



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“Stereotype: A standardized mental picture that is held in common by members of a group and that represents an oversimplified opinion, prejudiced attitude, or uncritical judgment.”

-From Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 11th edition

I like Garrison Keillor. When I listen to “Prairie Home Companion,” I frequently find myself laughing at one of his clever twists on reality. However I hadn't given much thought to the stereotypes he uses in his show until a recent librarian one.

I know it is meant to be a gentle parody, rather than a true representation. Certainly when he does a cowboy on the range, it is a cowboy that doesn't exist – and probably never did. Or a detective or a chef or any of the other characters that make up his small radio comic dramas. Listening to them doesn't make me think differently about those characters – I don't suddenly think all cowboys are like Dusty the cowboy or all detectives like Guy Noir, private detective.

So, why be so sensitive about the librarian stereotype? Of course, I am in good company – it is amazing how many columns and articles have been written about this topic. We

librarians are passionate about defending ourselves, or perhaps I should say, explaining ourselves. In Trisha Evans' “Cool Job: Librarian” (*Daily Oklahoman*, January 14, 2007), librarian Pat Weaver-Myers says: “I think people have the idea that librarian say ‘shush’ and wear buns. They have a pretty old-fashioned idea of librarians.”

In Julie M. King's “She's Not the Stereotype Librarian” (*The Post-Standard*, Syracuse, New York, February 17, 2005), reference librarian Lisa Carr mentions two other assumptions she thinks are made about librarians: That “you're quiet and that you read a lot.” She also makes a comment that I couldn't agree with more: “A lot of people think it's all about loving books, and books are important, but in a public library, it's about people.”

As I've been thinking about this topic, I realized I used to think that this stereotype was simply a dated impression of

librarians. Now I’m not so sure. Librarians have always had to be creative, resourceful, strong, personable, principled and passionate about bringing people and information together. We have always looked as different from each other as the people in any profession. Some of us are young when we start and middle-aged when we finish. Others become librarians later in life, after having a successful career in another field or after raising a family. When buns were stylish, some of us had buns – but so did my fourth grade teacher and, for a while, my fashionable mother.

As part of my effort to understand my strong reaction to the portrayal of Ruth Harrison, reference librarian on Keillor’s show, I asked one of my daughters if she knows the stereotype for librarians. She did, even though as far as we can remember, she has actually never met a librarian who fits

that stereotype and has met many who don’t. How can that be? I asked her. Movies, she said, movies and television.

That conversation led me to a website called “Film Librarian,” (www.filmlibrarian.info), which is “an online database of films featuring librarians.” Here Steven J. Schmidt has put together a list of films featuring librarians, including his choices for the top ten. In his comments he gives some good advice: “Many of these films [depicting librarians] offer a negative image of our profession, but just as many show our strengths. They all just serve to remind us that sometimes we need to remember the way others see us, and laugh.” So next time I hear yet another comment about librarians who are obsessively organized (I’m not) or too conscious of grammar (well, maybe), I will try to remember to find the humor and let it go.