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The Image of Librarians in Cinema, 1917-1999
By Ray Tevis and Brenda Tevis
Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2005
240 pp., $45 softcover
ISBN 0-7864-2150-9

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Introduction

The Image of Librarians in Cinema, 1917-1999 by Ray Tevis and Brenda Tevis is a discussion of virtually all U.S. and British feature films from the 20th century with librarians in the cast (termed 'reel librarians'). This study was authored by a pair of librarians with the goal of understanding the representation of their profession in over 200 films. The films of the twentieth century strongly influenced the development and perpetuation of the stereotyped librarian image in all media, as each generation attended the movies in great numbers (p. 1). The authors employ a content analysis methodology to examine reel librarians. The components of the image are visual characteristics (age, eyeglasses, hairstyle, and clothing); socioeconomic status; occupational tasks; and entanglements with the opposite sex.

Gender

Discussion of gender appears throughout the text, particularly in regard to reel librarians' visual characteristics and interactions with members of the opposite sex. In this study, 72 percent of reel librarians are women, and 28 percent are men. These figures approximate the profession, which is predominantly female (p. 190). Some of the authors' observations regarding male and female librarians in film are summarized below:
Male librarians

- Are more likely to be seen as ineffective in their tasks as compared to female librarians (pp. 136-137).
- Are more likely to be seen as 'bumblers' (p. 61).

- Do not appear as 'bad boys.' Instead, they fail to go astray even when they try, as exemplified by Bryant Washburn in *A Very Good Young Man* (1919) and Peter Sellars in *Only Two Can Play* (1962) (p. 100).

Female librarians
- Are often seen as making 'imprudent choices in the selection of mates' (p. 30), demonstrating an inability to make wise decisions in their personal lives.
- Often show the stereotypical visual characteristics (e.g. glasses, conservative clothes, bun) until they fall in love and leave their jobs at the library. *Navy Blues* (1937)—which the authors find to be an all-around assault on librarians—clearly displays this scenario (p. 35).
- Are seen as having achieved 'true womanhood' upon leaving librarianship. In *Katie Did It* (1951), the closing line spoken by actress Ann Blyth is, 'It's such a long drive to Niagara Falls' (pp. 73-74). As she departs on her honeymoon, she implies that she is leaving the library and opting for womanhood.

Socioeconomic Status and Dis/satisfaction with Librarianship

Reel librarians of both genders have limited finances. Female librarians often use marriage as an escape route from their meager livelihoods (with varying success since they often do not choose mates who are reliable providers). In the silent film *The Blot* (1921), a college professor's daughter must work at the public library to help support the family. Her salary does not seem to improve the family's finances (p. 9). Similarly, a recurring theme in *Only Two Can Play* is the insufficient salary that Peter Sellars' character must endure. A key moment in the plot is his attempt to win promotion.

In the silent era, reel librarians were shown as poorly paid, but with a strong work ethic (p. 3). The library was often a place for romantic exchange and comic relief (p. 15). The use of romantic banter in the library continued in the sound era, providing humor for the audience as well as for the reel librarians themselves—who are often depicted as unhappy or stifled in their jobs. In the film *Adventure* (1945), a young attractive librarian, Emily Sears (Greer Garson) plays opposite a merchant marine boatswain Harry Patterson (Clark Gable). When talking about her former occupation—after marrying Harry—Emily refers to the library as a 'morgue' (p. 56). Another 1945 film, *Wonder Man*, stars Danny Kaye as Edwin Dingle and Virginia Mayo as librarian Ellen Shavley. Like Garson in *Adventure*, Mayo is an attractive blonde who does not fit the stereotypical image. In these films, low salary is less of an issue than emotional fulfillment. Librarianship is depicted as an occupation—a 'safe harbor of employment'—rather than a satisfying profession (p. 57). In the 1986 comedy *Off Beat*, a library worker portrayed by Judge Reinhold is glad to quit his job. On the day he quits, he also foils a bank robbery. Remarking on these events, he says, 'I'm just a twenty-eight year old guy that's never done anything with his life until today.' Thus, he links his departure from the library with a more exciting life (p. 152).

Visual Characteristics: Age, Hairstyle, Eyeglasses, and Clothing

Age is probably the most important visual characteristic for reel librarians. The authors call age the 'Only 38' characteristic, in honor of the 1923 silent film of this title. In Filmography A, each member of every film's library cast is listed next to an age. If the exact age is not provided in the film, the researchers approximate the age. Age data is then broken down by gender. According to the study, 59 percent of men are or appear to be over age 40, and 43 percent of women are or appear to be over age 40 (pp. 190-191).

Even though a majority of female reel librarians appear or are younger than 40, the authors contend that the image of librarianship as an 'old' profession is stable and predominant in film. Their statistics may have been affected by the large differential in numbers of films analyzed per decade (p. 190). Interestingly enough, during the 1990s, 54 percent of the female reel librarians are or appear to be 40 or older (p. 190). No data is provided for male reel librarians in the 1990s.

Hairstyle is analyzed for male and female reel librarians. 28 percent of female librarians wear their hair in a bun. 26 percent of male librarians have receding hairlines or baldness (p. 190). Throughout the text, the authors meticulously describe the type of bun and hairstyle (i.e. 'finger waves; multiple jelly roll buns at crown' for Marian in the *The Music Man* (p. 102) and 'half bang; French twist; demi-beehive' for Miss Fowler in *Teenage Mother* (p. 122)).

Eyeglasses are a major visual characteristic for 20th century reel librarians. 34 percent of women and 40 percent of men wear or hold eyeglasses (p. 190). In fact, 'the first words addressed to a reel librarian in the sound era were ominous for the occupation and its stereotype: "Old Lady Foureyes''—taunts shouted by a group of children in Frank Capra's 1932 drama *Forbidden* (pp. 93-94).

Although data for the clothing characteristic is not tabulated, clothing is discussed throughout the text. The authors note that color film allows for variety in reel librarians' attire, but for the most part, librarians in supporting roles wear dark colors (p. 94). When clothing is described as conservative or matronly, the authors offer supporting examples, i.e. 'large white collar.' It would have been interesting to see quantitative analysis for variables such as 'dark clothing,' 'conservative clothing,' or 'fashionable clothing.' The authors do not explain this omission, but one hopes they will follow up by analyzing the data and publishing their conclusions.

Occupational Tasks

The stereotypical librarian image is an inexpensive and convenient commodity for filmmakers to project onscreen. By providing only a few visual cues, filmmakers convey information about the character, thereby serving to sustain the stereotypical image in the psyche of popular culture (p. 2, 191). Such visual cues often appear in the work that reel librarians do. Although no quantitative data is given for 'occupational tasks,' the authors provide qualitative analysis of librarians' work. Beginning in the silent era, reel librarians are seen doing traditional occupational tasks, such as shelving, filing, standing or sitting behind a desk, holding a book, or standing on a ladder. Despite the onset of

computerized library systems beginning in the 1980s, only a few films of the 1990s include librarians using computers (p. 188). This aspect of the stereotype conveys the notion that librarians do clerical work and are resistant to change. The authors call on filmmakers to modernize the image to more accurately reflect the current high-tech and highly skilled profession.

<div align="center">Conclusion</div>

At the end of this chronological study, the authors challenge all working librarians to do what they can to modernize and broaden the librarian image so that the stereotype does not continue to dominate film and other media. As noted by another reviewer, they offer few concrete examples for how librarians should tackle this monumental task.[1] Librarians have a solid tradition of sharing with each other their writings and discussions about the librarian image in the media. Librarians should undoubtedly continue their scholarship and creative work in this field, striving to reach non-librarians as well. It is hoped that Ann Seidl's documentary, *The Hollywood Librarian* (2007*)*, will reach a large and diverse audience. Also important—as well as informative and entertaining—are the bloggers and librarians who publish on this topic online.

Ray and Brenda Tevis encourage librarians to embrace the stereotype (p. 191). Certainly librarians are amongst the fans of films such as *Desk Set*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, *The Music Man*, and *Party Girl*. Librarians could create library programs and outreach activities involving these films. First, librarians would need to watch and/or revisit these movies on their own to learn more about the representation of librarians in film. Then, they could share their enjoyment of these films with others by holding programs, film viewings, and discussions at libraries and other venues. These events would allow librarians to present their impressions—and hear from the audience —about the ubiquitous stereotype. Once librarians begin 'owning' their stereotyped image, it may become theirs to change.

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[1] Hogan, Patricia. "The Image of Librarians in Cinema, 1917-1999." *Booklist* 101, no 22 (2005): 2055. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCO*host* (accessed March 9, 2007).