bu.edu/rmortiz/01-HotLibrarian.pdf>). This ad was discussed on numerous online lists and was taken by some to be a sort of a back-handed compliment, whereas others saw it as a compliment to the profession, saying it was nice to be seen as a sex symbol.

Another ad that generated lots of online list discussion was the Bacardi ad with a scantily clad female model holding a drink

with the caption, “Librarian by day. Bacardi by night.” The consensus about this ad seemed to be that, although it is nice to have a representation that is the polar opposite of the way librarians are usually depicted, this representation wasn’t really any better.

Even the most positive of ads can still be looked at more closely and found to be somewhat contradictory, which is the case with the HP Labs ad featuring its librarian Eugenie Prime. The text reads, “What the Internet needs is an old-fashioned librarian. Finding what you want on the Web should be as easy as finding a book in a library. It will be, if Eugenie has her way. She’s working to create a standard for labeling and cataloging information online—including all 2.7 billion Web pages—a virtual Dewey Decimal system, if you will. So you can spend less time looking for, and more time using, the information you need. Shh. You’re on the Internet” (<http://people.bu.edu/rmortiz/eugenielibrarian.pdf>).

The consensus among librarians was that this ad conveys a positive image of a modern-day librarian. However, before the reader even gets to the text, he or she sees the photo of a woman in a sweater set and pearls surrounded by stacks and stacks of books. The text then refers to the librarian as an “old-fashioned librarian” and also uses the infamous “Shh” line. HP was probably not trying to bash librarians, but was merely trying to use the librarian stereotype that most people are familiar

with to link to a more modern, tech-savvy kind of librarian.

Accessories Sold Separately

The latest incarnation of librarians came along last year from the Archie McPhee Company—The Librarian Action Figure. Based on a real-life librarian (Nancy Pearl, director of library programming at the Washington Center for the Book at the Seattle Public Library), this action figure is one of many that the company makes; others include Jesus, Sigmund Freud, and Rosie the Riveter. The company states that it has always tried to create action figures out of not only historical figures, but also out of people in unusual or underappreciated jobs. The Librarian Action Figure comes with a plastic replica of Pearl’s latest book and a stack of random literature. Also, press the button on her back and her arm moves up to her face in a “shushing action.”

When the action figure first came out, there was lots of controversy about it. Some thought it was deplorable and set the profession back, while others saw its kitsch value and took it as a compliment because other professions didn’t have an action figure. Pearl herself said, “The role of a librarian is to make sense of the world of information. If that’s not a qualification for superhero-dom, what is?”

Seattle City Librarian Deborah Jacobs, Pearl’s boss, said anyone who doesn’t view a librarian as a potent force doesn’t

understand the job. “Ideas are more powerful than bombs,” she said.

“Information is the way to take over the world.” I would like to believe, as Pearl does, that today’s librarians are secure enough in their work that they won’t take offense at the old cliché.

Librarians are ever-present in our culture and society today, from action figures to movies to contestants on *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire*—in 2002 a librarian won \$500,000 on the show and prompted Regis Philbin to exclaim, “What can I say? Librarians rule!” As the world has changed and evolved, so has the image of librarians in popular culture. In this age of information overload and technological advances, librarians are being perceived and praised for their abilities to find, organize, and disseminate information.

The popular media, although it may still refer to the clichés of librarians, understands what lies underneath the buns and glasses and is promoting that positive image in every kind of media—books, TV, movies, advertisements, and now even toys. As the old adage goes, “You can’t judge a book by its cover.” I think that people have finally taken this to heart when it comes to librarians and can honor and respect us and our profession, looking beyond the image and imagine what librarians really can do and be.

Holly M. Riccio (hriccio@omm.com) is the head librarian at O’Melveny and Myers LLP in San Francisco.