

# Looking Up:

## The Image of Youth Services Librarians

by Patricia E. Feehan and Jill E. Buie

"Yes?" The librarian did not bother to look up.  
"Could you recommend a good book for a girl?"  
"How old?"  
"She is eleven."

Each week Francie made the same request and each week the librarian asked the same question. A name on a card meant nothing to her, and since she never looked up into a child's face, she never did get to know the little girl who took a book out every day and two on Saturday. A smile would have meant a lot to Francie and a friendly comment would have made her so happy. She loved the library and was anxious to worship the lady in charge. But the librarian had other things on her mind. She hated children anyhow.<sup>1</sup>

**T**he year was 1966 and I was 21 years old when I read this passage from *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* by Betty Smith. It was my first foray into literature for young adults, and I was preparing myself to become a high school English teacher. As I read about Francie's visit to the library, the room began to spin around me and I had to momentarily put the book down. I was in total anguish for this little girl who was so anxious "to worship the lady in charge" who *never looked up!* It was during this dizzying and exquisitely (not to mention satisfyingly dramatic) moment that I decided to become a children's librarian.

"I would look up!" I vowed. "I would get to know all of the Francies and Frankies that walked through the door of my library! I would be worthy of their patronage and strive to be able to recommend good books to them."

And so, because of a negative portrayal of a librarian in a minor role in a well-known and beloved novel, I did become a children's librarian, and I worked against that negative image for

17 years before entering the Ph.D. program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Today, I am a teacher of children's librarians, and I feel as strongly today about Francie's experience as I did 21 years ago.

We all know the negative physical image of the librarian — an uptight old maid with her hair in a bun and glasses perched on the end of her nose who shushes patrons.

"The stereotype may not have originated in the books that we read and the shows that we watch, but these are some of the vehicles for perpetuating it," writes Gregg Sapp in his article, "The Librarian as Main Character: A Professional Sampler."<sup>2</sup> Sapp includes a litany of negative characteristics describing the stereotypical librarian: orderliness, introversion, unattractiveness, naiveté, etc.

According to Helene Woodhams, the typical literary librarians are "of a 'certain' age, i.e., rarely young; they are single; they are conservative in dress and manner; they are obsessively tidy in practice and in appearance (physical beauty is uncommon, unexpected, and

jarring when it exists ...)"<sup>3</sup> Also, part of the stereotype is the fact that the librarian is almost always female.<sup>4</sup>

I was a mature college student when I happened upon the hapless female librarian character with the bad attitude. I have no memory of literary influence preceding this incident. How often do young people come across a negative portrayal of a librarian in their literature? The question begged for some research.

### The Heylman Study

Katherine M. Heylman, a school librarian, was the first to address the issue in an article for *School Library Journal* in which she posed this question, "Could (awful thought) the books we are purveying daily to the new generation be helping to perpetuate the negative image of 'librarian' we so deeply hate?"<sup>5</sup> While much has been written about the portrayal of the librarian in literature and films, the image of the librarian in children's literature is an area that has gone unexplored. Heylman's study of "Librarians in Juvenile Literature" was published in 1975. She analyzed the

image of the librarian in children's fiction, both picture books and chapter books, and found an opposite stereotype of the typically negative character. Heylman makes an interesting point.

Ask anyone to describe Marian the Librarian, and see how many of these words crop up: glasses, old maid, dowdy, prim, narrow-minded, fussy. In point of fact, none of these words typify Meredith Wilson's original Marian, who is not only pretty, but has a lot of zip and is trying desperately but unsuccessfully to wake up the rest of River City to newer and broader viewpoints ... From whence comes our readiness to lay so many negative qualities on Marian? Could we have ingested any part of it with our early diet of reading?<sup>6</sup>

Heylman's study analyzed 22 children's books published between 1932 and 1975. These books included 25 portraits of librarians. The study scored the characteristics of age, marital status, appearance, attitude toward patrons, and the general image left by the book. Heylman found that the librarian in children's books is female (24 to 1), young (11 to 6), either married or likely to become so (10 to 5), attractive (13 to 3), has a positive attitude toward patrons (22 to 3), and presents a generally positive image (19 to 2).<sup>7</sup>

### The Buie Study

In 1997, Jill E. Buie, a school librarian in Grover, North Carolina, conducted a study replicating, in part, the Heylman research. The scope of Buie's study<sup>8</sup> covered children's books, not young adult books, published after 1975 and hypothesized that the image of the librarian in children's literature has remained the same — that is, the image has remained a positive one.

Buie consulted professional resources such as the *Subject Guide to Children's Books in Print*; *A to Zoo: Subject Access to Children's Picture Books*; *Play, Learn and Grow: An Annotated Guide to the Best Books and Materials for Very Young Children*; *Best Books for Children: Preschool through Grade 6*; and *The Best in Children's Books: The University of Chicago Guide to Children's Literature* to identify books in which a librarian appears. Eighteen titles were analyzed. Of the 18 books, 11 were picture books and 7 were chapter books. Heylman's characteristics of the librarian were considered. Again, these included age,

marital status, appearance, attitude toward patrons, and the general image left by the book. Illustrations, dialogue, and narration were analyzed.

### The Findings by Category

#### Age

Whereas Heylman found 11 representations of a young librarian and 6 of a middle-aged to old librarian, the Buie study found 7 and 10 respectively. Characters were placed in the "young" group if they were described or appeared as youthful and fit. This seems to be a "flip flop" of what Heylman found 20 years ago.

#### Marital Status

Heylman found 4 single librarians, 10 married or marriageable librarians, and 5 "probable old maids." Buie found 2 single librarians, 5 married or marriageable librarians and 2 "probable old maids." This conclusion was based on placing the youthful librarians called "Miss" in the single group; the librarians called "Mrs.," or who had boyfriends or children, in the married and marriageable group; and those who were older and lived alone in the "probable old maid" group. In both studies, the majority of librarians were married or marriageable.

#### Appearance

Regarding appearance, Heylman found 13 cases of attractive librarians and 12 cases of average to unattractive librarians. Buie found 8 instances of attractive librarians and 8 instances of average to unattractive librarians. This was a highly subjective category. Buie placed librarians in the attractive category if they were described as physically attractive or if they seemed youthful and did not wear glasses.

#### Attitude toward Patrons

Heylman found 22 occurrences of the librarian possessing a positive attitude toward patrons and 3 occurrences of a librarian exhibiting a negative attitude toward patrons. The Buie study found all 19 portrayals of the librarian's attitude to be positive, and none being negative. Positive was defined as the librarian being helpful and nice, if not in the beginning, then at least by the end of the story.

### General Image Left by Book

The previous category, attitude toward patrons, carried the most weight in determining the librarian character's placement in the final category. Heylman found 19 instances of a positive general image, 2 instances of a negative general image, and 1 instance of a neutral image. The Buie study found 17 occurrences of a positive general image, none that were negative, and 2 that were neutral. Buie placed two cases in the neutral group because the librarian's appearance in the story was not memorable.

Buie's observations were very similar to the Heylman study, matching in the categories of appearance, attitude toward patrons, and the general image left by the book. Buie ran chi-square tests on the categories of age and marital status. She started with the null hypothesis that time has had no effect on the portrayal of the librarian's age and marital status in children's literature. The chi-square tests did not reject the hypothesis. Thus it can be concluded that the portrayal of librarian characters in children's literature in terms of age and marital status has not changed.

Despite the fact that 27 years have passed since Heylman conducted her study of the image of the librarian in children's literature, an examination of children's literature published after 1975 to the present reveals that the positive image that Heylman found has not significantly changed, although in regard to age, the librarian more often appears to be middle-aged or older.

Heylman offered several explanations for the reversal of the usual librarian stereotype. One explanation was that editors and authors may be subconsciously "buttering up" those who buy most of the children's trade books. Another explanation was that "the preponderance of good-image librarians results from the fact that people who write books in general, and particularly those who write for children, have had more positive experiences with librarians than negative as they were growing up." And, of course, there are a number of children's authors who have been children's librarians themselves.<sup>9</sup>

Overall, librarians in children's literature have fared pretty well. And

... if young people have a negative impression of librarians, they are not getting it from the literature they read.



Heylman states, "while it is unlikely that children really see us as we are so flatteringly presented in the library books, it is just as possible that they have not all formed the more usual stereotype in which to place us."<sup>10</sup>

### Taking Image One Step Further

A psychologist acquaintance of Heylman's pointed out that "stereotypes do not arise from a vacuum and are originally modeled to some degree on reality."<sup>11</sup> We can draw one conclusion from the two small studies discussed in this article and that is, if young people have a negative impression of librarians, they are not getting it from the literature they read.

Personally, I can take this one step further. I decided to become a librarian *because* of a negative portrayal in a book. I had decided at age 12 to become an English teacher because I loved to read literature. I was dissuaded nine years later when I read *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. It would be interesting to find out what drew other children's librarians to the library profession. But that's another article.

### Recruitment and Training of Youth Services Librarians

I did find out, however, a little information on the status of youth services recruitment and training in schools of library and information science. In June 1998, an informal survey was sent to 179 faculty listed in the directory of the Association of Library and Information Science Education. The directory indicated faculty whose research and teaching were in the area of programming and services to children and young adults in school and public libraries. The informal survey asked ten short questions covering enrollment, coursework, the image of youth services, reasons that students choose youth services professions, and the faculty's opinion on the strength and vitality of the area of youth services in general. I discovered that the "incredible, shrinking" children's librarian written about in Mary Somerville's article "Facing the Shortage of Children's Librarians"<sup>12</sup> in the '80s, has not disappeared altogether.

There were only 28 respondents, but they represented half of the ALA-accredited schools of library and information science. Thirteen respondents felt that more people were entering the field of youth services. Adding my own opinion to the responses, based on ten years of working as a faculty member in

this area, I would say that the number of graduate students in youth services enrolled in the College of Library and Information Science at the University of South Carolina basically has been stable. The number of students in youth services has consistently made up half of the overall student body. More graduates are entering the school library media program, fewer in public library youth services.

Technology has had the biggest impact on libraries, library schools, and on the youth services curriculum. While some faculty feel there is not time for "necessary electives that produce well-prepared youth services librarians," others are developing and adding innovative courses that integrate electronic resources, multimedia materials, and computer applications. The coursework has definitely changed in both content and teaching methods that reflect the new technologies (e.g., distance education via telecommunications), and are in keeping with current professional issues and theories.

While the majority of respondents said that there was no longer an emphasis on traditional storytelling and programming, many new areas were being addressed in youth services courses. These areas include administration and management, strategic planning, advocacy for youth, assessment information, multiculturalism in literature, a focus on family services, and collaborative program planning among others. The image of the youth services librarian ten years ago may have been someone sharing a picture book with a group of preschoolers or booktalking to a high school class. Today's image includes that of a technically skilled cybrarian drafting budgets, facilitating focus groups, and learning to assess not only materials collections, but also community needs, both internally and externally.

The majority of respondents feel that the image of youth services has stayed the same in the past 15 years. As

one respondent put it, "naturally being a feminized area and more devoted to children diminishes its status but it is still well regarded in a minor status." There is a critical need for children's librarians, especially in school library media centers, and they are doing well by the communities they serve. Other respondents feel the image has been strengthened by technology while remaining true to concerns with literature, reading, and literacy. If there have been changes in recruitment at all, it is because once students enter a graduate program, they are exposed to what some call the "automation glitz," which becomes a stronger calling. The increase in corporate or special libraries is also a factor.

Graduate students in youth services are practical as well as philosophical. They love children and children's literature, and they want to make a difference. They enjoy public service and are interested in advancing literacy. They are choosing school libraries because of (1) the pay; (2) the critical needs in schools that produce lots of job opportunities; and (3) a work schedule that leaves them time for their families and the summers off. It is a change for teachers who wish to remain in a learning environment and build on their teaching backgrounds. The application of technology also is attractive to some.

Those choosing the public library environment relish variety, autonomy, freedom, and having fewer regulations than in schools.

Respondents generally feel there is a positive and energetic feeling in the field. The image in library literature is that of the "overworked and undervalued" librarian, but in general those recruited into youth services are among the best and the brightest and the most dedicated. One respondent added a note that an ALA advisement employment center head had told her that a children's specialist could name any state and find a job there.

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My personal take on many of the responses I received was that vital youth services programs in our library schools may exist because of faculty who feel that "we need to put the kids first"; faculty who feel that "the opportunity for creative renewal and revisioning of youth services in our 'information age' is there"; faculty who "worry about the perception by today's library students that public library youth services positions are overworked and underpaid, as well as underappreciated," but who counteract that perception on a daily basis as enthusiastic and positive role models who feel that it is still a "growing, vibrant, promising aspect of the profession."

In the past ten years, six of eight presidents of the American Library Association have put a great deal of emphasis on serving youth. One respondent expressed the opinion that the area is strong and could be getting stronger.

It is a time of great opportunity to make the "image" more attractive and timely. We can start them out with the positive image of librarians in children's literature, continue to set a positive example as practitioners in our schools and in public libraries, and recruit them into a field for which there is great hope and passion.

#### Picture Books Analyzed in the Buie Study

- Alexander, Martha. *How My Library Grew, by Dinah*. New York: H.W. Wilson Co., 1983.
- Best, Cari. *Red Light, Green Light, Mama and Me*. New York: Orchard Books, 1995.
- Deedy, Carmen Agra. *The Library Dragon*. Atlanta: Peachtree, 1994.
- Green, John F. *Alice and the Birthday Giant*. New York: Scholastic, 1989.
- Houghton, Eric. *Walter's Magic Wand*.

- New York: Orchard Books, 1989.
- Hulbert, Jay and Sid Kantor. *Armando Asked "Why?"* Milwaukee: Raintree Publishers, 1990.
- Kimmel, Eric A. *I Took My Frog to the Library*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1990.
- Pinkwater, Daniel. *Aunt Lulu*. New York: Macmillan, 1988.
- Porte, Barbara Ann. *Harry in Trouble*. New York: Greenwillow, 1989.
- Radlauer, Ruth Shaw. *Molly at the Library*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988.
- West, Dan. *The Day the TV Blew Up*. Niles, Illinois: Albert Whitman & Co., 1988.

#### Chapter Books

- Cleary, Beverly. *Dear Mr. Henshaw*. New York: Morrow, 1983.
- Clifford, Eth. *Help! I'm a Prisoner in the Library*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979.
- Dahl, Roald. *Matilda*. New York: Viking Kestrel, 1988.
- Greenwald Sheila. *The Mariah Delany Lending Library Disaster*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977.
- MacLachlan, Patricia. *Baby*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1993.
- Mahy, Margaret. *The Great Piratical Rumbustification and the Librarian and the Robbers*. Boston: David R. Godine, 1978.
- Miles, Betty. *Maudie and Me and the Dirty Book*. New York: Avon Books, 1980.

#### References

- <sup>1</sup> Betty Smith, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (New York: Harper & Row, 1943, 1947; Perennial Library edition, 1968): 24-25.
- <sup>2</sup> Gregg Sapp, "The Librarian as Main Character: A Professional Sampler" *Wilson Library Bulletin* (January 1987): 29.
- <sup>3</sup> Helene Woodhams, "To Know What People Think about the Public Library ... Read a Novel!" *Public Libraries* 35 (November/December 1996): 354.
- <sup>4</sup> Melvin K. Burton, "Whose Mom Is a Librarian? Or Does Gender Make a Difference in Children's Librarianship?" *North Carolina Libraries* (Summer 1993): 72-74.
- <sup>5</sup> Katherine M. Heylman, "Librarians in Juvenile Literature," *School Library Journal* (May 1975): 25.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>8</sup> Jill E. Buie, *The Image of the Librarian in Children's Literature*, Graduate Research Project, College of Library and Information Science, University of South Carolina, 1997.
- <sup>9</sup> Heylman, 25.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-26.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.
- <sup>12</sup> Virginia Van Vliet, "Great Expectations: the Role of the Professional Children's Librarian," *Emergency Librarian* 17 (May/June 1990): 28-31.

#### Errata!

At the time of the writing of Dr. Kenneth Shearer's article, "Readers' Advisory Services: New Attention to a Core Business of the Public Library," (Fall 1998), the number of items in NoveList was 62,000 not 34,000. We apologize for the error.

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