Image disorders: Obsessing over library portrayals

Librarians have long complained about their portrayal in popular culture, be it either as the 'bun lady' — a middle-aged white female, with glasses and hair in a bun — or the newer cliche the 'anti-stereotype' stereotype — an exaggeration of characteristics that depart from the original myth. I admit to more than a passing interest: the topic formed my honours thesis, and I remain eager to view examples. Such compulsion affects many in our sphere, possibly because it is human nature to want to know what others think of us. The media feeds this habit — they too seem a little obsessed with images of libraries and librarians. This article was sparked by the ABC's announcement of its six-part comedy-drama set in Book Week. I wondered how we would be portrayed, and decided to review what had been shown in the past twelve months.

Contrastingly and confusingly, pop culture did present both characters. Traditionally styled workers were demonstrated by the spinster-librarian of Jo Dereske's novel *Book-marked to Die: A Miss Zukas Mystery* (2006), but Paul Stewart's ongoing science fiction series *The Edge Chronicles* has the anti-stereotypical heroic librarian knights.

On television, the lead character, Brent, of the Canadian comedy *Corner Gas* (SBS) was greeted with 'Shh! This is a library. Shh!' by the severely hairstyled, glasses-wearing female behind the desk, yet an episode of *New Tricks* (ABC) contained a librarian who triple-defied the myth, being male, sexually attractive and who practised witchcraft. Generally, movies perpetuate 'the bun lady' image, but *The Librarian: Return to King Solomon's Mines* (2006), featured Noah Wyle as adventurer-librarian Flynn Carsen, and *You, Me and Dupree* (2006) referred to the nymphomaniac-librarian cliche via the role of 'Mandy'.

I concluded that the staff in the upcoming series could be shown either way, and turned my investigation to the likely portrayal of their environment — also subject to a perception that libraries are dark and silent places of rows of dusty books. For instance, viewers saw floor-to-ceiling library shelving and rickety ladders in an episode of *Don Matteo* (SBS). Yet alternative images are being presented, usually by the coverage of real-life innovations. In 2006, *Enough Rope* (ABC) featured Catharina Noren of Malmo,

Sweden, with her library's 'Living Book' borrowing initiative that enables patrons to interact with people they might otherwise not encounter, such as an Imam and a transvestite. Another example is America's Denver Public Library, where patrons can download movies and television programs to their PCs and portable media players (*Home Media Retailing Magazine*).

Also countering the cliche were presentations of the revamp of library architecture: *The Amazing Race* (Channel 7) had the Bransen family team travel past the Robarts Library at the University of Toronto, which was designed to resemble a giant peacock; *The Courier-Mail* ran an article about a Liverpool, England library installing gym equipment alongside the stacks, and *The Ledger* website, <**http://www.theledger.com**>, referred to the Munn Park outdoor library in Lakeland, Florida.

Next, I looked at what had driven such changes overall. Culturally, there has been an increase in focus on realism on both the big and small screens, accompanied by a surge in sales of non-fiction books. This shows consumers want representations of

Image disorders: Obsessing over library portrayals

continued from page 11

life, and this should mean an overhaul of library images in media and advertising.

Such a change is likely to be protracted, and in the meantime our responses vary. We know stereotypes are used as shortcuts to ensure understanding, and most careers are effected: when was the last time you saw your GP wearing a stethoscope? Driscoll urged moving past what he saw as the profession's obsession with image, and reminded us to maintain a sense of humour. Some people propose just not reacting — in fact librarians were accessories to the formation of the 'anti-stereotype' stereotype', which arose from a backlash against being seen as dull and unfashionable. Numerous websites, events and discussion groups were launched by self-titled 'image busters', who paraded their unconventionality. Perhaps best known early on was the webpage *The Belly-Dancing Librarian* at <**http://www.sonic.net/erisw/bdlib. html**>, but other features and past-times celebrated included having tattoos and enjoying rockclimbing and motorcycling.

For now, staff can focus on promoting a positive profile: whilst demographically there might be people who fit the mould (40+ women), they do not necessarily possess poor sight, bad hair and a tendency to 'shush'. And regarding collections, books might be dominant, but dustiness isn't automatic.

My ideal would be for popular culture to depict normalcy! To show librarians as everyday, ordinary people, in all shapes and sizes, backgrounds and interests, whose only uniting feature is extraordinary information skills. Likewise, for our buildings not to be either a dungeon or futuristic, but of variety and vigour, and, for the most part, pleasant, comfortable and welcoming places, with holdings made up of multiple formats. Truth in the media? I for one will be avidly watching.

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Noah Wyle and Bob Newhart in *The Librarian: Return to King Solomon's Mines*

image courtesy of ABC Television
'Christine', Middleton Interactive Learning Centre's Children's Librarian