Publications and Research   CUNY Graduate Center

2002

Know-It-All Librarians

Beth Posner
CUNY Graduate Center

KNOW-IT-ALL LIBRARIANS

By Beth Posner

Librarians are depicted as know-it-alls by some, and as know-nothings by others. Similarly, they are seen as both utterly powerless and preternaturally powerful. This essay offers examples of these contradictory images, examines their implications, and proposes a more realistic view of librarians and their relation to knowledge and power.

INTRODUCTION

One image of librarians is that they are know-it-alls who can answer any question. This image -- sometimes consciously or unconsciously promulgated by librarians, themselves -- may also be held by knowledge seekers who are new to the world of information or intimidated by its pursuit. To them, librarians can seem like magicians who occupy a rarified space in which answers are always at their disposal. From this perspective, librarians control access to information and have the power to provide assistance, but will only do so *if* they happen to be interested in the question and in a good mood. More often, they are presumed to be too intellectually arrogant to be either helpful or interested.

At the same time, given that library work encompasses everything from the sublime and the complex to the banal and the ridiculous, a rival image of librarians also exists. In this view, library work requires little effort or intelligence and librarians must be prodded, pushed, or provided with a breadcrumb trail in order to track down even the most routine request. Since many common questions answered at reference desks are not very challenging – for instance, "Where is the bathroom?" or "How much does a photocopy cost?" -- some see librarians as little more than worker bees or drones who occupy the gray world of the unimaginative and uninspired. Particularly, today, when so many have so much information at their fingertips, librarians can appear increasingly unimportant and powerless.

It is the common Western tendency towards the binary that makes dichotomous thinking -- and dichotomous images such as these – so common. It *is* often simply easier to classify things as black or white than it is to decide and describe which of the infinite shades of gray they may be. However, one useful aspect of the postmodern project -- and one purpose of this article -- is to point out the simplifications and other misleading implications that come from framing issues in terms of opposites, whether the opposites are us-other, master-slave, civilized-uncivilized, or librarians as know-it-alls or know-nothings, omnipotent or powerless.

As knowledge workers, exactly how librarians are perceived with respect to knowledge and power is of particular importance. What they know and do not know are essential aspects of both their self-image and the image that others will have of them. And, if, as Francis Bacon noted, "knowledge, itself, is power," then their knowledge base is directly related to what librarians do and do not have the power to do. Of course, the relation of knowledge to power is a complicated one.[1] But, whatever the exact relation, knowing a subject means understanding and applying facts and methods in order to harness power to achieve relevant goals. So, in order for librarians -- through the knowledge and practice of library science -- to reach any of the goals that they have for patrons, libraries, or themselves, then the boundaries of what they know and do not know must first be established.

IMAGE: "THE KNOW-IT-ALL LIBRARIAN"

> *We called him Mr. Know-All, even to his face. He took it as a compliment.*
> Somerset Maugham, "Mr. Know-All"[2]

The idea of knowing it all, or of omniscience, has long had an influence on "scientific and philosophical thought, and more generally [on] images of knowledge, nature, history and of humanity."[3] Contemporary theologians explore religions that portray their supreme being(s) as possessing complete knowledge of the past, present and future, while philosophers examine omniscience in relation to epistemology. In literature, it is authors and narrators who may be omniscient, and in psychology, omniscience is discussed in connection to both infant development -- where it is short-lived and healthy, and psychoses -- where it is far more entrenched and unhealthy.

A variety of other characters -- such as parents, psychoanalysts, doctors, leaders, and various experts – are also sometimes considered to be virtually omniscient. Still, most theorists consider omniscience too extreme a concept to be very useful. Surely, it is a sign of insanity for any human to believe that they know it all, and perhaps, even, as Debra Castillo observes:

> One of the major features of the insane mind…consists of the way it knows. …The madman…seeks to assimilate whatever he encounters into his frame of reference, without ever truly recognizing or acknowledging any new fact. …It is only in this sense that the mad librarian can be said to know at all.[4]

However, although reaching or even approaching omniscience is impossible -- or possible only in God, authors or the insane – it is also a concept that offers insight into certain characters, particularly certain librarians, whose ego ideal is to be knowledgeable. As

Janette Caputo observes, "the librarian who satisfies every user's request without delay [and] with totally accurate information…is a fantasy of first semester library school students."[5] This is fantastic because practical considerations of time and resources, the standards of the library profession, and the nature of knowledge, itself, limit a librarian's ability to respond to informational requests. Yet, despite all this, some librarians hold on to this particular semi-functional delusion of intellectual grandeur throughout their careers and lives.

Examples of know-it-all librarians exist in both contemporary and historical literature, as well as in both popular and library literature. In only the second issue of *Library Journal*, published in 1876, we read that,

> A librarian should not only be a walking catalogue, but a living cyclopedia. …Librarians…are expected to know everything; and in a sense they should know everything - that is, they should have that *maxima pars eruditionis*, which consists in knowing where everything is to be found.[6]

Similar points of view are also expressed in non-library literature. One hundred years ago, *The London Times* printed the view that "the ideal librarian must be a man of rare and almost superhuman gifts."[7] And, today, Erica Joyce Olsen's website proclaims, "People become librarians because they know too much… Librarians are all-knowing and all-seeing."[8]

Images of know-it-all librarians can also be found in non-library literature. In the 1995 film *Party Girl*, the librarians act intellectually superior to Mary, the clerk, in part because they know how a library works and she -- at first -- does not. In Jorge Luis Borges' short story, "Library of Babel," the universe is envisioned as a library containing every possible book. There, people are called "imperfect librarians" because no one can find books with correct answers among the multitudes that exist. This implies that a perfect librarian would be able to do so, and indeed, there is one alleged librarian, "the Man of the Book," who is analogous to God, because having found the book that explains it all, he knows it all.

Mystery novels regularly feature librarians as crime solvers because of how much they know and how adept they are at finding answers.[9] In Umberto Eco's <u>The Name of the Rose</u>, an intellectually glorified image of librarians is evident in the hubris of those who "corrected the errors of nature"[10] by shelving books according to where their authors should have been born, rather than where they actually were born. Another example is seen when William, the monk who solves the murder mysteries is told, "What a magnificent librarian you would have been…you know everything."[11] Although well aware of the dangers of knowledge, he is also something of a know-it-all – exceedingly proud and sure of his learning, reasoning and empirical skills.

Now that we have seen examples of this image, let us turn our attention to how and why it developed. One hundred years ago, John Ashhurst explained the way a librarian might come to a posture of omniscience. The librarian, he said,

> …is treated with a certain amount of deference, he finds that he is able to answer many questions that puzzle little boys and old ladies without having to have recourse to reference books, his staff laugh politely at his jokes, and after a time he finds that he is probably more familiar with the titles and names of the authors of a greater number of book than about anyone of his acquaintance… He grows so accustomed to the appearance of his books on the shelves…[that] he really comes to feel as if he must have read them. …But the real downfall of a librarian…probably dates from the time when he first discovers a mistake in the writings of some well-known authority.[12]

Additionally, when a librarian, through a good reference interview or years of experience, understands what a patron needs even better than that person knows or can articulate, and can immediately find whatever information is needed, an impressed patron's awe might well become exaggerated, as, in turn, might the librarian's self-image.

Perhaps some librarians choose to perpetuate this particular stereotype because they are inflicted with so many negative stereotypes, while this is one that feeds something positive in them. As Katherine Adams explains, there is something enjoyably subversive and empowering about claiming a stereotypical image as one's own.[13] In addition, delighting patrons with their knowledge is not only pleasurable for both librarians and patrons, but can also bring librarians needed prestige and financial support from patrons. Or, alternatively, perhaps it is because some librarians do not understand the real and certain value of their work and knowledge that they feel the need to inflate their self-importance by acting like know-it-alls.

There are even professors of library science and other librarians who teach -- or at least imply --that a good reference librarian can find the answer to any question. In reality, however, a number of researchers have found that only 55 percent of reference questions are answered accurately.[14] This "55% rule" is a highly contested statistic,[15] but if it is acknowledged that librarians answer at least some questions incompletely, if not incorrectly, then it is must be attitude,[16] more than ability, that fuels the image of librarian as know-it-all.

As understandable as the enjoyment of this image may be, and as important as knowledge is to librarians and society, knowing it all is still not an unequivocally positive image for librarians – or anyone -- to maintain. Warnings about the risks of too much knowledge abound. Children are told that "no one likes a know-it-all" and entertaining a delusion of grandeur, such as omniscience, is considered to be a clear sign of psychological

dysfunction. It is a desire for more knowledge that leads to the fall of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, and it is partly due to a desire to know it all that Faust sells his soul to the devil. In <u>The Name of the Rose</u>, the Devil is described as "truth that is never seized by doubt"[17] and "the trouble in the abbey came from those who knew too much not too little."[18] Even Plato condemned the poet as "a charlatan whose apparent omniscience is due entirely to his own inability to distinguish knowledge and ignorance."[19] Though less severe, know-it-alls who finish your sentences or give away the endings of movies are still quite annoying, and know-it-all librarians can even do harm to themselves and others.

The American Library Association Code of Ethics[20] states that librarians should be courteous to patrons. If, instead, a person is faced with a know-it-all librarian with a bad attitude, they may not only leave the library without answers…they may be emotionally devastated, as well. This occurs in <u>Sophie's Choice</u>, when Sophie goes to the library to find the poems of Emily Dickinson but mistakenly asks for those of the American poet, Emile Dickens. The librarian, assuming that she means Charles Dickens, insists that everyone knows that he was not American and did not write poetry. His attitude, accompanied by her own frailties, rattles her so badly that she faints.[21] A know-it-all librarian may not even deign to explain things to people who do not know as much as they do -- or think they do. People regularly apologize to librarians because they think theirs is a "stupid question." So, if librarians want people to come to them with their informational needs, they must not only make clear what questions they can answer, they must also convince people that they are approachable and interested in any and all queries.

The existence of this image -- and even a slight belief in it by librarians -- can also be harmful to librarians, themselves. Acting like a know-it-all is a defense against fears of uncertainty, and it can become pathological if it is used to avoid self-knowledge and its attendant difficulties.[22] If someone is sure that they know what is and is not possible, instead of questioning and thinking things through, they may cease to experience reality or make any effort.[23] When faced, as all inevitably will be, with something that they do not know or cannot adequately explain, a librarian who expects to know everything will, at the least, get frustrated and irritable. While some amount of perfectionism may be necessary for libraries to function, if librarians irrationally believe that they must also be perfect, then they will worry too much about every question and problem, become unduly nervous, and make mistakes. No human being -- librarians included -- would want to live without the "emotions of wonder, adventure, curiosity and laughter"[24] that, as Santayana explained, omniscience excludes.

IMAGE: "SHELVERS-WITH-ATTITUDE"

> *No plant is able to think about itself or able to know itself...no plant can do anything intentionally...Its growth has no meaning, since a plant can not reason or dream... [Chauncey Gardner]...would be one of them.*
> Jerzy Kosinski, <u>Being There</u>, [25]

Countering the image of librarians as know-it-alls is the view that they are know-nothings. Many people are shocked to discover that librarians are required to have a graduate degree (or two) for their jobs. To them, a librarian's only ability and desire -- other than to hide out in libraries and be left alone -- is to check items in and out, assess overdue fines, and "shush" library patrons.

Like the image of the know-it-all librarian, this stereotype is one that has existed throughout the history of librarianship. Over 125 years ago, librarians recognized that there were some among them who were untrained and simply not good at their jobs. They knew that there were "...corporators and civic councillors who conceive that the extent of a librarian's duties is to pass books over a counter... They say of us [we] have nothing to do and are fully equal to it."[26] And, even today, the "55 percent rule" may make some librarians feel as good -- or as bad -- as know-nothings.

Examples of know-nothing librarians exist in contemporary popular literature, as well. In <u>The Name of the Rose</u>, Malachi, the monastery's librarian, "seemed quite thoughtful, but on the contrary, he was a very simple man...he was a fool."[27] In the science fiction book, <u>Wyrms</u>, there is a character named Heffiji who is a librarian of sorts. Papers with answers written on them are scattered throughout her house, but they are not arranged in any systematic way. As she admits, "I don't know anything but I can find everything."[28] Of course, librarians do have organizing principles, but since most people do not understand them, they undoubtedly question their efficacy, if not their existence.

Nescience, the opposite of omniscience, "is a nostalgic, regressive, atavistic condition...it may be provisionally defined as the state of being unacquainted with a cultural archive (the textual embodiment of knowledge.)"[29] Like omniscience, the idea of nescience is portrayed in the Bible when Adam and Eve are in a state of blissful ignorance until they eat from the Tree of Knowledge. Prior to that, although not as knowledgeable, they are closer to God, and it is precisely this sort of spiritual knowledge that is thought to derive more from nescience than omniscience. There is also a long history of anti-intellectualism that holds that too much concern with learning is bad for society and individuals,[30] and that oftentimes, action or acceptance are more productive than analysis. However, librarians are not mystics,

nor - hopefully - are they anti-intellectuals, so nescience is not the sort of image they should do anything to encourage.

One reason that this image exists may be that librarianship has not been considered a profession for very long, and it quickly became a feminized one. Perhaps, as Penny Cowell says, an early "emphasis on housekeeping tasks performed in a fussy manner has trivialised library work."[31] Radford and Radford posit that libraries are symbols of order and that librarians control that order. Therefore, perhaps, in an effort to minimize people's fears of knowledge and discourse, librarians are "feminized" and made to appear as victims of this order rather than as rulers of it.[32] Or, perhaps librarians have acquired this image because they are in a service industry with no little or no direct connection to the making of money, which is considered so important in our culture. Instead, their connection is to bookishness, which seems to be less and less respected. (Similarly, other knowledge workers, such as computer scientists, may be more respected because their work and image is so much more connected to profit making and computers than to books and education.)

Some would-be-patrons, know-it-alls themselves, assume that everyone else knows less than they do, if not nothing. Others, intimidated by libraries, overwhelmed by information, and misunderstanding what libraries can provide, may downplay the abilities of librarians in order to make themselves feel better. Many businesses, and even schools, consider the library to be merely a support service, akin to a typing pool. Similarly, some see all library workers as clerks, instead of distinguishing librarians as professionals with education, duties and abilities beyond what they can see. (For instance, while librarians may be developing collections by studying book reviews, patrons only see them sitting around and reading magazines.) Perhaps, because people think that anyone can type keywords into a computer and get an answer, they are unimpressed by what it is that librarians appear to do at work. Or, perhaps it is because librarians work in places that others use for leisure or education that they are not considered particularly professional or capable.

There are also those who think that librarians know nothing about the real world because they are always reading, rather than living. They simply assume that librarians prefer the company and knowledge of books to the company of people and the knowledge of life. This is Marion the Librarian's mother's viewpoint in *The Music Man.* She does not expect anyone to listen to her daughter, given that Marion is more concerned with her library than with finding a husband, and by extension, a life in the real world. Even some librarians, in the early years of *Library Journal,* expressed a similar point, repeatedly using the phrase "the librarian who reads is lost". It is true that empirical knowledge -- which comes from

experience -- must be supplemented by analysis, because no one can experience everything first-hand, and even when people do engage in direct observation, their senses can be deceived. However, it is also true that sometimes, the more one intellectualizes, the further one can get from knowledge that is directly relevant to the real world. Both reading and living are, therefore, profitable exercises from which librarians can learn a great deal.

REALITY: WHAT LIBRARIANS KNOW

Since neither of these extremes portrays an accurate image of what librarians know, let us now consider just what knowledge they do possess.

- ***Librarians know how to find information.*** As Samuel Johnson noted, "Knowledge is of two kinds -- we know a subject or we know how to find information on it," and one definition of knowledge is "the ability to produce the correct answer to a question."[33] This, first and foremost, is what librarians know.

- ***Librarians know how to collect, preserve, organize, and dispense information.*** Knowledge can also be defined as understanding acquired through experience or study. The responsibility of librarians, with respect to the economy of knowledge, is to know how to collect, preserve, organize and dispense information for that study.

- ***Librarians know how to get things done.*** In addition to their process and subject knowledge, librarians have practical knowledge. They can fix copy machines and printers, load microfilm machines, raise and budget money, and manage all of the everyday aspects of their work.

- ***Librarians know how to work with people.*** It is a librarian's job to bring people and information together, thus encouraging the creation and transmission of knowledge. This means that as much as they know about information, they must also know about people. From knowing how to conduct reference interviews and determine what information a person needs, to knowing how to calm someone facing a deadline and a broken copy machine, a librarian's understanding of people is essential.

- ***Librarians know what information literacy means and how to impart information literacy skills to others.*** Librarians know – and can explain to others – how, done properly, the review and consideration of existing information saves time and opens people up to new ideas, insights and understandings. (It also indicates what is already known so that efforts can be focused on applying and testing information or on answering other questions.) Despite their prejudices

towards research, however, librarians also know, and must teach others, that scholarship can, and often does, proceed without the use of secondary "library" sources. Indeed, independent thinking may even be stifled and overwhelmed when confronted with too much pre-existing data. Although librarians have always served as conduits between people and information, research studies[34] and experience at reference desks indicates that many people do not understand that a librarian's job is to help answer their questions. So, people need to be taught to ask for help. Also, librarians know that not all information is reliable, so as they teach people how to find information, they must teach them how to evaluate what they find.

- *Librarians know how to work with electronic information.* As even the smallest libraries get connected to the Internet and all that it encompasses, no librarian can know their entire collection. And, even if they did, online catalogs, databases, indexes, and research engines could also -- quickly, cheaply and reliably-- tell people what is available. However, since technological interfaces are not always user-friendly and the actual content of such services is sometimes lacking, a librarian's knowledge of how to handle computerized data is much needed.

- *Librarians know about the nature of knowledge and its limits.* Despite all the well-considered wisdom of sages and scholars throughout time, and the massive accumulation of information in libraries and computer databases, librarians know that questions not only remain…they proliferate. Given that knowledge is relative and human understanding finite and biased, questions and problems are simply a natural, intrinsic and inevitable part of life. No amount of information will answer everything and some information will even lead to more problems than it solves. Thus, problems will always exist, but so will more fortunate byproducts, such as hope and determination (and plenty of jobs for librarians.)

- *Librarians know how other limits they face -- such as a lack of resources – effect what they can do.* With so much information in existence, there is always more to be acquired, and each acquisition comes with additional costs. Most libraries do not have the money or space they need, nor do cataloging systems have the breadth they need to fully encompass everything. Librarians know what this means in terms of what they can provide to patrons, and they also know how to make the system work within these limits.

- ***Librarians know how knowledge and information are connected.*** The interconnectedness of knowledge makes interdisciplinary research important, and when people need to work outside of their fields, they are especially likely to need the help of librarians. This interconnectedness also means that, to a certain extent, it is an unnecessary redundancy for researchers or librarians to know or have to look at everything. So, librarians must understand these connections in order to decide what their libraries will provide and how to guide patrons to the most relevant material.

IMAGE: "DRAGON LIBRARIANS" OR MEEK, WEAK, GEEKS

Just as knowledge and power are related, so are omnipotence and omniscience, and as such, they are often considered together. The same characters who are regularly judged omniscient -- parents, psychoanalysts, doctors, leaders, authors, and God -- are often deemed omnipotent, as well. This connection can also be seen in the use of the word *authority*. Not only does knowledge makes someone an authority, but being an authority ~~that~~ gives people power and the right to use it to accomplish their ends.

To become healthy adults, we all need to realize the limits of our power. However, human development also includes an acquaintance with the feeling of omnipotence; through good parenting, infants are given a taste of being all-powerful, which in turn helps them learn that they are real.[35] A librarian, however, may experience this feeling as an adult, too. When in charge of a reference desk or library, with all the information that they have at their fingertips, librarians can actually feel like absolute rulers of their own little fiefdom. As Alison Hall says, "Librarians, it would seem, have the potential for immense power…by withholding, or alternatively, disseminating knowledge."[36]

However, despite the idea that knowledge is power and that a librarian's mastery of information can provide them with strong feelings of control, it is interesting that librarians are generally perceived of as meek, rather than strong, and as thinkers -- and not great thinkers, at that -- rather than doers. Perhaps, because they seem so quiet at work, they are assumed to be weak and ineffectual. Or, perhaps, it is because the standards of their profession guide them not in the use of information, but in providing information for others to use that they are seldom considered powerful.

Still, despite all this, images of mighty librarians do exist. We know that Batgirl was, indeed, a librarian, and Spider Robinson describes one of his characters, Mary Kay Kare, as "one of the secret masters of the world: a librarian. They control information. Don't ever piss

one off."[37] Jet Li, in the movie, *Black Mask*, plays a mild-mannered librarian who enjoys the peace of the library, but is also a super-powerful superhero. And, in Sean McMullen's Soul in the Machine, not only are there Dragon Librarians who routinely fight duels, but two of the most powerful warrior-rulers in the world are librarians. As Erica Olsen's riff on the Internet ends, "Librarians wield unfathomable power. …Librarians rule. And they will kick the crap out of anyone who says otherwise."[38]

REALITY: WHAT LIBRARIANS CAN DO

Librarians who feign knowledge or ignorance, or strength or weakness – becoming either pseudo-intellectuals or mere paper pushers -- will find it difficult to do their jobs successfully. And, patrons who over-estimate the abilities of librarians will be frustrated when their expectations are not met, while those who underestimate the capacities of librarians will never ask for their help. Either way, there will be disappointment and unmet information needs, and as a result, people may completely turn away from libraries and librarians. Should they do this, getting information from unreliable sources or doing without information that they really do need, then the impact is potentially quite dire, not only for the future of librarianship but also for those individuals and society.

Complicating the issue is the fact that all of these contradictory images exist at the same time, both in the minds of librarians and in the minds of others. Entrenched images are difficult to dispel, but nonetheless, librarians have the power to do many things that can help people understand just what it is that librarians know and can do. Specifically,

- *Librarians can study their image(s).* It seems that librarians have always been interested in and concerned with the image of their profession. But, the old focus on bemoaning and challenging stereotypes is now also being supplemented by a postmodern call to deconstruct, understand, subvert and sometimes even embrace them. Either way, understanding various aspects of an image is the first step towards embracing or combating it. Coupled with a dispassionate, even ironic, assessment of one's self and others, librarians can determine why they are viewed in a certain way, what this means to themselves and to others, and what they might do in order to successfully project a more positive and realistic image.

- *Librarians can tell people what they know, what they do not know, and why.* Every person a librarian meets, in the library or outside of it, provides them with an opportunity to confront their images. Although it can be easier to fall into expected behaviors, librarians will only grow personally and professionally if they present

themselves as they really are. And, although librarians cannot control the way others view them, they can control the way they present themselves. Every person they help learns what they know and every person they cannot help learns what they do not know. So, while distinguishing themselves as librarians, they should always clearly and openly explain how it is that they know some things and why it is that they do not know others.

- *Librarians should not be know-it-alls.* In order to act at all, librarians should never think of themselves as know-it-alls. An omniscient being "is never presented with options, never enjoys the capacity to acquire intentions, and is unable to act intentionally [so] far from being 'free' to choose and act, or unlimited in power, it is, of necessity, omni-impotent."[39] Those who think they already know it all will never try to change or improve themselves. And, certainly, this is not an image librarians will ever disabuse others of, if they believe it themselves.

- *Librarians should not think of others as omniscient or of themselves as know-nothings.* Believing that others know it all -- or always know more than they do -- leads people to abdicate personal responsibility and rely too much on what those others think. Librarians who assume that information scientists or publishers, deans or library board members know more than they, do a disservice both to themselves and their patrons. In this, the "information age," it is time that librarians acknowledge their areas of expertise and take more visible leadership roles in the larger world.

- *Librarians can study epistemology and the changing nature of information.* Library science education should include more instruction about the philosophical basis of epistemology,[40] so librarians will truly understand what knowledge is, what it can do, and how it may be changing. Computer technology, for instance, has made information less fixed (as books are) and more fluid, changeable and relativistic.[41] Only librarians who understand the changing nature and power of information can work out what this implies for the nature of knowledge and its use.

- *Librarians can teach people about the limits of information technology, as it exists today.* Some people think that libraries offer them no more, and often less, than what they can find on any computer. That they will miss important sources, or take more time than necessary to find them, may not even occur to them. Or, if it does, they still may not turn to a librarian for help because they do not think librarians *can* help. In some ways, it may feel like a relief to librarians when people learn to use electronic databases by themselves and when troublesome patrons stay at home and

logon to library databases through proxy servers, instead of demanding attention at the library. True, librarians might then have more time to do other work, but without some sort of contact with people -- whether face-to-face or remote – librarians lose valuable opportunities to help and show people what they know and can do.

- *Librarians can be more proactive in helping people search for knowledge and information.* In some ways, the traditional professional standards of library science limit what librarians can or will do for people. Reference librarians were originally so-named because they simply referred people to books.[42] It was only later that their job description came to include finding information for people and/or teaching them how to find it for themselves. Today's ALA Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Services Professionals state that one goal of librarianship is to make people information literate and self-sufficient by imparting research strategies, not answers,[43] so most librarians still will not retrieve or evaluate information for people. However, with more and more information being generated, librarians need to advise people more and organize knowledge better in order to keep information overload to manageable proportions. Otherwise, information overload, in the extreme, may just lead to information impotence.

- *Librarians can fight against unnecessary limits.* Librarians must consciously decide which, among the limits that exist, to accept and which, with proper effort, they can transcend. Cuts in acquisitions budgets or limits in new building space translate into real problems, not only for librarians but for patrons and society, as well. So, if librarians do not fight for what they need in terms of budgets, schedules, etcetera, then needed resources will be directed to louder – and not necessarily more worthy -- advocates.

- *Librarians should accept necessary limits.* It is human nature to struggle against limits, and many successes have certainly come from this struggle. Still, although binary thinking makes it easier sometimes to accept nothing when one cannot have it all, it is only by recognizing realistic limits that librarians can concentrate on knowing and doing what is possible and most productive. While innovations and discoveries regularly increase the world's bounty, there is just no alchemy that can increase certain basic resources; infinite amounts of anything -- including knowledge -- are just not seen in everyday life. And, even when certain limits can be transcended, a conscious decision should be made as to whether the costs of doing so are acceptable ones. As people and resources are pushed harder and harder, care must

be taken that no one and nothing is pushed beyond the breaking point. If this is not done, then by trying to continually get more for less, or by trying to be everything to everyone, librarians may use up too many resources and too much of themselves.

- ***Librarians can support and trumpet more complicated and realistic depictions of themselves in fiction and in the media.*** One way to dispel an image is to replace it with a stronger one. Library associations have run advertising campaigns that focus on what *libraries* do, but they should also use their media savvy to depict what *librarians* know and do. Depictions of well-rounded, realistic librarians in movies, popular novels or television shows are also helpful. Some particularly well written fictional librarians, who know a great deal, but definitely not everything, include Bunny Watson, in the movie *Desk Set*, Mary, in the movie *Party Girl*, Jan O'Deigh, in Richard Powers' award winning bestseller, *The Goldbug Variations*, and Rupert Giles, from the television show *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer*.

Ultimately, the more that librarians know and do, the more power they will have to help people meet their information needs. And, whatever librarians may or may not know, there is no doubt that their sustained attempts to answer all questions and their continual efforts to organize and make available all information are invaluable to knowledge building. So, a better understanding of their relation to knowledge and power is a step not only towards a more realistic image of librarians, but also towards a better understanding of knowledge and power in a world where both are increasingly important.

REFERENCES

Adams, Katherine C. "Loveless Frump as Hip and Sexy Party Girl: A Reevalutaion of the Old-Maid Stereotype." *The Library Quarterly,* vol. 70, no. 3, July 2000: 287-301.

American Library Association. *ALA Code of Ethics.* [Online.] Available: http://*www.ala.org/alaorg/oif/ethics.html*.

American Library Association. *ALA Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Services Professionals.* [Online.] Available: *http://www.ala.org/rusa/stnd_behavior.html*.

Ashhurst, John. "On Taking Ourselves Too Seriously." *Library Journal*, May 1901: 265-268.

Bell, DL, "Knowledge and Its Pretenders: Bion's Contribution to Knowledge and Thought," pp. 70-82 in Psychosis: Understanding and Treatment, ed. Jane Ellwood, London and PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1995.

Budd, John. *Knowledge and Knowing in Library and Information Science*. MD: Scarecrow Press, 2001.

Burns, Grant. *Librarians in Fiction: A Critical Biography*. NC: McFarland and Company, 1998.

Caputo, Janette S. *The Assertive Librarian*. AZ: Oryx Press, 1984.

Card, Orson Scott. *Wyrms*. NY: Arbor House, 1987.

Castillo, Debra. *The Translated World: A Postmodern Tour of Libraries in Literature*. Tallahassee: University Presses of Florida, 1984.

Ceruto, Mauro. *Constraints and Possibilities: The Evolution of Knowledge and the Knowledge of Evolution*. Switzerland: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, SA, 1994.

Cowell, Penny. "Not All in the Mind: The Virile Profession." *Library Review*, 1980: 167-175.

Crowley, Terrence. "Half-Right Reference: Is it True?" *Reference Quarterly,* Fall 1985: 59-68.

Durrance, Joan C. "Reference Success: Does the 55% Rule Tell the Whole Story?" *Library Journal*, April 15, 1989: 31-36.

Eco, Umberto. *The Name of the Rose.* San Diego: Harcourt Brace Javonovich, 1983.

Eigen, Michael, "Aspects of Omniscience," pp. 604-628 in *The Facilitating Environment: Clinical Applications of Winnicott's Theory,* eds. Fromm, M. Gerard and Smith, Bruce L., CT: International University Press, 1989.

Hall, Alison. "Batgirl Was a Librarian." *Canadian Library Journal*, vol. 49, 1992:345.

"The Ideal Librarian," *Library Journal*, vol. 7, June 1882: 106.

Jardine, Carolyn. "Maybe the 55% Rule Doesn't Tell the Whole Story: A User-Satisfaction Survey." *College and Research Libraries*, vol. 56, November 1995: 477-485.

Kapitan, Tomis. "Agency and Omniscience." *Religious Studies*, vol. 27, March 1991: 105-120.

Kosinski, Jerzy. *Being There*. NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971.

Martin, Andrew. "The Genesis of Ignorance: Nescience and Omniscience in the Garden of Eden." *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 5, 1981: *3-20.*

Maugham, Somerset. *The Complete Short Stories of* W. *Somerset Maugham*. NY: Doubleday, 1952.

Olsen, Erica. *Thwart not the librarian*. [Online.] Available: http://www.librarianavengers.com/library.html

Plato. *The Republic*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967.

Radford, Marie L. and Radford, Gary P. "Power, Knowledge, and Fear: Feminism, Foucault, and the Stereotype of the Female Librarian." *Library Quarterly,* vol. 67 no. 3, 1997: 250-266.

Robinson, Spider. *The Callahan Touch*. NY: ACE Books, 1993.

Santayana. *Realms of Bring,* xiii.

Smith, Anthony. *From Books to Bytes: Knowledge and Information in the Postmodern Era*. BFI Pub, 1993.

Smith, Lloyd. "The Qualifications of a Librarian." *The American Library Journal,* vol. 1, 1876: 69-74.

Styron, William. *Sophie's Choice.* NY: Random House, 1979.

Thiem, Jon. "The Great Library of Alexandria Burnt: Toward the History of a Symbol." *The Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. XL, 1979: 507-526.

White, Alan. *The Nature of Knowledge.* NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982.

Winsor, Justin. "The Presidential Address." *Library Journal*, vol. 2, September 1877.

NOTES

[1] Budd, John. *Knowledge and Knowing in Library and Information Science.* MD: Scarecrow Press, 2001.

[2] Maugham, Somerset. The Complete Short Stories *of* W. *Somerset Maugham.* NY: Doubleday, 1952: 144.

[3] Ceruto, Mauro. *Constraints and Possibilities: The Evolution of Knowledge and the Knowledge of Evolution*. Switzerland: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, SA, 1994: 28.

[4] Castillo, Debra. *The Translated World: A Postmodern Tour of Libraries in Literature.* Tallahassee: University Presses of Florida, 1984*:* 47.

[5] Caputo, Janette S. *The Assertive Librarian.* AZ: Oryx Press, 1984*:* 28.

[6] Smith, Lloyd. "The Qualifications of a Librarian." *The American Library Journal,* vol. 1, 1876: 70.

[7] "The Ideal Librarian," Library Journal 7 (June 1882): 106.

[8] Olsen, Erica. *Thwart not the librarian*. [Online.] Available: *http://www.msu.edu/~olseneri/library.html*)

[9] Grant Burns, Grant. *Librarians in Fiction: A Critical Bibliography*, *NC: McFarland and Company, 1998:* 4.

[10] Eco*,* Umberto. *The Name of the Rose*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Javonovich, 1983: 314.

[11] Eco: 567.

[12] Ashhurst, John. "On Taking Ourselves Too Seriously." *Library Journal*, May 1901: 268.

[13] Adams, Katherine C. "Loveless Frump as Hip and Sexy Party Girl: A Reevalutaion of the Old-Maid Stereotype." *The Library Quarterly*, vol. 70, no. 3, July 2000: 298.

[14] Crowley, Terrence, "Half-Right Reference: Is it True?" *Reference Quarterly*, Fall 1985: 65.

[15] Durrance, Joan C. "Reference Success: Does the 55% Rule Tell the Whole Story?" *Library Journal,* April 15, 1989: 35.

[16] Jardine, Carolyn. "Maybe the 55% Rule Doesn't Tell the Whole Story: A User-Satisfaction Survey." *College and Research Libraries,* vol. 56, November 1995: 477.

[17] Eco: 81.

[18] Eco: 64.

[19] Plato. *The Republic.* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967: 375.

[20] American Library Association. *ALA Code of Ethics*. [Online.] Available: http://www.ala.org/alaorg/oif/ethics.html.

[21] Styron, William. *Sophie's Choice.* NY: Random House, 1979: 10.

[22] Bell, D.L. "Knowledge and Its Pretenders: Bion's Contribution to Knowledge and Thought," in *Psychosis: Understanding and Treatment.* ed. Jane Ellwood, London and PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1995: 81.

[23] Eigen, Michael "Aspects of Omniscience," pp. 604-628 in *The Facilitating Environment: Clinical Applications of Winnicott's Theory*, eds. Fromm, M. Gerard and Smith, Bruce L. CT: International University Press, 1989: 608.

[24] Santayana, *Realms of Bring*: xiii.

[25] Kosinski, Jerzy. *Being There*. (NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971: 3-8.

[26] Winsor, Juston. "The Presidential Address." *Library Journal,* vol. 2*,* September 1877.

[27] Eco: 420.

[28] Card, Orson Scott. *Wyrms*. NY: Arbor House, 1987: 138.

[29] Martin, Andrew. "The Genesis of Ignorance: Nescience and Omniscience in the Garden of Eden." *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 5, 1981*:* 19.

[30] Thiem*,*Jon. "The Great Library of Alexandria Burnt: Toward the History of a Symbol." *The Journal of the History of Ideas,* vol XL, 1979: 520.

[31] Cowell, Penny. "Not All in the Mind: The Virile Profession." *Library Review*, vol. 29, 1980: 172.

[32] Radford, Marie L. and Radford, Gary P. "Power, Knowledge, and Fear: Feminism, Foucault, and the Stereotype of the Female Librarian." *Library Quarterly*, vol. 67 no. 3, 1997: 259-260*.*

[33] White, Alan. *The Nature of Knowledge*. NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982: 119.

[34] Durrance: 31.

[35] Eigen: 605.

[36] Hall, Alison. "Batgirl Was a Librarian." *Canadian Library Journal*, vol. 49, 1992: 345.

[37] Robinson, Spider. *The Callahan Touch.* NY: ACE Books, 1993: 64.

[38] Olsen: www.msu.edu/~olseneri/library.html

[39] Kapitan, Tomis. "Agency and Omniscience." *Religious Studies,* vol. 27, March 1991: 119.

[40] Budd, John. Knowledge and Knowing in Library and Information Science. MD: Scarecrow Press, 2001.

[41] Smith, Anthony. *From Books to Bytes: Knowledge and Information in the Postmodern Era.* BFI Pub, 1993.

[42] Durrance: 33.

[43] American Library Association. ALA *Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Services Professionals*. [Online.} Available: http://www.ala.org/rusa/stnd_behavior.html