SOME PORTRAYALS OF LIBRARIANS IN FICTION — A DISCUSSION

by
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Abstract

This article explores portrayals of librarians in selected works of fiction, notably those involving mystery or detection. It begins with a summary of information derived from descriptions of about one hundred and twenty contemporary or recent works, then discusses particular stories involving detection or mystery, with occasional references to other genres such as science fiction, historical fiction, espionage, and romance.

In 1996, we began to compile a bibliography of fiction involving librarians to accompany a graduate course introducing the profession. Entries were obtained through searches of online catalogues and databases, as well as through queries posted over Internet LISTSERVs. About 120 individual works and about a dozen bibliographies were included in the resulting list.

In many instances, librarians and their places of work were presented as intrinsically interesting and appealing. In more than half of the works, librarians played leading or major supporting roles. Following a categorization of the roles of librarians in these works, the article examines images of the profession in the works of Umberto Eco, L.R. Wright, and Charlotte McLeod.

We contend that, even in works which present casual glimpses of the profession, or even in those which stress less desirable images of its members, accurate details of its techniques and working realities are sometimes discernible. We suggest that further research concentrate upon the work done by fictitious librarians and upon their centrality to plots.

In contemporary New England, a professor of agriculture returns home from his Christmas break to find a dead librarian behind his sofa. She was an officious busybody, with no professional credentials, and thoroughly disliked on campus. The professor is not saddened by her demise, merely inconvenienced by her choice of venue.

On British Columbia's Sunshine Coast, a small-town librarian disappears. She has been kidnapped by a man on a quest for the ideal mate - a serial killer who stalks his prey at library association meetings, and uses his position to research their backgrounds. He is a Professor of Library Science.

There was once a book too valuable to destroy, and so dangerous that anyone caught reading it must die. There was a librarian so zealous that he would easily murder, and even take his own life to protect it. He was a medieval monk, and the book he guarded so obsessively was Aristotle's treatise on comedy. Today, scholars believe it to be lost. Perhaps somewhere, a librarian knows better.

These scenarios are the creations of 20th Century novelists. The plots come respectively from *Rest You Merry* (1978), the first in Charlotte McLeod's "Professor Peter Shandy" books; *A Touch of Panic* by L.R. Wright, and Umberto Eco's modern classic, *The Name of the Rose.*

This article explores portrayals of librarians in these and other selected works of fiction. It also includes a summary of information derived from descriptions of about one hundred and twenty contemporary or recent works obtained from reviewing sources and from direct examination. Librarians frequently appear in these works as protagonists or as major supporting characters - detectives or villains, suspects or nuisances, or as partners or foils for the protagonists. In the summer of 1996, we began to assemble a bibliography of works of fiction involving librarians for use in an "introduction to the profession" course in a school of library and information science. We examined an initial list of 121 titles, many culled from the online indexing and abstracting sources, some supplied to us by readers' electronic mailing lists, or known to us personally. We also became aware of several bibliographies of librarians in fiction, which we have cited below. The exercise was meant to assist on two levels. It would provide material for book review assignments, and it would help students in the introductory class learn about the public image of their chosen profession.

While this article deals mainly with detective fiction, it also makes brief forays into other genres, such as science fiction, historical fiction, espionage, and romance. In many instances, librarians and their places of work are presented as intrinsically interesting and appealing. However, even in works which present

less desirable images of the profession, accurate details of its techniques and working realities are sometimes discernible. Furthermore, this article contends that an author's use of a despicable and villainous librarian in a plot, or of a library as a setting of intrigue, implies that the writer considers librarians and their workplaces sufficiently interesting to arouse and hold a dramatic interest. This project was motivated by sympathy for the Kuhnian notion that mature sciences not only work, but are seen to be working by those outside their confines.

The professional literature of librarianship, while not replete with studies of the phenomenon, has by no means ignored its importance. For example, *American Libraries*, through its regular feature "Image," has regularly provided summaries of media portrayals of librarians, and occasionally, made reference to novels written by librarians or about them. For instance, a sidebar to a 1995 article in *Public Libraries* devoted to romance lists a dozen novels in the genre which feature librarian heroines (Linz, et al., 1995:149). The journal, *The Indexer* has published several accounts of indexers in fiction. (Anon. 1991 and 1984).

Lengthier treatments of the subject have included Gregg Sapp's discussion of about fifty novels involving librarians as main characters. (Sapp, 1987). Sapp provides brief characterizations of these protagonists, culled from the sources themselves, but does not attempt to synthesize the material in this sampler, or to draw inferences about the portrayals of librarians in various genres. Alison Hall, writing in *Canadian Library Journal*, discusses the image of librarians in Eco's The *Name of the Rose*, Bowes' *Between the Stacks*, PD James' *A Taste for Death*, Mortimer's *Rumpole and The Age of Miracles*, Goodrum's *Carnage of the Realm*, and other works of fiction. Reminding her readers that "Batgirl was a librarian," Hall suggests librarians learn to laugh at the profession's negative image, and that they act individually to improve it. (Hall, 1992).

The task of identifying all the works featuring librarians in main roles, much less of analyzing them, exceeds the scope of the current article. However, we can make an attempt to categorize the roles of librarians occurring in a sample of the material available and to draw some tentative inferences from them about the profession's literary image.

Dramatis Personae

Fiction, especially detective fiction, demands action. However, we tend to imagine real or fictional librarians as quiet, demure, and reticent book-lovers, rather than as men and women of action. We have come to think of the librarians of fiction as possibly clever, but probably officious, obsessively methodical, pedantic, stodgy and old-maidish. Though certain fictional librarians have been portrayed as objects of desire, their depiction as both personally attractive and professionally qualified would seem rare. What is more, whether or not this is the predominant media image we ourselves have come to believe it to be.

It would be unreasonable to expect authors to populate their works with inherently dull people, or set them in uninteresting locations. Our work has hitherto been mainly cerebral - and thinking does not lend itself easily to dramatic representation. However, the tools of the librarian's trade - especially computing devices - are becoming more visible, and hence more dramatically interesting, as librarians themselves increasingly take on roles beyond the confines of the stacks. (cf. Beaty, 1996).

Scholars and philosophers, archivists and librarians, do not capture the popular imagination as readily as doctors, lawyers, or spies. The library and the scholarly carrel lack the immediate dramatic appeal of the hospital or police station. However, the college with its Gothic passages, and the library with its "book lined alcoves" and mysterious denizens, do provide natural settings for intrigue.

Nor should we be surprised when authors find librarians themselves intriguing. Real librarians have played important roles in major historical movements. Hypatia, the neo-Platonist philosopher and head of the Great Library of Alexandria, was killed by a mob of anti-Platonists (Gates, 1990). Yurii Vladimirovich Got'e chronicled the Russian revolution, became head of the Lenin Library, and incurred the ire of Stalin (Got'e, 1988). Nor can we fail to note another revolutionary librarian, Nadezhda Konstantinova Krupskaya - the spouse of V. I. Lenin. (McNeal, 1972; Raymond, 1979). It is unlikely that reticent, routinized, or socially inept, individuals would be seen as "dangerous" enough to become political targets. Hypatia, for instance, was both an attractive and sociable individual and a technically competent philosopher. One poet went so far as to dub her "adorable."

This mix of professional acumen and sociability is surprisingly common among the librarians of mystery fiction. McLeod's Professor Peter Shandy becomes involved with an erudite female librarian named Helen, who holds a Ph.D. in LIS. Wright's librarian "Cassandra" pens articles for *Library Quarterly*, and as we shall see, finds her middle-aged attractiveness occasionally detrimental.

Librarians have also fared well in works of science fiction. In one of the original Star Trek episodes, "All Our Yesterdays," a computer-generated librarian named "Atoz," controls the fate of a planet's population. In his 1971 utopian novel, *Knowledge Park*, Stephen Franklin envisaged a global resource library situated near Cochrane, Ontario, founded by a visionary male intellectual known as "The Originator," but planned by a female librarian and renaissance woman named Alex. Isaac Asimov's librarians are among the social engineers who build a galactic civilization in the *"Foundation"* series.

Perhaps the social value of an information profession is apparent to writers in this genre, with its frequent allusions to robotics, cybernetics, and computing. Canadian SF writer Spider Robinson exemplifies the positive trend in this passage from *The Callahan Touch:* "Mary Kay, is one of the hidden masters of the world - a librarian. They control information. Don't ever piss one off."

Weighing the Evidence - Methodology

This article grew from an attempt to compile a bibliography of fiction involving librarians, to accompany a graduate course introducing the profession. The bibliography itself was obtained

through searches of online catalogues and databases, as well as through queries posted over Internet Listservs, notably *JESSE* and *DOCDIS*.

As well, an online search of Dialog's *Books In Print* file yielded many such titles. About 120 individual works, and about a dozen bibliographies were obtained through these means. At this point, we will examine and attempt to categorize portrayals of the librarians and their roles and situations evident in some of these works, and to determine their relationships the plots and protagonists.

During the summer of 1996, we examined an initial list of 121 such works. Since that time, librarians and LIS students have continued to add works to the list. When we categorized the roles of librarians in this initial sample, we found that in the genres represented - mainly mystery or detective fiction, librarians figured as protagonists a refreshing 34.8% of the time.

Categorization of 129 Roles in 121 Works of Fiction

Category	Raw Score	Percentage
Protagonist	45	34.8%
Partner/Mentor	30	23.3%
Suspect/Nuisance	13	10.1%
Love Interest	5	03.9%
Victim	4	03.1%
Other/Setting	32	24.8%
	129	100.0%

In the "other/setting" category, we have included works notable because they are set in libraries. For instance, John Austwick takes readers on a grisly tour of the British public library system in a series which includes *Murder in the Borough Library, The County Library Murders*, and *The Mobile Library Murders*. (Austwick, 1959, 1962, 1964).

It should be stressed that these data were obtained in the main from plot descriptions given in the online sources, rather than from a reading of all 121 texts. This informal and no doubt statistically questionable sampling method was intended merely to confirm the supposition that a substantial number of mystery writers do indeed cast librarians in leading roles, and do view libraries as suitably dramatic settings.

A Summary of Roles

Librarians feature as detective protagonists Martha Grimes *Old Contemptibles* (1991), as they do in over a third of the works in this list. Charlaine Harris' Aurora Teagarden series features a librarian turned detective. It includes *Real Murders* (1990), *A Bone to Pick (1992)* and *Three Bedrooms, One Corpse* (1994). No mention of librarians as detectives would be complete without reference to Charles Goodrum's mysteries, featuring chief librarian Betty Crighton Jones and the crime teams she assembles from among the staff of her academic library. Goodrum's classic *Dewey Decimated* (1977), has been joined by titles like *Best Cellar*, *The Subject Was Murder*, and *A Slip of the Tong*. Other examples of works featuring librarians as protagonists include *Do Unto Others* (Abbott, 1994), *Katie's Terror*, (Fisher, 1982), *North Star Conspiracy*, (Monfredo, 1993), *Sneeze on Sunday*, (Norton, 1991).

In other novels, librarians who have turned to other professions, like book selling or authorship, become embroiled in various investigations. For instance, in Barbara Michaels' *Naked Once More* (1989), the librarian has become a romance writer. Ann Cooper's *Ice Storm* (1982), involves a librarian turned detective, and in Kate Morgan's *Home Sweet Homicide* (1991), a librarian working as a bookseller becomes involved in a murder.

In other works, librarians function as mentors or companions to the protagonists. For instance, detectives are assisted by librarian sidekicks in Dorsey *Fiske's Bound to Murder* (1987), and Michelle Spring's *Every Breath You Take* (1994). A public librarian helps British schoolgirls interpret local history in Theresa Tomlinson's *Summer Witches* (1991). The "Laura Principal" series by Michelle Spring features a female private investigator, assisted by a female librarian sidekick. A librarian averts international disaster by conducting a database search in the 1991 spy thriller *MacKinnon's Machine*. Of course, real librarians conduct literature searches every day, with no thought of drama. The fact that such techniques could be effective, however, is novel enough to figure in a dramatic plot. While we may lament the public's lack of awareness of our acumen and apparatus, perhaps we ought rather to rejoice when these figure in fictional works, even if they are presented as singular or unusual.

A few general observations seem appropriate at this point. First, despite the growing trend toward "non-traditional" employment, the majority of librarians represented in these stories are: (1) public librarians, or less frequently, (2) academic librarians. Special librarians are rarer in this selection. This trend may tend to bias the discussion.

Second, if we are searching for positive portrayals of librarians, we ought to define what we mean by "positive." Let us say that any positive portrayal of librarians ought to present our fictitious colleagues as we would like others to view us in the real world. Those librarians who figure as principal characters often exhibit strong personal traits. They include quickness of intellect, leadership, pleasantness of personality, resourcefulness, good problem solving abilities, and so forth. However, many of the roles in which they find themselves are somewhat passive, and it is likely to be mental flexibility rather than physical strength which enables them to solve mysteries, or to assist their detective partners.

The Librarian as Sinister, Quirky, or Klutzy

Some portrayals of librarians are intentionally negative. An officious head librarian censures professors for drinking coffee in their carrels while the bodies of murder victims stack up in his library's washrooms. Here, a despicable librarian is murdered. There, a mean-spirited one interferes with an investigation.

For instance, according to synopses gleaned from online reviewing sources such as *Books In Print* and *AV Online*, "a scholarly but sinister" librarian will be found in John Ballinger's 1989, *Williamsburg Forgeries*. John Bellairs' *The Mansion in the Mist* features a detective with a "klutzy" librarian sidekick, Miss Eells, who continues her adventures in *The Dark Secret of Weatherend* (1984). Other fictional librarians are merely quirky. A suspect librarian in *The Bridled Groom* (1994), claims to have "special knowledge from the stars and runes." Some have things to hide. The "reticent" librarian in *Stalk* (1992) turns out to have a hidden past. So, too, the "very proper" one in Linda Miller's historical romance *Emma & the Outlaw*, raised by the local lady of the evening.

In *Shades of Gray* (1987) an investigation of murder in the United States Military Academy at West Point is hindered by "stereotypically crabby" librarian, while a "decidedly unpleasant" Oxford librarian becomes the victim in Hazel Holt's *Cruelest Month* (1991). By contrast, the male public librarian in *A Flight of Angels* (1989) is called "refreshingly non-stereotypical" by the *Books In Print* reviewer.

Timothy Findley's retired librarian Lilah Kemp is a mental patient endowed with a singular but uncontrollable gift. Kemp can call into being characters from novels. Findley's dystopian novel *The Headhunter* begins when Kemp conjures Kurtz from the pages of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* to stalk the streets and psychiatric institutions of Toronto. In Anne LeClaire's horror tale *Sideshow*, a librarian is the subject of sleep experiments.

Such stories may have at least one positive side-effect. By depicting librarians as particularly memorable villains or victims, authors pay our profession the compliment of literary recognition. Other stories are unintentionally negative. Zoë, the children's librarian in *Library - No Murder Aloud*, for instance, is something of a wallflower. Her stodgy public library is more typical of a private subscription library of the last century.

Librarians also figure as suspects or nuisances in works such as Dorothy Sayers' *Gaudy Night* (1936), Jane Smiley's *Duplicate Keys* (1984), Steven King's *Four Past Midnight: The Library Policeman* (1990), and E.X. Giroux's *A Death for a Dreamer* (1989).

The Librarian as Object of Desire

In some instances, librarians serve as temporary diversions. Inspector Morse and Sergeant Lewis interview a "winsome female librarian" in Colin Dexter's *The Wench Is Dead* (1990), while the investigator in *Rising* (1987), "enjoys a tame romance with a wholesome librarian". Nor should we overlook the "flirtatious" librarian in Julie Smith's *Huckleberry Fiend* (1992). A subplot in Susan Steiner's 1993 tale, *Library: No Murder Aloud*, involves a romance between two suspects - the male CEO of a stodgy little public library and "Zoë," his beautiful and wealthy children's librarian. In Barrett Tillman's 1992 *Dauntless: A Novel of Midway & Guadalcanal*, a naval officer enjoys a "refreshing romance" with a librarian in Honolulu.

Philip Roth's 1959 classic, *Goodbye Columbus*, chronicled the risqué adventures of a Brooklyn librarian. In fact, there is a long history of literary librarians in romantic situations, which includes titles by Davis (1937), Amis (1956), Braine (1964), Monteilhet (1976), Pym (1982), Peake (1972), Brookner (1983), and Douglas (1994). We will encounter more examples below.

In a small Ohio town, a middle-aged academic librarian despairs of finding true love. Through various twists of fate, she becomes involved with a mysterious architect and contractor, whose reading of Tarot cards suggests she is the "ideal woman." Rachael Locke, heroine of *In the Cards,* a 1990 Harlequin Super Romance, works as a university reference librarian, and is recovering from an involvement with a married professor. Concerned for her aging aunt's welfare, she takes a position at a small town library, and becomes embroiled in a major romance and various minor mysteries.

An attractive and spirited woman, Rachael had "read a million library books" as a child. Librarians love to quote, she says, sprinkling her conversation with passages from authors like Maxim Gorki: "When work is a pleasure, life's a joy." But while Rachael's lover "admires her naked perfection," his Gypsy relations deride her as "a Gaja who worships books." This story is of interest both because librarians often figure as romantic heroines (Linz, 1995), and because the details of librarianship interspersed throughout the narrative are accurate and positive. Rachael is evidently acquainted with collection development, classification, budgeting, reference work, and all the major elements of professional librarianship - details of which are presented swiftly but faithfully in the novel.

While the unintentionally negative elements of this plot line will be apparent to most readers, we ought not to dismiss its positive qualities. Rachael is at once attractive and clever, possesses a Master's degree, behaves in a professional manner, and acts as the story's protagonist. However, romance is a genre apart. We will now return to the librarians of mystery.

The Librarian as Renaissance Person and Consummate Professional

In the most positive portrayals, librarians are presented as clever and socially acceptable individuals. Professor Shandy's partner Helen is physically attractive, well traveled, and knowledgeable on several fronts. Newly arrived at Shandy's agricultural college, she astonishes the professor by wondering aloud about correct Latin case-endings, and citing obscure works like "Life With the Burrowing Mammals." Hired to set a badly-maintained rare books collection to rights, she uses her librarian's skills and perceptions to help Shandy solve crimes. We are told that she obtained these skills through studies for an MLS and a Ph.D., and through professional work at various illustrious institutions. We meet Helen first in *Rest You Merry* (1978). Her adventures continue in MacLeod's *Something the Cat Dragged In* (1983), *The Corpse in Oozak's Pond* (1987), *Vane Pursuit* (1989), *An Owl too Many* (1991), and *Something in the Water* (1994).

L.R. Wright's Cassandra pens articles for professional journals, goes to LA conferences, and lives with her partner because she is cautious about marriage. Like Helen, Cassandra drifted into a small-town setting and stayed there. In fact, these may be instances of a recurring plot-line involving a new breed of intelligent and versatile female librarian, who, like the Western gunslingers, ride into town, tidy up a bibliographic mess, clean up a criminal one, find kindred spirits, and perhaps settle down. These librarians frequently end up as partners, assistants, or mentors to the stories' real protagonists.

L.R. Wright's Cassandra Mitchell takes an active and central role in the Karl Alberg mystery series. She is a woman in her early 40s who works as the sole qualified librarian in the sleepy British Columbia town of Sechelt. Drawn there by filial piety, she chose the town because of its proximity to her mother's nursing home. Ten years later, she begins to long for male company and places an advertisement in the *Vancouver Sun* personals. It reads in part: "Books are my work, my comfort, my joy." One man replies: Staff Sergeant Karl Alberg, head of the local detachment of the RCM Police - the Mounties.

Again, a librarian is being presented as a book lover and custodian of books rather than a proactive information professional. However, she is not presented as unidimensional, reticent, nor humorless. "I use marijuana sometimes... not for a long time...," Mitchell admits, "And I have a few speeding tickets...." We are told of her previous lovers, and her current preference for a common-law relationship over a wedding.

We meet Mitchell first in *The Suspect*, winner of the 1985 Edgar award for best novel . At first, Cassandra acts as a foil and a source of information. By virtue of her role as a public confidant, she has access to town gossip which might elude a policeman, and can supply the newcomer Alberg with a wealth of local history gleaned from her professional research and from conversations with patrons.

It's very handy to know a librarian," admits the Staff Sergeant. Besides, a librarian is a respectable sort of a date. "So, who'd you have lunch with," ribs a colleague. "A librarian," said Alberg, with dignity.

There is also some suggestion that Cassandra is a bit obsessive. "He noticed that as she shelved the books, she pulled some slightly farther out, and then, unthinking, ran her fingers along the spines as if playing a harp." (Wright, 1985).

Wright is at once a master of psychological suspense and of the Canadian equivalent of an English village mystery. Her work includes *The Suspect*, *Among Friends*, *A Chill Rain in January*, *Fall From Grace*, *The Favourite*, *Prized Possessions*, *Sleep While I Sing*, *Mother Love* and *A Touch of Panic*. If a librarian has only time for one of her offerings, *A Touch of Panic* (1995), is perhaps the best choice. This grotesque study features librarians as both villain and victim. The victim is Cassandra, the villain a millionaire professor of library science from the University of British Columbia, who had spotted Mitchell at a library association meeting, classified her as the "ideal woman," and resolved to drug and kidnap her. If Mitchell declines the position, another place awaits her in the professor's garden, where shallow graves already hold a couple of rejected candidates.

Professors," quips one real-life education consultant, "are the people nobody would dance with in high-school." Far from musty, Gordon Murphy is obsessed with youth and vitality. He is middle aged, wealthy, attractive, and possessed of a remarkable set of gym equipment. Mitchell reminisces about their introduction:

> An attractive man of about her age, tall and big... dark-haired, graying, lithe and muscular. His grip had been warm and firm. And his smile was dazzling; she'd never seen such perfect teeth. Good God, she'd thought, staring at his mouth, maybe they aren't real. (Wright, 1995).

For his part, Murphy is attracted to her at once, though, as Wright tells us, "The look of her surprised him. She was in her forties, and adorably plump." (Wright, 1995). After six years of tertiary education and several years on the job, lithe or plump, chief librarians are likely over forty. Library professors would be lucky indeed to be both wealthy and "ostentatiously fit" like Dr. Murphy. He drives a BMW, lives in a huge house which he remodels frequently, and dresses with impeccable taste. "His eyes were large and dark, his mouth full-lipped and sensuous... His voice was low, deep, and warm." (Wright, 1995). Murphy is perhaps equally atypical of librarians and academics - suave, wealthy, and smooth-talking, Wright endows him with a character larger than life, and with a chillingly warped personality.

Because Wright emphasizes the scholarly as well as the practical side of the profession, it becomes apparent that Mitchell, and by implication, her colleagues, are by no means intellectual featherweights. By making Gordon Murphy a professor of library science, and by mentioning Mitchell's journal articles, Wright reinforces the notion that graduate degrees like the MLIS are required of librarians, and that librarianship involves true scholarship. The tale begins by stressing Cassandra's professional qualifications and stature, and ends by demonstrating her strength of character.

We can forgive Wright's making Cassandra reshelve books — though they may dislike admitting it, professionals in small libraries must frequently perform such tasks. We can overlook her describing books as Cassandra's "life and joy," because at bottom, libraries are enjoyable workplaces. Any stereotypes evident in statements like these are more than balanced as the series, and the character, evolve. Over the course of the series, Mitchell emerges as an attractive, resourceful, and intelligent woman, an able partner and sounding board for the series' protagonist, and a character with depth and definition.

The Librarian As the Guardian of Knowledge

As we noted earlier, Stephen Franklin's *Knowledge Park* (1972), is about an international effort to reconstruct the Great Library of Alexandria near Cochrane, Ontario. The scheme is at once utopian and custodial. In our final example, we are treated to Umberto Eco's vision of one of fiction's most insidious libraries and foulest librarians. If Eco's 1989 article in the Ontario Library Association's journal *Focus* is to be taken at face value, the novelist

based his portrayals on his experiences doing research among the great "closed stacks" libraries of Europe. In that article, Eco sets out criteria for constructing the world's worst library. (Eco, 1989).

Umberto Eco's librarian is a brilliant but demented zealot who believes it his duty to conceal dangerous works. Why not simply destroy vile works? We need falsehood so that we can come to know truth, and monsters exist so that we can appreciate beauty. Monsters exist so that we can appreciate truth and beauty - but only those with sufficient knowledge and maturity (in the librarian's judgment), should be allowed to view them.

The library of Eco's medieval Benedictine monastery exists to conceal such dangerous information. The exact contents of its books are known only to the librarian, and the key to its classification scheme, as well as the exact nature of its most harmful works, are revealed by the librarian only upon his retirement, and only to his immediate sub-librarian. But in this case, Jorge, a nominally "retired" librarian with a tinge of megalomania, neglects to share some of the secrets.

To guard its treasures, the library defends itself by means of a labyrinthine layout, by subtle architectural features, and by ingenious traps set for interlopers. These devices include burning pots of hashish, ventilation slits which sigh like lost souls and mirrors which terrify intruders with their own distorted images. Although constructed on the basis of sacred numerology, it is a perverse edifice.

The work's protagonist, a Friar named William, schooled in the scientific methods of English Franciscans like William of Ockham, Richard Grosseteste, and Roger Bacon (who incidentally investigated the nature of light), stands in opposition to the librarian Jorge, who symbolizes ignorance and superstition, darkness, and the perversion of all things holy. William links a series of bizarre murders to Jorge's campaign to conceal the only extant copy of the second book of Aristotle's Poetics - the book presumably devoted to comedy and the healing power of laughter. Aristotle argued in the *Poetics* that tragedy was a high form of drama, and applied properly only to great and noble people, brought low by fate. Comedy, on the other hand, showed us nobility by negation - by depicting ridiculous, low, or base people, whose silly exploits taught us wisdom. (Butcher, 1929).

The novel concludes with a diabolical gloss on the Apocalypse. This most zealous of custodians devours the poisoned pages of the *Poetics*, becoming himself a type of the "low and base persons" of Aristotelian comedy, and an antitype of the sacred figure of the Apostle John who also devours a good book in the *Revelations*. The novel culminates in a classic confrontation of master detective and master criminal. "What an excellent librarian you would have made, William," croaks the villain.

While Eco presents a nightmarish library and a devilish custos librorum, he injects various details which contribute to a positive professional image, evident in quotes like this one: "The librarian must have a list of all books, carefully ordered by subjects and authors, and they must be classified on the shelves with numerical indications."

Such details are of course secondary. Eco's actual experience of libraries (cf Eco, 1989), seems to have given him the impression that, aside from a few exemplary institutions, they are populated by arrogant and officious functionaries, who exhibit some of the characteristics of the Venerable Jorge, but without, one presumes, enough true villainy to make them interesting.

While Eco seems less than taken with librarians, he is clearly a champion of their overall enterprise. The real enemy in *The Name of the Rose* is ignorance and illiteracy. The book's numerous subplots involve attempts to stifle knowledge, to quash intellectual and personal freedom. There are minor villains in this book too - heretics whose grammar is perverted, whose logic is warped, and whose language is the confusion of tongues.

The goodly library would stand in stark opposition to Eco's fictitious construct. One is left with the impression that for Eco, heaven itself would be a library - one with open stacks, eternal hours of opening, infinite learning, and ministering echelons of librarians who understood the needs of scholars like himself. By contrast, Jorge is a "figure" of the devil himself. The enemies of humor are the enemies of wisdom, and Jorge is not only humorless, but also given to censure it in others. This librarian "shushes" his patrons by stifling them permanently. Perhaps in casting a librarian as one of literature's most fiendish villains, Eco has paid our profession the ultimate compliment. As Australian writer, Robyn Davidson once noted about actor Paul Hogan's "Crocodile Dundee" character, this is "the negative stereotype at its purest" (Davidson, 1987).

Summary

In summary, this brief examination of some of detective fiction's depictions of librarians will serve to show how a simple interpretation of the profession's literary image cannot suffice. We began by asking whether a tentative "literary image" of the profession could be constructed, based upon scrutiny of a few recent novels involving librarians. While we have adopted, for convenience, notions of "positive" and "negative" portrayals, such categories inevitably overlap. There are many more novels about librarians than the few we have examined herein, and it is readily acknowledged that the few instances we have described may be quite atypical of the main body of the literature.

Perhaps, rather than asking whether a fictitious librarian is likable or despicable, we should rather evaluate a work on the basis of the librarian's prominence and relationship to the plot. Nevertheless, even in works which feature librarians as supporting characters - as partners or foils for protagonists - we can see opportunities for acquainting the reading public with librarians' depth of character, professionalism, and personality. We may also ask whether a work which features librarians describes the apparatus and methods of librarianship faithfully.

Nor should we dismiss a work simply because it depicts librarians using the tools of their trade, or exhibiting personality traits which are demonstrably common. However, there is much more to the art or science of librarianship than a casual observation of these activities would suggest. If authors always depict librarians

performing just these tasks, they lose the chance of exploring far more interesting dimensions.

An aspect of a literary character's behavior can become recognizably "typical" only if it has some basis in fact. Many librarians, for example, do love books. Many must reshelve them, often according to the Dewey Decimal system. Many perform literature searches. However, character and personality are not constrained by time clocks and office walls. In this selection of stories, we can see how some authors have chosen to explore other dimensions of librarians' personalities, and how some of these fictitious librarians can be nearly as interesting as their real-world counterparts.

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