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THE IMAGE OF LIBRARIES AND LIBRARIANS IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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"A new action figure of a frumpy librarian who moves her index finger to her lips with 'amazing push-button shushing action!' has librarians around the world raising their voices in protest." A public library director from Maine said in response to the bespectacled woman in a cardigan, long plain skirt and sensible shoes, "The shushing thing just put me right over the edge. It's so stereotypical, I could scream." (Jung)

Negative stereotypes of librarians are not a new phenomenon. In Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, written sixty years ago, we see Francie Nolan making her final visit to the public library. She speaks to the librarian who looked up at her for the first time ever, even though Francie had made daily visits since she was a little girl. "I've been coming here since I was a little girl, and you never looked at me till now," Francie said. The librarian's response? "There are so many children; I can't be looking at each one of them. Anything else?" (Smith, p. 414)

What is it about librarians that often makes our profession the brunt of jokes and negative images? Nemitz writes, "...perhaps because we are not vocal enough about the disparity between reality and fantasy. Few champions for improving our image in the library field exist..." (p. 2) Perhaps the change in this ten-

dency towards a negative stereotype will come from children, for the image in much of the current literature presents our profession in a far more positive light. Let us look at some examples of this.

In *Library Lil*, Suzanne Williams goes out of her way to shush the image. "I bet you think all librarians are mousy little old ladies. Hair rolled up in a bun. Beady eyes peering out at you over the tops of those funny half-glasses.

An index finger permanently attached to lips mouthing 'Shhh.' Bet you

never heard about Library Lil." She goes on to tell

how Lil grew up as a kid with a wild imagination who was always reading. Not only was she a fast reader, but she was also very strong. Why, she could carry the whole set of encyclopedias in one hand while reading a volume held in the other. When she grew up she accomplished her goal, which was to replace all television viewing in her

town of Chesterfield with reading.

Everyone is happy until a motorcycle gang rides into town. The leader of the gang, Bust'em-up Bill, is confronted by Lil who asks the gang to move their bikes that are blocking her parking place. When they refuse, she states, "All right. If you won't move them, I guess I'll just have to move them for you." Bill responds, "Sister, if you can do that, why I'll, I'll...I'll read a book," which is the worst thing he can think of. Bill and his gang watch



in amazement as Lil tosses motorcycle after motorcycle into the street. She then opens the library and the members of Bill's gang begin to read. Bill's now her assistant, and there hasn't been an overdue book since! No stereotype there!

Two fun picture books about the library start out with librarians portrayed as quite fearful creatures who make the library a rather scary place, but these books end on a very different note. In Thaler's *The Librarian from the Black Lagoon*, Mrs. Beamster the librarian is nicknamed "The Laminator." Rumor has it that she laminates anyone who talks in the library. Illustrator Jared Lee pictures her as a very large monster with large teeth and rubber stamps on the soles of her shoes which mark OVERDUE wherever she steps. Students are warned not to go near her computer because it uses a real mouse! However, when library time arrives Mrs. Beamster turns out to be welcoming and very friendly. The last sentence in the book is, "I'm going to love the library!"

Miss Lotta Scales in Deedy's *The Library Dragon* is actually a bespectacled dress-wearing dragon who sees her role as preserver of the books and who, like the first picture of Mrs. Beamster, frightens the children. She thinks her job is to make sure no one removes any books from the shelves and sees the idea of story time as simply "medieval." However, little Molly Brickmeyer has lost her glasses and wanders into the library, never seeing the sign that reads, "Do not touch the books. For display only." She finds a book, holds it right under her nose and begins to read. She is soon surrounded by children. "Give me that book, Molly Brickmeyer," roars Miss Scales. Molly does so and, after Miss Scales checks the spine for cracks and examines each page for stains and smudges, she begins to read. When Molly Brickmeyer climbs up into Miss Scales's lap and doesn't get scorched, the students relax, and as the dragon librarian reads, her scales begin to fall on the floor and she becomes a friendly librarian who causes the children to love library day. Well, to tell the whole story, we must be honest and report that she does retain a little bit of her dragon qualities. After all, if she didn't, "who would guard the books?"

Librarian Ms. Katz in Porte's *Harry in Trouble* also appears a bit scary at first, but it turns out that the problem is with Harry who is always losing his library card. Ms. Katz turns out to be quite understanding and patient, and solves

Harry's problem by suggesting that Harry let her keep his library card. "When you want to borrow books, you'll have to ask for it..." Harry is quite happy with this arrangement, and in the end he finds his lost cards as well.

Authors Cari Best, Patricia McKissack and Pat Mora have created picture books which totally remove the negative media-created stereotypes and replace them with positive pictures of libraries and librarians. In Best's *Red Light, Green Light, Mama and Me*, we see Lizzie going to work with Mama who is a children's librarian at the public library. Niki Daly's watercolors add a great deal to the description of the train ride, the walk through the city and finally the arrival at the public library. The wonderful day includes meeting members of the staff, attending story time, eating lunch on the steps, helping a little boy select a book, making bookmarks, and just hanging out with Mama. What is Lizzy's idea of Mama's job? "My mama must be the most important person in the whole city," she thinks.



McKissack's *Goin' Someplace Special* describes a very different journey across a city. At the beginning of the story we find 'Tricia Ann preparing to make the journey. Like Lizzy, 'Tricia Ann is an African American, but the setting is the 60's when the city was not a friendly place to her people. We see her walk to the back of the bus and then give her seat to another passenger who, because of her race, may not sit in an empty seat at the front of the bus. We see her in the city park observing the "For whites only" sign on a bench. "Silly signs," she muttered as she strutted away on sober legs." 'Tricia Ann encounters several other evidences of Jim Crow such as someone in the hotel lobby saying, "What is she doing in here?" and a girl in front of the Grand Music Palace saying, "Colored people can't come in the front door. They got to go 'round

back and sit in the Buzzard's Roost." But finally she reaches her destination. "It was much more than bricks and stone. It was an idea." "Tricia Ann no longer feels angry or hurt or embarrassed, for she has at last reached "Someplace Special." What is that place? The message chiseled in stone across the front facing says it all — "PUBLIC LIBRARY: ALL ARE WELCOME."

Tomás and the Library Lady is also the story of a minority child who finds the public library a friendly welcoming place. Young Tomás is the child of migrant workers in Iowa. When his story-telling grandfather tells him that there are many more stories in the library, he walks downtown to find this wonderful place. He is greeted by the librarian who gives him a drink of water, finds out what his interests are, and then leads him to a place where he may read the day away. When it is time to leave she even allows him to take two books home! This becomes his pattern that summer. Some days the librarian would ask Tomás to read to

her and to teach her some new words in Spanish. On other days he would read to himself. Then comes the day when Tomás has a sad word to teach her. The word is adiós. "He would miss this quiet place, the cool water, the many books. He would miss the library lady." She gives him a big hug and a shiny new book for his journey. This story is inspired by the experience of Tomás Rivera, who became chancellor of the University of California at Riverside. That campus's library now bears the name of the boy who was encouraged to read by a librarian in Iowa.

Thank you, Patricia McKissack, Pat Mora, Suzanne Williams and other writers of children's literature who have presented librarians, not as shushing stern keepers of books, but as friendly fun people in welcoming places ready to open up new worlds to the children who enter.

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- Note: A few titles listed in the bibliography are not mentioned in the text of the article but provide further pieces of children's literature that include libraries and/or librarians.

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