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# Old Maids and Faeries: The Image Problem

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## **Old Maids and Faeries: The Image Problem**

Polly Thistlethwaite

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As for the old maid librarians, they still exist, to be sure, but you really have to look around for them, for their places are rapidly being taken by pretty career girls and smart young matrons.

Ernestine Rose. *The Public Library in American Life*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1954. pp. 4-5.

Sometime in the late sixties or early seventies, a group of dissatisfied librarians, disgusted at the way the desiccated little old ladies and waspish closet queens of the American Library Association (ALA) were doing nothing more than playing empty parliamentary games with themselves, established the Social Responsibilities Round Table...

Harleigh Kyson, Jr. "Library Service & Gays," *Gay Sunshine*, October-November 1971.

Librarians are preoccupied with an Image Problem. The Image: female librarians = pinched old maids; male librarians = fastidious, limp-wristed aesthetes. The Problem: this is unflattering and unfair! Librarians are REALLY NOT like this at all. Really. There are too many "negative images" out there like this, and for no good reason. We need more "positive images" of librarians in movies and books, images more in line with how we REALLY ARE. We need more heroic, gorgeous, witty, clever, actively heterosexual and smartly dressed librarians. Fantasy should reflect reality because -- it hurts to be Miss Understood. It's bad for our self-esteem and bad for our salaries. Librarians would climb in cultural and economic value if Tom Cruise and Meryl Streep clamored to play exciting, complex librarians having love affairs and promoting information literacy in major cinematic roles. The Image Problem is killing us. Hollywood functions to discourage young people from becoming librarians. Our rep is undeservedly uncool. "My son the librarian..." -- when have you EVER heard that. How are we to reproduce, recruit, replicate under these conditions? We are doomed, at least until the culture industry WAKES UP and lionizes us.

### **Stop Whining.**

Some librarians say, just shrug and laugh it off. Ha, ha, ha. Loosen up, brush it back. Not a Big Deal. If you've got a Problem with the Image it must be, uh, that you've got an Image Problem of your own, a deep down, personal, a problem with Yourself. You're not Really Like That, are you? Laugh now, or else you're insecure and you don't have a sense of humor. Other librarians say, Don't Talk About It, that just makes it worse. Serious. Shut Up. Speculation on this topic is dumb and frivolous. Write about what librarians Really Do, discuss the profession's social service, its democratic indispensability, its cataloging statistics. Work is reality, and that's all that matters.

### **What's Really Reel?**

Cut through all the fuss about the old maid and the aesthete stereotypes and you find that Western popular culture offers a surprising variety of librarian characters, yet there are several recurring subtexts producing this variety. Librarian characters are often drawn around tensions between order and disorder, the known and the unknown, the sacred and the profane, the sexual and the asexual. These subtexts and tensions are sufficiently abstract to produce an exciting and complex array of characters. There are librarian heroes and librarian villains, wild librarians and tame librarians, rule-bound librarians and rule-breaking librarians, beautiful librarians and ugly librarians. Often a librarian character experiences movement and transformation along these dramatic axes. With this variety of representations, why do librarians have knickers in a twist tighter than, say, other classes of people with an arguable mass mediated Image Problem like, say, engineers, New Yorkers, cops, or Latinas over 50?

### **Why So Hot 'n' Bothered?**

I'll Tell You Why. Though there are thousands of fantasy librarians extant in our cultural milieu, the librarian character types most firmly embedded in our collective cultural bosom are the Old Maid and the

Aesthete AND these stereotypes read QUEER with a Capital Q. Their Queerness is what makes them offensive. In academic translation: Librarianship's Image Problem is generated by a heteronormativity which functions discursively to identify and marginalize Queerness. In other words: Librarians' concern with Image reflects tremendous uneasiness Straight and Gay and Lesbian librarians alike experience while negotiating the "label" Queer and it's undesirable associated characteristics including asexuality, hypersexuality, sexual perversion, political correctness, pretentious snobbery, and strangeness. Such unflattering attributes are commonly packed into baggage carried by the stereotypical Old Maid and the stereotypical Bitchy Queen.

In the movie *It's a Wonderful Life* Jimmy Stewart sees what the world would have been like if he'd never lived. He calls out from his window beyond to Donna Reed his now-librarian wife looking frumpy, unhappy, unfucked, and practically dressed. She lets rip an hysterical scream. Had Jimmy Stewart never lived might Donna Reed have been...a lesbian, I mean a librarian? Horror. Could sensible shoes alone warrant such distress? Might there be not only fashion anxiety, but also sexual anxiety motivating Miss Reed's blood curdling shriek? I would say so.

Jim Carmichael's 1992 survey of male librarians indicated the most common stereotypes articulated by male librarians are "effeminate, probably gay," "powerless, socially inept," and "unambitious."<sup>1</sup> Morrisey and Case's 1988 research indicated that despite the "positive" non-stereotypical image the non-librarian public has of male librarians, the masculine bibliophiles themselves were haunted by concerns about their perceived "negative" image.<sup>2</sup> Were these fellas surveyed just humble and self-deprecating? Or were they performing their hyper-sensitivity to the Question of Queerness. Methinks the latter.

All this professionally internalized homophobia blooms fully despite of AND because of the presence and influence Queer librarians in the ranks, politics, and history of librarianship. What professions were available to unmarried women around the turn of the century? – nursing, teaching, librarianship, prostitution. I suspect that librarianship in its earlier years attracted an inordinate number of "spinsters" secretly or even openly attracted to other women. These days, folks openly speculate about the unannounced sexual preferences of unmarried and unattached library colleagues. In bygone days, such speculation might not be so glibly articulated, but it circled in the more submerged conversational currents around the water cooler. Despite the substantial closet doors in a profession clamoring for legitimacy, the American Library Association happily became the first professional organization to sponsor a Gay and Lesbian subdivision: the Task Force on Gay Liberation formed in 1970. This fact alone was a selling point when I was a dyke pup considering career choices in the early 1980s.

Librarians share a preoccupation with "positive" and "negative" images with other classes of frequently maligned folk, not the least of which are Gays and Lesbians. Funny that. The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), one of the country's leading glbt political organizations, tackles media stereotypes gravitating towards serial killers, pedophiles, cowards, predators, and suicidal alcoholics. Concerned librarians take heart! It could be worse.

Illustrations:

From BUST magazine, Spring 2002, p. 87.

<http://staffweb.library.vanderbilt.edu/brown/librarians/ad1.html>

Donna Reed Screaming, *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946)

Stop Whining, Postscript.

GLAAD's positive images campaigns seek "positive" media role models for queer youth and adults deprived of "healthy, constructive, inspirational" self-representations. Critics charge GLAAD's campaigns with excessive political correctness (the moralistic Shhh! of Etiquette Queens smacks to some of censorship), a focus on fantasy confused with reality, and an underdeveloped sense of humor and self confidence. Similar arguments appear in librarians' discussion of the matter.

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<sup>1</sup> Carmichael, James. The Male Librarian and the Feminine Image: a survey of stereotype, status, and gender perceptions. *Library & Information Science Research* 14 (1992): 411-446.

<sup>2</sup> Morrisey, Locke and Donald Case. There Goes My Image: the perception of male librarians by colleague, student, self. *College & Research Libraries* 49 (1988): 453-464.