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# Sex in Public (Libraries):

## *An Historical Sampler of What Every Librarian Should Know*

by James V. Carmichael, Jr.

**A**s historical and sociological objects of study, public libraries present a mirror to their host societies, not only of those societies' reading tastes and information needs, but also of their predominant social values. From a modern perspective, some would argue that American public librarianship reflects a wide though perfect image of society like a Hubbel telescope, indecipherable in its constituent parts, but forming a coherent whole. Others would contend that the image is distorted through a convex lens, so that the public library embodies a larger spectrum of ideas than actually exists in the immediate host society. Conversely, there are those who perceive a concave lens that condenses or omits certain aspects of the world of ideas that the community finds distasteful, or harmful to its interests. Professionals in the public library field have been extremely prolific, if somewhat ambiguous, in articulating a positivist philosophy of collection development that balances community needs with the principles of intellectual freedom. This philosophy, it would seem, is intrinsic to American democratic principles, although actually, each generation of public librarians has refined it to suit changing social conditions. Perhaps in no area is this more

true than in the complex of ideas that define the topic of sex and sexual mores.

Popular images of public librarians are fraught with sex or sexlessness, perhaps because these individuals have so often been the gatekeepers of literature about sex. Certainly, they have been held accountable for the sexual content of the literature they acquire, and the political, economic, religious, and philosophical content, as well. Very often, sexual content has provided the pretext by which much more disturbing aspects of the work — an attitude of rebellion, a flaunting of conventional mores, a political philosophy that bears disturbingly anarchic overtones — are suppressed. Standards of decency have provided the traditional venue of attack, but it is much harder to attack philosophical, religious, or political ideas knowledgeably. Europeans understood the relationship between sexual libertinage and anarchy, and seques-

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tered pornographic collections in national libraries to which only the keeper of books had access. Is it any wonder librarians of every type were resented?

In some American books and films, however, the public librarian is depicted as a pretty, romantic figure, drifting in and out of the sexual miasma of great literature, equally adept at handling steamy fiction and steamy patrons with chaste and unsullied hands (*No Man of Her Own*, 1932). Her sister in academic or special libraries, on the other hand, is thoroughly abstracted by the constant traffic of soul-stirring ideas (*Desk Set*, 1957). Ironically, in works of the genre, the librarian ends up with her (always her) man, whatever her constituency. In other fictional works, the public librarian is an anti-heroine (nearly always a *anti-heroine*), has no physical allure, bears a pale, repressive countenance, silences flirtations in the stacks, or casts a glance over the top of her glasses that would shrivel the sexual organs of any patron in her path. It is, therefore, not surprising that pornographers sometimes use libraries as the settings for their fantasies, and sexy librarians as the central figure in the culminating orgy: comic value derives from lambasting an authoritarian stereotype.

In more complex fictional works, like Frances Newman's *Dead Lovers Are Faithful Lovers* (1928), the heroine rebels

against the ennui of her profession and its baggage of gender roles in search of "illicit" passion (with a married or unmarried man). Newman's heroine definitively rejects the seedy Victorian gentility of "old" Atlanta for the (unfulfilled) hope of the urban boosters, which her financially well-connected paramour represents. In a more recent example, Richard Powers' *The Gold Bug Variations* (1992), the librarian-narrator — a veritable font of trivia and "expertise" — forsakes the public library's reference desk and her seedy librarian lover for a patron who incidentally introduces her to one of the genetic de-coders of the double helix. The abandonment of the traditional librarian turf of disconnected facts and bits of information in favor of sexual passion, spiritual fulfillment, and new appreciation of science (no less) is unmistakably pointed.

In both Newman's and Powers' works, sex and librarianship are metaphors for a larger complex of social values.

One usually has to resort to fiction to find that public librarians have any sexual life at all, for biographical accounts of librarians reveal very little of librarians' personal lives. Sydney Pierce has lamented the lack of "dead Germans" in the profession<sup>1</sup> — figures of the stature of Nietzsche and Freud whose influence is universal, and whose eminence could only be enhanced by revelations of eccentricities, including sexual peccadillos. Part of the ahistoricity of librarianship may reside in librarians' perpetual low self-esteem, even in face of research that indicates that their modern public image is benign. Moreover, public librarians preserve the records of mankind even while they destroy their own papers, thus robbing future professionals of their biographical heritage, "warts and all." In conducting biographical research on a deceased public librarian, it is not unusual to find a scattered paper trail of committee appointments, clippings that document professional achievements, a cache of insipid "personal" papers, and little else to add a vital third dimension to the dry professional portrait other than the occasional marriage certificate, reminiscences of children, or (rarely) the presence of a candid surviving associate.

Many of the current generation of emerging professionals are too young to remember the struggles of public librar-

ians, publishers, and legislators as they broadened the boundaries of permissible discussion of sex. Sadly, with the current emphasis on technology, students have little time or initiative to explore the subject during their professional education programs. They may be only dimly aware of the polarization of community values around the subject of sex, and have little historical sense of the principles that these battles engaged. Thus, while only thirty years ago, literary works by Henry Miller and William S. Burroughs had to be smuggled into the United States in their (Paris) Grove Press editions, they now typically

## How would the early "liberal" courts — the one that defended *Lady Chatterly's Lover*, for example — react to *Madonna's Sex*, a *Mapplethorpe* portfolio, or even the novels of Danielle Steele?

collect dust as leaden curiosities on the shelves of larger public libraries (Filmic accounts of these authors' struggles, however, such as *Henry and June* (1992) and *Naked Lunch* (1993), circulate briskly at video stores). Given the numbing frequency with which nearly every class of material now is challenged by somebody, students may be hard pressed to understand the definitive (now quaint) court cases of only several decades ago — for example, Ralph Ginzberg's fight to publish nude (breasts exposed) photographs of Marilyn Monroe in the pages of the literary journal, *Evergreen Review*. Consider publishers' century-long hiatus on common Anglo-Saxonisms. How would the early "liberal" courts — the one that defended *Lady Chatterly's Lover*, for example — react to *Madonna's Sex*, a *Mapplethorpe* portfolio, or even the novels of Danielle Steele?

Since the nascent American library profession was given its first push by Melvil Dewey, the commerce of sexual ideas has been restricted by societal mores. In Dewey's (1851-1931) heyday, the rigid separation of public morality and private behavior, concern over female "purity," and the limitation of

frank discussion of sex to the Gradgrindian explanations of medical, legal, and scientific tomes, confined public exploration of these issues to the realm of metaphor and euphemism. Reading between the lines of some of these tomes, one can detect concerns that continue to haunt us. Thus, a turn-of-the-century women's advice manual,<sup>2</sup> in a titillating chapter entitled, "Liberties Men Take," enumerates 1) "the coarse liberties attempted by strangers in public places or conveyances;" 2) "the effort men make to lead young women into unconventional or imprudent actions;" and 3) "the attempt at

love-making which men make toward married women" — in other words, sexual harassment, unmarried sex, and "hitting on." It is worth explaining that Dewey, one of the fathers of the (public) "library idea," was the object of controversy during his life, not only because of his communitarian beliefs (including the use of Christian names with acquaintances and the general loosening of social strictures, although apparently not sexual mores), but also because of rumors of sexual misconduct brought

forth by four female fellow-travellers in the 1905 ALA post-conference excursion. Mary Wright Plummer of Pratt Institute, one of the offended principals, would not sit in the same room with him.

Whatever their personal views, public librarians of the Gilded Age faced their most serious challenges from community leaders who sought to limit library acquisitions to prescribed fictional works (if the community condoned fiction at all), and eagerly condemned "pernicious trash" that would corrupt youth and sully the "pure" female mind. A list of such "trash" might astound the modern reader. The secretary of the Nebraska Library Commission, for example, was admonished by the President of the Commission Board for ordering Margaret W. Morley's popular study of the principles of biology, *Life and Love* (1895), because he thought it was "one of those books which must be circulated with discretion and not a book which should go into the hands of young people. We have no way of preventing that after it once leaves the library." As for Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Women and Economics: a Study of the Economic Relation*

*Between Women and Men* (1898), he dismissed it as unworthy of public purchase, since surely "there must be plenty in the Women's Club Library ... to cover this point."<sup>3</sup> Innocence was defined by age; power was circumscribed by sex.

Between 1915 and 1920, women from every class, of whom Margaret Sanger was only the most famous, banded together to promote the idea that women owned their own bodies and therefore had a right to practice contraception. By the 1920s, the Great War and Prohibition had loosened Victorian morals sufficiently to remove illicit sex from the red-light districts and into the rumble seats of jalopies. In New York, a flourishing gay sub-culture became the object of fascination and even tolerance, yet even in the heat of prosperity and "flaming youth" (as it was called), American prudery resurfaced with a regularity that foreign observers found remarkable.<sup>4</sup> Particularly in the South, Victorian moral values lingered longer than elsewhere — for example, in the collection policies of some public libraries. Women had great difficulty in liberating themselves from veneration as "Dixie's Diadem," and at Dayton, Tennessee and elsewhere scientific values suffered defeat to religious rote in the courts, while the rest of the country howled at the side show. Indeed, at times, the South earned H.L. Mencken's soubriquet, "desert of the Bozart." From Georgia, one young lady reported in 1921 that

At college I looked on literature as something apart. Since I have come home to Georgia, I find that it is better to submit myself to the direction of our good Baptist clergyman, and have no books on our library shelves that I cannot read alone to the young.<sup>5</sup>

Frances Newman, the Atlanta librarian-author mentioned previously, announced by the title of her first novel, *The Hard Boiled Virgin* (1925), that she had flatly rejected contemporary middle-class southern sexual mores. The book was immediately banned in Boston and became a best seller. Her former employer, Atlanta's librarian, Tommie Dora Barker (1915-1930), had some years before noted in a personnel evaluation letter that Newman displayed contempt for the public's opinion, since "the

stupidities of the public irritate her," although the brilliance of her literary knowledge was unsurpassed.<sup>6</sup> Newman railed particularly against the subjugation of well-born belles in the round of debutante balls, teas, and church socials where they were expected to be vanquished by socially appropriate beaux in sometimes loveless matches, or else be relegated to a life of dim spinsterhood. She had even more contempt for the conventions by which unmarried women of impecunious means were assigned miserable and colorless "careers" in the limited range of exclusively female occupations like librarianship. Indicative of the tone of her criticisms is her characterization of library self-censorship in her last novel, *Dead Lovers Are Faithful Lovers*. There Barker, thinly disguised as Miss Joma Currier, reminds her staff that "a novel is considered immoral if it makes vice attractive, or if it separates an act from its consequences" — with obvious reference to the procreative potential of the sexual act.<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that the real-life Barker justified such a caricature to some degree, since she once fired an employee for speaking in terms "of unspeakable vulgarity" of her supervisor, and dismissed another student from Atlanta's library school, then located on the top floor of Atlanta's Carnegie Library, for lying about her age on her application "by a whole year."<sup>8</sup> With respect to this last folly, it should be stated that Barker's disapproval did not extend to graduates of the school who underestimated their age by more than a year, either on application forms or in the first edition of *Who's Who In Librarianship* (1933), presumably because overestimation implied moral turpitude in seeking premature entree to the privileges of adulthood, whereas underestimation represented the option of "shedding" experience always available to a southern "lady."

Ironically, although Georgia legislators were prescient in opening the office of State Librarian to women as

early as 1896, Georgia did not formally ratify the Nineteenth Amendment giving women the right to vote until 1976. The peculiar ambiguity of southern states towards gender roles (and by implication, sexual mores) extended to men as well. Thus, men were not admitted to the South's only accredited library school until 1931, supposedly because as librarians, they could not earn enough to support a family, but also because of a deeply-held belief in the "separate spheres" of the sexes; coeducation in southern universities occurred in most cases only after racial desegregation had become inevitable. Moreover, library schools had to exercise great care in attracting "manly" graduates, since the imputation of effeminacy by association with a female profession had to be avoided. "Effeminacy," it should be noted, did not necessarily carry the burden of association with homosexuality in the 1920s that it did only a few decades later. One of the most prominent southern male librarians of the 1920s and 1930s, a father of three children and the founder of three southern library education programs, had executive abilities that were highly ranked by his instructors at the University of Illinois even though his graduate file carried a recommendation that warned his employers of his effeminate manner and high-pitched "soft" voice.<sup>9</sup> Even Dewey's "old maidish" quality had been noted some years before, for as American society became more permeated with the cult of masculinity in the late nineteenth century, men in intellectual or service occupations ran the risk of being labelled "effeminate gnomes" or "the third sex."<sup>10</sup>

The loosening of sexual mores was stalled by the national emergencies of the Great Depression and the Second World War during which time, incidentally, women made short-lived gains in traditionally male occupations, but was sent into retreat by the Cold War Era. During the 1950s, the country reached a "liberal consensus" on sex.<sup>11</sup> Reproductive sex within marriage became the legitimate vehicle for greater sexual fulfillment for both sexes; sexual experimentation outside marriage was confined to petting, which supposedly had marriage as its object, and, once more, illicit sex was relegated to the bordello and racy literature. Sexual "deviance" (i.e., homosexuality) was uncovered and

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punished mercilessly even within the public library. Thus, librarian John Settlemayer of Atlanta cooperated with the Atlanta Vice Squad in a sting operation on homosexuals frequenting the men's room of the Atlanta Public Library in 1957. To understand the tenor of the times, it should also be mentioned that the Library's Motion Picture Review Board regularly excised scenes with overtones of miscegenation in features like *Band of Angels* and *Imitation of Life*.

It seems somewhat startling now to realize that Grace Metalious' soapy pot-boiler *Peyton Place* (1956) once marked the boundaries of the hotly-contested terrain of the struggle between family values and sexual license in the editorial pages of *American Libraries*, or that teenagers smuggled copies of Eustace Chesser's *Love Without Fear* (1957) into their rooms because of the author's frank discussion of the right of liberated sexual expression within marriage. Who now can remember the early Supreme Court cases concerning controversial classics like Frank Harris' *My Life and Loves* or Edmund Wilson's *Memoirs of Hecate County* that, along with the fall of Senator Joseph McCarthy, the demise of segregation in the South, the resurgence of feminism and the gay rights movement, spelled an end to the liberal consensus on sex?

What D'Emilio and Freedman felicitously call "the commercialization of sex and the sexualization of commerce" in the 1970s definitively changed the way Americans viewed sex, for "many Americans came to accept sexual pleasure as a legitimate, necessary component in their lives, unbound by older ideals of marital fidelity and permanence," while at the same time, the "tension in sexual liberalism between the celebration of the erotic as the peak experience in marriage and the effort to contain its expression elsewhere, made sex ripe for commercial exploitation."<sup>12</sup> For almost two decades (ca. 1960-79), an unparalleled degree of laxity gave rise to experimentation in sexual behavior that would have been unthinkable only a few years before, plus a plethora of alternate lifestyles and living arrangements, and a basic re-definition of the limits of verbal expression. More alarming indicators also surfaced, such as pornographic movie houses and bookstores, a rise in venereal diseases, a flourishing bathhouse and massage parlor industry, and sex manuals which glorified sexual experimentation at

the expense of state statutes which criminalized some of the specific acts these best sellers touted. Some librarians might marvel at the fact that North Carolina and South Carolina in the 1970s led the nation in the number of adult movie theaters, "belying the notion that pornography was the product of big-city decadence."<sup>13</sup>

Like its host culture, the public sector of the library profession reflected these profound social changes. The rhetoric of social activism became part of the editorial battery of the library press, even if the professional credo of librarians, expressed in such documents as the ALA "Code of Ethics," professed neutrality. At this time, "neutrality" seemed to imply openness to all comers in selection decisions, and if anything, erred on the side of liberality rather than nit-picking literary distinctions. One group of "radical" librarians sought basic re-definition of the staid library policies of the past through an overhaul of patron policies, classification systems, and subject headings which in the new social context, now seemed whimsical, if not regressive: "We say 'No way!' to Shh!" In one sense, academic librarians led the way for public librarians, defining the context in which reform should occur: one University of Massachusetts librarian denounced as intolerable the way the library establishment disregarded unmarried citizens: "Through its polarization of what gets into 301.42 [Marriage and family] and what gets left outside in 301.415 [Sex life outside marriage], Dewey reinforces Official Sexual Orthodoxy. Baby-making sex inside marriage is Good. All other sexual activity is 'perversion.'"<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, a public librarian, Sanford Berman, actually modelled subject-heading reform for the profession at large in Hennepin County, Minnesota.

Trying to keep in step, the American Library Association's Task Force for Gay Liberation had been formed in 1970 under the aegis of the newly-founded Social Responsibilities Round Table, the first such professional organization anywhere. Delegates to the 1971 ALA in Dallas were unprepared for the spectacle that ensued as Israel Fishman and gay activist Barbara Gittings put up a "Hug-a-Homosexual" booth that was featured on national television news broadcasts. The Task Force's agenda was serious, however: Gittings voluntarily compiled and updated an annual gay and lesbian bibliography that for years was the only list

of its kind. She did this, she said, because in growing up, she had found very few positive images of gay people on the library shelves. On the feminist front, women in librarianship were challenging inequalities and discrimination in the work place and sexism in the media. Through organizations like the Social Responsibilities Round Table and the Black Caucus, a backlog of professional and literary wrongs was righted, some more successfully than others, adding perhaps an uncomfortable degree of social relevance to the rising tide in professional debate.

Not until the 1980s, when conservative proponents learned to exploit the national media equally as well as their liberal counterparts, was the Right able to mount a successful counter-attack to the sexual liberation movement and librarians who had viewed with alarm the broadening of the public librarian's explicit social mission, the decline in moral certitude, and who had questioned the value-free literary aesthetic of the post-modernist age, redrew boundaries for the traditional "liberal consensus" on sex. With the election of Ronald Reagan as President, conservative footing in the national debate on sex was secured, and sex was irretrievably politicized.

In more than a century of struggle to define the limits of sexual license, the only constant has been that of youth: it is the sexual behavior and attitudes of youth that serve as the bottom line of debate, and at no time more so than the present. No longer is only the economic future of the country threatened by the cycle of teen-age pregnancies, welfare mothers, drug-addicted fathers, or the failure of society to resolve such controversial topics as abortion, birth control, and sex education. Now life itself is threatened by transmission of the AIDS virus through casual sexual encounters, shared needles, and even contaminated blood supplies. These frustrations have fuelled a cynical backlash against the liberal values of the late 1960s and early 1970s, not only from the right, but also from former proponents of liberal social values on the left. The current shrill and strident tone in discussions of sex and social values permeates even the pages of the official professional association journal. Professional credos of open-mindedness and neutrality notwithstanding, the pages of *American Libraries* have become littered with the detritus of bitter partisan debate from the liberal, conservative, and even the "neutral"

camp, on the general topic of social responsibilities and professionalism, from which the topics of sex and professional image are never too far distant.

At the 1995 meeting of the Association of Library and Information Science Education in Philadelphia, the Dean of one of the largest library schools in the country took the profession to task for its lack of strategic vision as indicated, among other things, by its preoccupation with gender issues, sexuality issues, and social issues which he called "icing on the cake of librarianship" from which the "cake" threatens to collapse. Yet while an increasing amount of rhetorical attention has been paid to some of these issues in recent years, a review of library literature yields only a few citations to research studies on the attitudes of any type of librarians towards sex, all of them now long outdated. Moreover, even though statistical studies continue to show that salary differentials between male and female public library employees have narrowed considerably in recent decades, librarians continue to have sexual problems, some of which seep into the library. Evidence of sexual harassment continues to surface in public libraries, just as it does in the corporate world. Given the relatively commonplace aspect of sexual matters in the present decade, and the penalties associated with ignorance, public librarians would be foolish to deny the sexual undercurrents in their lives. A recent multi-million dollar court award in San Francisco in September 1994, to a sexual harassment plaintiff, Rena Weeks, suggests that courts are serious in their intent to punish the misuse of sexual power. As these principles are extended into a wider arena of cases, justice rather than gender may be served, and the tide of male backlash quelled.

During the past year, the author and Marilyn L. Shontz of UNC-G's Department of Library and Information Studies have conducted a national survey of Canadian and U.S. 1993 MLIS/MLS graduates of ALA-accredited programs on the subjects of social responsibilities, gay and lesbian issues, women's issues, and diversity issues. Interestingly, significant differences in responses to survey items were more likely to be determined by graduates' self-described social orientations (radical liberal, liberal, moderate, conservative, liberal conservative) than by their sex, their sexual orientation, their age, their library type, the region of their school or

their personal acquaintance with someone who had died of AIDS. Over 79 percent of respondents agreed unequivocally that if they were in charge of collection development in a public library, they would have acquired *Daddy's Roommate* or *Heather Has Two Mommies* if those titles represented the best of their type available. On the other

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hand, qualitative comments which accompanied the responses made clear that these librarians, over half of whom were thirty-five or younger, are more comfortable with a passive, neutral form of sexual tolerance through such activities as collection development, than they are in proactive programming which incorporates sexual issues, sexual minorities, or controversial sexual topics like abortion. This means that while most patrons may expect their varied information needs for explicit information on sex to be met by these new professionals, new professionals feel that their own personal agendas will not meet an equal degree of tolerance. Some graduates reported never having dis-

cussed women's issues, gay issues, or even broader social issues like poverty or world hunger in any of their library education programs, although these are issues central to the controversy that informs current political debate, news hour polemic, and the national struggle to redefine community values.

What about the future? Obviously, neither the library and information profession nor society as a whole can afford to turn back wistfully or angrily to simpler, less sophisticated times. Sexually-explicit material is a readily-available commodity on the Internet, in video stores, on television, and in every form of advertising. Public librarians, whatever their personal beliefs, must be informed about sex, unblinkingly conversant about its legal, biological, political, medical, religious, artistic, and (even) romantic aspects, and aware of the ideological polarities that mark its outer regions. The firing of the U.S. Congress' historian because she had once stated that children needed to know about Nazi philosophy demonstrates how disingenuously political opponents purposefully confuse knowledge with advocacy. Society faces a fate far worse than "moral decline" if citizens don't learn everything they can about sex, for until a cure is found for AIDS, the hypocritical attempt to suppress sexual information hurts the very people it is meant to protect.

To return to the original metaphor

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of this essay, the problem with mirrors, even those not purposefully designed to distort reflections, is that they are easily obscured by grime. In a dirty mirror, even images close at hand may seem blurred. If public libraries are the mirror of society, then public librarians, when they emerge from the background and display some movement in the interest of the public (the viewer), generally receive a favorable reception, more favorable, perhaps, than they care to acknowledge. Public librarians must realize, however, that their image is reflected in the mirror as well as that of "the public." They are inextricably bound to the fabric of the host society even as they serve it. Neutral? Probably not. Fair-minded? Well, that's possible. While the library and information profession in recent years has more often than not welcomed recruits of every religious, political, social, and sexual persuasion and professes to welcome the "marketplace" of ideas, it behooves librarians of every stripe to be thoroughly familiar with the entire evolution of that marketplace, including its sexualization, in order to make professional and personal decisions that truly reflect the best of that tradition.

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