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I am Not a Badass: Against the Librarian-as-Superhero Stereotype

By Rachel King

Abstract

This paper explores cultural tropes portraying librarians as heroes and superheroes. In this work, the writer has drawn on social reproduction feminist theory to explain the appearance of this emerging librarian stereotype, as well as to help readers better understand the role of academic librarians in today's underfunded and pandemic-ravaged neoliberal university.

Keywords

Librarian stereotypes, critical university studies, social reproduction feminism, neoliberalism, Covid-19

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Introduction

One of the most tedious aspects of librarianship is learning nonlibrarians' opinions about the profession. I have been told that my work is "important" and that I am "amazing." Others have had no qualms about letting me know that my work is irrelevant because everything of value can be found for free on the internet. None of this bothers me much: I always knew that if I chose a feminized profession, I'd have to deal with a certain amount of condescension; in getting a library science degree, I was almost asking for it. The traditional librarian stereotype is so familiar that people can hardly resist the urge to evoke it on the slightest pretext. I am referring, of course, to what we might call the embittered spinster librarian stereotype (Garrison, 1979/2003, p. 194).

I knew all about this stereotype. At least, I thought I knew. Because not long after I entered the profession a decade ago, I started seeing signs that librarian stereotypes were evolving. In 2010, Marilyn Johnson published *This Book Is Overdue!: How Librarians and Cybrarians Can Save Us All*. Then came *The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu* (Hammer, 2016). Simultaneously, throughout the aughts and 2010s, there was a TV movie franchise, *The Librarian*, which produced three films, and a related TV series, *The Librarians*.

I think that this new, heroic image of librarians is one that is enjoyed by a lot of librarians—and I don't really want to spoil anyone's fun. Some of us enjoy it because we hate the older stereotype, and this one, however silly, seems more flattering than what we have had to deal with in the past. But is it really an improvement?

It bears repeating that stereotypes reveal something about the society that create and sustain them. They serve to bolster the status quo and also to obscure social hierarchies (Jost et al., 2004). The older stereotype of librarian, as I think many librarians know, is rooted in the past when women had few career paths, a past when the growth of public libraries meant that there needed to be good, highly skilled, but cheap labor available. The increasingly well-educated women of the late 19th century served that role and the stereotype of the librarian as service-oriented woman replaced the previous stereotype of the librarian as a bookish man (Garrison, 1979/2003, p. 194). The stereotype shift occurred at the very moment that the culture needed it to happen. Yes, the gender and background of librarians really did change: More women entered the profession. But the idea that librarians were no longer scholars but were, instead, fussy women who cared about order, cleanliness, and quiet above all else—that was a stereotype, and one that suited its moment.

What about the stereotype of the librarian as superhero? I want to provide an answer to the question of why this stereotype has emerged at this moment in time, and what work is it doing in our culture. What is its function as propaganda? How is it trying to distract us? What does it seek to keep us from seeing and understanding? The image of librarian-as-superhero is both humorous and serious. It is funny because it is such an extreme overcorrection of the previous stereotype. It is, in that sense, a form of mockery, which I am sure is why I found its initial appearance insulting and grating. But, more troublingly, it is also intended to be taken seriously, at least to a certain extent. It seems to allude to things that appear to be broken in our society—our economic and social relations—as well as to the people and the institutions that some feel might be in a position to fix them.

It is for this reason that I have wanted to address the librarian-as-superhero stereotype from the very first moment that I saw the cover of *This Book Is Overdue!: How Librarians and Cybrarians Can Save Us All*. My critique is not really about the book itself, but rather about the way it has been marketed. Nothing is put on the cover of a trade book that is not intended to boost sales. Why, then, would a cartoon librarian flying through the air and wearing a cape be perceived as appealing to book buyers? I think that the appeal is assumed because we are being asked to think that the people who work in libraries can somehow remedy the problems of the larger society—poverty, homelessness, etc.—that libraries have had thrust upon them.

I have personal reasons for resisting the trope: I began my library career in September 2008 with a job at a small liberal arts college. A couple of weeks after my first day of work, the stock market crashed and unemployment soared to a level that had not been seen since the Great Depression. At the time, I had the sickening feeling that I had only just barely escaped catastrophe. I live in a country that has shredded its social safety net, does not offer its citizens health coverage, and has little interest in blunting the sharp edges of capitalism. I started a job in a library just in time, a few weeks before a period when there would be no jobs, no new hiring. I thought if I could just hang on for a while, everything would settle down.

Except it didn't. Life went on, but the money slashed from university budgets didn't return even during the boom years of the 2010s ("Changes," 2016).

The librarian superhero on the cover of Marilyn Johnson's book, it should be noted, is clutching an iPad, not a book, as she flies ever higher into the stratosphere. Still, for me, the value of libraries lies not in the shimmering possibility of technological transcendence, but rather in community, in the preservation of knowledge, and most importantly, in the sharing of information.

It is true that libraries, like the rest of our system of education, and like pretty much all American institutions, perpetuate oppressive cultural patterns. But it is also true—and this is probably the reason why a lot of librarians continue to do this work in spite of poor working conditions and stupid stereotypes—that libraries hold out the tantalizing prospect that we could, if we as a society wanted to, do things differently. We could, for example, share more, and provide more equitable access to, knowledge and information and education. Part of the reason that library budgets are always being slashed is not because the United States is poor. It is because, for all the failings and shortcomings of libraries, for all the times that they serve to reinforce existing corrupt, unjust, and dysfunctional systems, they are at their very root antithetical to the dominant values of our culture, by which I mean the capitalist values that have gotten this country into so much trouble. After all, libraries serve as a reminder that for knowledge to progress, resources need to be pooled and need to be shared. There are many accomplished individuals, but their brilliant work doesn't happen in a vacuum. No matter what the defenders of restrictive intellectual property laws may say, great intellectual accomplishment occurs in a context of community and sharing.

And that is why libraries are at best undervalued and at worst attacked as a drain on resources. The current higher education regime places value on individual researchers' ability to bring in grant funding and crank out papers, and yet it simultaneously attacks the very structures within academia that make such research possible.

To better understand why university budgets were not permitted to return to previous levels after the Great Recession, I want to mention theory, specifically

social reproduction feminism. Social reproduction theory gives us a way to think about the role of librarians and others within the contemporary academy. It provides an explanation of the processes that enable workers to successfully produce things within the economy and that allow our current system to be reproduced over time. So, to analyze the example I have just mentioned using this particular critical lens: Individual researchers at a university may develop new therapies or new technologies that are easy to monetize, but these researchers' accomplishments rest on the care work of others. Their discoveries could not have happened, without, for example, the adjunct professors who teach the bulk of intro level classes, freeing up researchers' time; the cafeteria workers who prepare their meals; the custodians who keep their offices clean; and the librarians who subscribe to the article databases that they use for research. As Guild (2019) notes in the article, "Social Reproduction Theory in the Academic Library,"

reproductive labor may not produce an immediately tangible commodity for sale, but it does produce and reproduce the crucial commodity of labor on a more or less daily basis. Further, it is the lack of an immediately visible, tangible commodity combined with the feminization of this work that often results in the devaluing of labor carried out in more formalized reproductive careers and jobs like teaching, domestic labor, librarianship, and nursing in our current epoch." (p. 266)

We see here that most of what happens in the academy falls into the category of care work, work that does not create things so much as it nurtures people. Academic librarians are always careful to make distinctions between themselves and the rest of the faculty: We are "library faculty" and they are "teaching faculty." Yet, when viewed through the lens of social reproduction theory, librarianship and teaching are not so different at all. Both are care work, and neither is particularly valorized in the academy even though they are integral to the success of any college or university. Care work, of course, need not be done by women. Nevertheless it is, as Guild (2019) points out, typically feminized and associated with women, and it is therefore valued less no matter who is doing it, and no matter how critically important it is. As Arruzza et al. (2019) write in their book, *Feminism for the 99 Percent: A Manifesto*,

Social practices that nourish our lives at home, and social services that nurture our lives outside of it, constantly threaten to cut into profits. Thus, a financial drive to reduce those costs and an ideological drive to undermine such labors are endemic to the system as a whole. (p. 70)

In case you were wondering why we can't have nice things, even when the economy is booming as it was a few years ago, that's the reason. Withholding funding from the sphere of social reproduction is not an accident; it is an ideological decision.

It is at a moment of crisis—the economy in shambles, university budgets in tatters—that the librarian superhero arrived, wearing a cape and leaping over tall buildings in a single bound. The librarian superhero stereotype started as a response to the earlier feminized-librarian stereotype: the joke of the TV movie

franchise, “The Librarian,” and the TV series, “The Librarians,” is that people who work in libraries are the very last people you’d expect to demonstrate any kind of daring or bravery. But many librarians have had to be daring and have been brave as they faced dangerous situations. I don’t like the word heroic, as it implies agency and choice, and I don’t think we’ve really had either. We have been forced to make the best of a bad situation. We have created something out of almost nothing. We have—with limited resources (Mitchell et al., 2019)—helped students succeed academically (Rowe et al., 2021). And yet, it is possible that we have done too much, and have therefore failed to convey how unacceptable the situation is. Guild (2019) writes,

Too often, library workers take it upon themselves to provide services that go above and beyond what library users have come to expect. While these efforts should be lauded, they also set a dangerous precedent that this should be the norm; that library workers can take on more work, and more complicated work, without assistance or compensation from the university.... (pp. 270-271)

And so, librarians embraced user satisfaction surveys and started thinking of patrons as “customers” and libraries as quasi-retail spaces (Stevenson, 2011). Academic librarians tried to ingratiate ourselves with university leadership by aping corporate business practices. But still, in 2019 and the early months of 2020, many students were going hungry (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019), our budgets were stagnant or shrinking, and our staff was smaller than it used to be. People left and were never replaced. Then along came the pandemic, and now don’t you just know it, we need to tighten our belts again.

We may be superheroes, but it’s looking as if we are no match for the evil forces arrayed against us. In fact, the idea of the hero has become threadbare over the last year. After all, as we have seen during the pandemic, attributing “superpowers” and larger-than-life “heroism” to certain classes of workers downplays their needs and leads to chronic expectations that they will willingly take on absurd challenges. Such workers are expected, often with inadequate pay, to confront intractable social problems that they have not trained for and are not given adequate resources to address. Twenty-twenty was a watershed year for this kind of mythologizing. We were inundated with praise for health-care “heroes” who were given applause and cheers, but no personal protective equipment, and supermarket cashiers and Amazon warehouse workers who were deemed “essential” but denied well-ventilated work spaces and hazard pay. For years, academic librarians became heroic because they were expected to handle student mental health crises, hunger, and even homelessness. During the pandemic, some librarians took on additional job tasks. Many had to teach in person indoors. Others had to mobilize their chronically underfunded collections to miraculously provide rich learning experiences for remote students.

According to Anna Wexler (2020), who wrote in the pages of the *Boston Globe* about the treatment of health care workers during the pandemic, “the problem with the hero narrative is that it emphasizes ‘bravery’ for those who work under hazardous conditions—rather than outrage over the continued existence of such conditions” (para. 6).

She was not writing about academic librarians or college professors or the students they serve, but her point stands: No one should be “forced” to be brave, and using words like “hero” deflects attention from the function of the superhero narrative for care workers. “Superpowers” are found only in comics. In the real world, there are no magical superpowers, only raw, brutal power, and that I believe everyone knows is not actually wielded by librarians.

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