The librarian stereotype in current films

Dr. Howard Besser

Introduction

In 1993 Stephen Walker and V. Lonnie Lawson published "The Librarian Stereotype and the Movies" in The Journal of Academic Media Librarianship. In their article, the authors looked at the image of librarians as depicted in 30 films dated from the 1920's through the 1980's. It was the premise of the authors to look at the image of librarians in Hollywood movies in order to determine how the public was viewing the profession (16). It is my intention to use the same approach as Walker and Lawson to examine the image of librarians in movies dated from 1991 to the present. As in the original article, the image will be broken down into discussion into specific categories such as job duties, gender, and film genre. For the purpose of this paper, several categories have been added that were not present in the original article.

Walker and Lawson identified movies through a search of the term "librarian" in Magills' Survey of Cinema online database (16). I attempted to recreate the same search, but found that the database has not been updated for several years. Martin Raish maintains "Librarians in the Movies: An Annotated Filmography" on the web, which proved to be a valuable resource for identifying appropriate films. Films that I had personally viewed and identified as appropriate are also included.


Reel Librarians

A character search for the term "librarian" in The Internet Movie Database returns a total of 260 actors that have played the role. This list only includes those characters that were so insignificant, that they did not merit an actual name, but could be referred to merely as "librarian". There are several other movies that have librarians in them who are real characters with real names. These characters are rarely a complete embodiment of the stereotype. They may have stereotypical traits which become part of the plot, such as Betty Lou in "The Gun in Betty Lou's Handbag" (1992), but generally the stereotype does not overtake the character.

Walker and Lawson make the point that in order to be credible, a stereotype must be on the screen for only a short period of time (18). The librarian stereotype is usually seen very briefly and it is used to make a point about the situation or to advance the plot in some way. It is absurd for library professionals to take these stereotypes entirely to heart. These stock librarian characters are a necessary tool for Hollywood to use in order to quickly communicate a specific idea (Valenza, 3). Professionals in other fields have to combat their own stereotypes in Hollywood, just as library professionals do. Martin Raish believes that librarians don't have the worst professional stereotype, but they do tend to be too sensitive about it (Brooks).

The stereotype in question is that of the orderly, conservative, passive, introspective and anxious librarian (Spaulding, 320). This stereotypical librarian image is best seen in the character "Marian the Librarian" of Meredith Willson's "The Music Man". Marian is a "self-proclaimed spinster" who tends to be "picky, hardworking, standoffish, bookish, and, by most accounts, pitiable" (Grimes, 3). It is her spinster quality that makes her pathetic and it is this image of the old-maid librarian that seems to stick in the minds of the public and the library profession (Adams, 287).

Tasks and Environment

This category has shown an extreme removal from the findings in the Walker and Lawson article. They concluded that librarians tended to be "book stackers and book caretakers", rarely as "active accessors of information" (19). The instances of book care taking or stacking found in the current films is rare. "Riding In Cars With Boys" (2001) shows a librarian sorting books on a cart, "City Slickers II: The Legend of Curly's Gold" (1994) and "I Love Trouble" (1994) both have a librarian who passes by pushing a book cart and shushing patrons. In "The Pagemaster" (1994) the librarian enters pushing a book cart, and we meet the librarian in "The Mummy" (1999) while she is shelving books.

More often in these films, librarians provided reference service or assistance in locating a book. The best examples of reference service can be found in "Party Girl" (1995). Judy Lindendorf (Sasha von Scherler), the librarian, has hired her goddaughter, Mary (Parker Posey) as a library clerk. Throughout the film are several examples of reference service, some bad and some good. The worst example is when Mary is asked for "The Origin of Species", she misunderstands and sends the patron to find books on oranges and peaches. Judy quickly intervenes and asks that Mary refer such questions to the librarians on duty. Later, Judy is asked a reference question for which she conducts a brief reference interview and then sends the patron off to "the 300's". This offhand treatment of a patron's question is not meant to make a statement about bad library service, it is only cut short because a drawn out reference interview is not something that
Another instance of reference service can be seen in "Scream 3" (2000). In this film a movie studio archivist is asked for information about a specific B movie actress. The archivist is shown a photograph of the actress and she instantly is able to recall the name of this woman that was in a few films almost thirty years previous. This is a fine example of exactly how much information retrieval the public wants to see. The same scenario plays out in "Dream With the Fishes" (1997) when the librarian is called for a specific fact. She has no need to look it up, she just knows it. Assistance in locating books is seen in "Philadelphia" (1993), "Monkey Trouble" (1994), and "Finding Forrester" (2000). In "Bliss" (1997), the librarian provides Inter-Library Loan service.

The use of the computer in the library is rare in the movies sampled. In "Finding Forrester" (2000), the librarian uses an Online Public Access Catalog (OPAC) to locate a book. In "Blade" (1998), the archives are stored on a computer system. The librarian in "Monkey Trouble" (1994) uses her computer to find information on a specific monkey breed. Amazingly, her computer contains a database of monkey photos which seem to link directly to the library holdings. The most unusual example of computer use is in "Mercy Rising" (1998), where the public librarian assists an FBI agent with hacking into an email account.

Controlling the library environment is an important job duty for reel librarians. Whether it is removing undesirables from the library as in "With Honors" (1994), closing the library and clearing everyone out as found in "Rudy" (1993), or keeping people quiet which can be seen in "I Love Trouble" (1994), "Commandments" (1997), and "City Slickers II: The Legend of Curly's Gold" (1994), the control that librarians have over their environment is made clear. Other movies displayed obscure duties such as reader's advisory in "The Pagemaster" (1994), and story times and fundraising in "The Gun in Betty Lou's Handbag" (1992). Overall, these movies provide the public with a wide array of librarian related activities.

Policy issues came up fairly often in this selection of films. The most disturbing example can be found in "Rushmore" (1998). In the film, a student finds a quote written in a library book which upsets him. He approaches the librarian with the book in hand and asks for a list of all the people who have checked it out in the last year. The librarian asks him why and the student shows him the quote. He responds, "Hm" and hands over the list. The list of people is used to advance the plot of the film, and no mention is made by the librarian of a privacy policy. This may not affect the general public watching the film, but it can prove quite irritating to a librarian who understands the importance of patron privacy.

In three other films reference is made to a policy which is promptly broken. The archivist in "Deceived" (1991) tells Adrienne Saunders (Goldie Hawn) that she can not give out information about someone unless she has proof that the person is dead. Adrienne replies that the person is indeed dead, but she can't prove it. The archivist is obviously moved by this proclamation because she says, "To hell with it. What is his name?" A less grievous policy broken is seen in "The Pagemaster" (1994) when the librarian allows three books to be checked out "just this once", when the limit is two at a time. The student librarian assistant in "Scent of a Woman" (1992) makes a point of telling his fellow student why the policy on reserve books exists before he lets the student check it out.

Of the thirty-one films, only twenty-five give an indication as to the type of library that is seen. Of these twenty-five, fourteen are set in public libraries, three in academic libraries, two in law libraries, two in school libraries and four in special archives. There is nothing unusual in the library settings in these films. In the academic, public, and law libraries the librarian is seated behind a high counter or a desk. Book stacks are in the background and a computer or card catalog is usually visible. Often, a patron has entered the library to look at old newspapers on microfilm. The archives provide the greatest variety in settings with file cabinets, cardboard boxes, and walls of computers among the examples.

**Female Librarians**

In their article, Walker and Lawson found few examples of the old maid stereotype that is generally associated with female librarians. Instead, they found that a young maid who is sexually liberated or married by the end of the movie to be more common (21). This transformation plays on the stereotypical traits of introversion and anxiety. Walker and Lawson term this "a transformation from...librarian qualities to such healthy characteristics as assertiveness and sexual honesty" (22).

The film that best follows the Walker and Lawson idea of a liberated librarian is Betty Lou (Penelope Ann Miller) in "The Gun in Betty Lou's Handbag" (1992). We first meet Betty Lou while she is being admonished by the cranky head librarian for getting the children too excited during story time. Betty Lou tries to defend herself, but soon finds herself overruled by the senior librarian. Betty Lou is passive, she is even reading "The Assertive Woman". When Betty Lou takes her dog out for a walk, she finds a gun by the river. She immediately calls her husband, a police officer, who won't listen to her because he is too busy trying to solve a murder case. Coincidentally, the gun that Betty Lou has is the missing piece of evidence in the same murder case her husband is working on.

By this time Betty Lou is feeling rather sorry for herself so she creates interest in her life by confessing to the murder. While in jail she discovers a new self with the help of a make-over inspired by fellow inmates and media attention. Betty Lou invents a story that involves a passionate love affair gone awry, ending with the murder of her lover. The public is shocked by the fact that a librarian as timid as Betty Lou had the emotion necessary to commit a murder (Plumb, 33). At the end of the movie we find Betty Lou using her notoriety to create interest in library card sign-ups and fund raising activities.

In "Party Girl" (1995) the opposite transformation takes place. As Mary discovers that librarianship appeals to her orderly nature, she begins to change from the ultimate party girl into the drab librarian. In order to prove to her godmother that she is serious about library school, Mary puts on the stereotypical librarian costume: suit, bun, and glasses. Katherine Adams identified this as Mary using the stereotype "as a means of laying claim to cultural legitimacy" (5). Mary has found her place in the world, but she must have the appropriate image to be taken seriously.
In the movies viewed for this paper, twenty-two of the librarians are female. Most of these librarians are middle aged to elderly. Although buns are rare, glasses are a common accessory and reel librarians generally don't have a sense of fashion, preferring dowdy suits in muted tones.

**Male Librarians**

It is not surprising that only five of the reel librarians are male. The profession of librarianship is typically feminine, with 75% of law librarians and 63% of academic librarians being female (Kolb and Schaffner, 52). The percentage of reel male librarians, at just over 18% may be a little low when compared to the actual numbers, but it is obvious that the image of librarians does not usually include men. What is surprising is the number of male librarians represented in the films studied by Walker and Lawson. They found that females outnumbered males eighteen to twelve in the movies, while at the time four out of five librarians in the real world were women (Walker and Lawson, 22).

Walker and Lawson found that male librarians in the movies tended to be mild, civil, and intelligent, the opposite of the qualities found in a movie hero (22). "Heart and Souls" (1993) provides a perfect example of the timid, civil, and intelligent male librarian. Harrison Winslow (Charles Grodin) is a librarian who wants to be a singer, but can not move past his stage fright to audition. Throughout the film, it is Harrison who begins intellectual conversations or tries to work out conflicts between the other characters.

Quite opposite of the Harrison Winslow character is Mr. Dewey (Christopher Lloyd) in "The Pagemaster" (1994). Mr. Dewey is passionate about books and reading and encourages action and adventure. Mr. Dewey is also the Pagemaster, and as such he uses his skills to draw a frightened young boy into a world of excitement. There is nothing timid or necessarily civil about this character, but he does show evidence of intelligence.

The librarian in "Philadelphia" (1993) played by Tracey Walter, is not a timid, civil, or even intelligent example of a male librarian. He is in fact rather assertive about his ignorant opinions of a patron. The librarian in "Rushmore" (1998) is either a pushover or just careless when he hands out personal information to students. The last male librarian example is in "Judicial Consent" (1994) with a part so small that it is difficult to determine his characteristics. He does not appear to be unusually heroic or intimidating, so it can be assumed that were his part extended he would fit the timid, civil, and intelligent stereotype.

**Support Staff**

In the movies it is difficult to distinguish the librarians from the paraprofessional staff. In their study, Walker and Lawson do not attempt to make a distinction between the two (20). For this paper, I have distinguished librarians from paraprofessionals for those films where the difference is made obvious. Unfortunately, due to the generalizations of Hollywood, some characters identified as librarians in this paper may be working in the capacity of paraprofessional library staff.

The distinction between librarian and library clerk is made clear in "Party Girl" (1995). The librarian, Judy, explains to Mary and the movie viewers the difference between librarians and clerks. She tells Mary that "Patrons often mistake clerks for librarians", and explains that as a clerk, Mary should not attempt to answer reference questions.

A student library worker who has the sole responsibility to close the library can be found in "Scent of a Woman" (1992). In "Judicial Consent" (1994) a young man volunteers at a law library in order to get close to a judge he plans to kill. When the judge finds out about his plan she asks the librarian who the young man is, but the librarian has no records for a volunteer. Bridget Fonda's character in "A Simple Plan" (1998) seems to be doing the work of a page, but she could also be a library clerk. Her behavior towards her job does not suggest that she is a professional.

Two of the films feature individuals who have no professional training, but who act in the capacity of a librarian. In "Where the Heart Is" (2000), a young man takes over his sister's position as librarian while she is incapacitated. His sister, the librarian, lives in rooms above the library while he works downstairs. He is incredibly abrupt and impatient with his patrons, but as time progresses he becomes increasingly helpful and sympathetic. It is never made clear in the film why she is not replaced with a professional. "Shawshank Redemption" (1994) gives us a look at a prison library from the inside. When the old prison "librarian" is released, Andy Dufresne (Tim Robbins) takes over his position and with persistence turns the library into a vast resource for the inmates. Although Andy is not an information professional he does have more education than the average prisoner in the film.

**Villains Vs. Heroes**

As with the findings of Walker and Lawson, I can also conclude that librarians are rarely full fledged villains (23). More often it is the case that the librarian is an everyday sort of villain, for example the librarian in "With Honors" (1994) who tries to throw a homeless man out into the snow. Every librarian that shushed someone can be considered a villain because shushing is an example of controlling and even frightening library patrons into submission.

The librarian in "Philadelphia" (1993) is unfortunately the character chosen to display the public fear of AIDS (Raish, 10). Although he helps Andrew Beckett (Tom Hanks) find information on HIV related discrimination, he announces loudly in the quiet library what he has found, which causes many people to sit up and take notice of the situation. With the power that he has gained from the others listening, the librarian then begins to suggest repeatedly that Andrew remove himself to a private research room. The altercation ends when another patron stands up for Andrew and the librarian leaves saying, "Whatever, Sir". This is a prime example of the library villain. He used information that he gained from helping with a reference question to publicly humiliate a patron.

Another library villain is the archivist Pearl (Eric Edwards) in "Blade" (1998). She is a vampire and shows her villainy by refusing to help...
our hero Blade obtain the information that he needs. It requires torture with ultra-violet rays for Blade to get anything out of the archivist, and even then it is not useful information. Pearl is a villain in her refusal to help the good guy, but since she is a bad guy, she is actually a hero among her own people for protecting their information under duress.

In the same way that there are everyday villains, there are also everyday heroes in movie libraries. There is the librarian in "Matilda" (1996) who helps to open up the world of books and information to young Matilda. Mr. Dewey in "The Pagemaster" (1994) frees a boy from his fears by providing reader's advisory services. It is hard to say whether or not each act of providing someone with needed information is a heroic deed, so it is difficult to determine further library heroism.

A prime example of a librarian who is also a heroine is Evelyn Carnahan (Rachel Wiesz) in "The Mummy" (1999). She is an intelligent and adventurous woman who seeks knowledge, and unknowingly unleashes a monster from the dead. She is eventually the one who saves everyone from the same monster with her extensive knowledge of hieroglyphics. Throughout the movie Evelyn manages to shed most of the stereotypical librarian traits that she begins the movie with. It is unfortunate that in the sequel "The Mummy Returns" (2001), she has left her librarian career to become a wife and mother.

Comedy

Comedies play on the stereotypical aspects of the librarian in order to get a laugh. Walker and Lawson found several examples of films that play on the "sheltered or meek aspects", as did I (24). "The Gun in Betty Lou's Handbag" (1992) which was discussed above is a prime example of this, as well as "Heart and Souls" (1993) and "Stepping Out" (1991). "Party Girl" (1995) shows us the opposite transformation from outgoing to introverted, which has the potential to be just as entertaining.

"Big Bully" (1996) gives us a librarian who is so pathetic that she has to be funny. David Leary (Rick Moranis) is a published author who returns to his middle school to teach. On his first day, he spots the school librarian and enters the library to tell her what a great impact the library had on his life. Her response is "Green Eggs and Ham". David is shocked that she can remember his favorite book and when he tells her this she says, "8862 days overdue". Her explanation for this uncanny knack to remember the exact due date of specific items is, "It's what I live for, dear". Shushing was used as a comedic device in "City Slickers II: The Legend of Curly's Gold" (1994). These two examples obviously make a mockery of the librarian position (Walker and Lawson, 24).

Mystery and Thrillers

With only three mysteries and one thriller to discuss, I do not feel the same confidence as Walker and Lawson in stating that librarians have a good representation in this genre (24). "Deceived" (1991) is a mystery that requires the help of an archivist to solve. It is a librarian in "Judicial Consent" (1994) that phones with the piece of information that is needed to discover the plans of the villain. The librarian in "Mercy Rising" helps to get access to an email account containing important information. In "Scream 3", the archivist provides a piece of the puzzle that will help determine the identity of the killer.

Action

Only one action heroine is among the librarians in these films and that is Evelyn Carnahan from "The Mummy" (1999), which was discussed previously. This character shows incredible bravery in the face of the inexplicable. She is proud of who she is and says, "I may not be an explorer or an adventurer or a treasure seeker or gunfighter...but I am proud of what I am...I am a librarian!" Although she begins the movie in a bun and glasses, by the end she has only her intelligence left as a reminder of the stereotypical librarian.

Fantasy

"Blade" (1998) was the only fantasy film in this sampling. As Walker and Lawson point out, the stereotype is not particularly relevant to this genre (25). Pearl falls well outside of the librarian stereotype, especially in her appearance. The archivist is so obese that she does not wear clothing, nor is she able to move from her prone position in front of a computer. There is a stench that surrounds Pearl, partly caused by her flatulence. Without even taking the above physical characteristics into account, Pearl is not stereotypical because she is a vampire.

Drama

A large portion of the films used for this paper are considered dramas. For the most part, the librarians in these movies have small roles which are present to either provide information or establish the library setting. Some of these provide a positive image by helping the protagonist, while others were negative images by removing someone from the library or controlling in some other way.

There are two significant examples of librarians being used to advance the plot. The first of these, "Philadelphia" (1993), has been discussed above. The second dramatic film, "Where the Heart Is" (2000), uses the librarian character to trap a young man with potential in a small town that is going nowhere. The librarian, Mary Elizabeth Hull (Margaret Ann Hoard) has become so dilapidated by her alcoholism that she can no longer function in her position. Her brother, Forney Hull (James Frain) leaves college to return home and take over the daily operation of the library and to care for his sister. We meet the librarian in a scene where she has fallen out of bed and needs Forney's assistance to get back in. The only aspect of this alcoholic that could be considered a stereotype is the unattractive brown cardigan she wears over her nightgown.

Children's Films

"Monkey Trouble" (1994) is an excellent example of a negative librarian image in a children's film. When we meet the librarian (Julie Payne) she is sitting behind a very tall counter squinting through her glasses at a computer screen. When a young girl, Eva Boylan
"Matilda" (1996) gives the opposite image. Even though this librarian is also sitting behind a tall desk, she is quick to offer assistance to Matilda (Mara Wilson). The librarian is a friendly and warm older woman. Eventually she becomes an important person in Matilda's life. She provides her with a library card which helps her to develop her personality, which is quite opposite from her family.

"The Pagemaster" (1994) provides us with a wonderful example of what a librarian can be. As discussed above, Mr. Dewey falls well outside of the stereotypical image of the male librarian. He works in a library that appears to be abandoned until a young boy (Macaulay Culkin) runs inside to escape a storm. The boy falls and hits his head which transports him to an animated world of books. In this alternate world Mr. Dewey becomes the Pagemaster, a wizard who identifies himself as "keeper of the books and guardian of the written word". The boy's adventures ultimately open up the magic of books to him, leaving both the Pagemaster and the librarian rather pleased.

Future of Librarians in the Movies

As the job duties and descriptions of real librarians change, so will the images of librarians that appear on the big screen. In the above sections it has been made clear that reel librarians have begun to use computer databases and the internet to locate materials and information for their reel patrons. This is a natural progression as the scope of the library changes.

K-PAX (2001) is a film that fits under no other heading in this paper because it does not contain a library or a librarian. It is this absence of both library and librarian that deserves to be mentioned. The story takes place in a mental institution where Dr. Mark Powell (Jeff Bridges) is trying to find information about his patient Prot (Kevin Spacey). In the scene where we should see Dr. Powell at the library reading through newspapers on microfilm, we instead see an internet search. Instead of trekking all the way to the public library, Dr. Powell has his secretary perform a search on Yahoo! Amazingly, Yahoo! has an index of New Mexico newspapers from 1996 and the secretary is able to pull the article up onto her desktop. For entertainment purposes, we can suspend our disbelief about Yahoo! indexing newspapers.

The disturbing aspect of this scene is the gentle omission of the librarian. It is doubtful that any movie viewers will miss seeing the librarian, because the setting for the quest for information was believable even if the viewer only saw a glimpse of the Yahoo! search screen. It may be a trend in Hollywood to move away from libraries to the simpler idea of the internet.

Conclusion

As Walker and Lawson also concluded in their study, the old maid stereotype is nowhere to be found in the current films (25). What is present is the passive, conservative, orderly, introspective, and anxious librarian stereotype. It is present in varying degrees, and sometimes even melts away as a character progresses. These are still the traits that are easily matched with librarians and they will continue to be used by Hollywood as a way to identify librarian characters.

Overall, the conclusions made by Walker and Lawson still hold true today. Reel librarians tend to be female. It is more common to have a librarian in a small walk-on part than to have any real character development. This allows the stereotype to progress as these librarians do not have the time on screen to show themselves as real people.

Missing from these current films is the "fate worse than death view of women as librarians" (26). With thanks given to movies such as "Party Girl" (1995), "The Gun in Betty Lou's Handbag" (1992) and "The Mummy" (1999), librarianship doesn't seem like such a bad career choice for a young woman. There is no example yet of librarianship being a viable career choice for a young man, but we have to take one step at a time.

Walker and Lawson conclude their article with the statement, "In the films of the future it is likely the celluloid librarians of the past and present will continue to perform their prim work" (26). I will not make a similar statement in the conclusion of this paper. Librarianship is frighteningly easy for Hollywood to replace with a desktop computer. As much complaint as there is by librarians about the image of the profession in popular culture, it can only be worse if there is no representation in popular culture. At least the stereotypical images shows that Hollywood knows a little about what librarians do (Stevens, 62). It is the absence of librarians in the movies that should be feared more than the stereotype.

Bibliography


Stereotypes of librarians in popular culture are frequently negative: librarians are portrayed as puritanical, punitive, unattractive, and introverted if female, or timid and effeminate if male. Such inaccurate stereotypes are likely to have a negative impact on the attractiveness of librarianship as a profession to young people. In modern times, the archetype of the "sexy librarian" has also begun to gain some traction, introduced in an effort to subvert the popular matriarchal image and make them...