

Hey, There's a Dead Guy in the Living Room

By Dale Spindel

<http://heydeadguy.typepad.com/heydeadguy/2011/02/misperceptions-some-people-have-about-public-libraries.html>

Sixteen misperceptions about public libraries

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- 1. You will be yelled at if you don't whisper.** These days, some of the noisiest people in the library are the members of the staff. While library staff members may still look askance at loud, extended cell phone use, libraries today are a lot less quiet than they used to be.
- 2. It takes a long time for libraries to get newly released books, movies and CDs processed and on their shelves.** Any library worth its salt will have books, music and DVDs processed and ready for the shelves in time for the items' release dates.
- 3. Libraries love it when people donate the old books they have stored away in boxes in their basement or garage; the library's patrons are anxiously awaiting the acquisition of your forty year old set of the *World Book Encyclopedia* and poli sci textbooks from 1977.** Nobody likes to throw out books, especially ones that cost a lot of money when new, but most textbooks become dated very quickly and almost no one coming into a public library is looking to check them out. When old sets of encyclopedias are left abandoned at the library's door (yes, this happens more than you realize), all it does is create additional work for the library's maintenance staff. Please resist the temptation to drop off boxes of old books at the library under cover of darkest night. Please.
- 4. Everyone who works in a library is a librarian.** The standard in the United States is for a professional librarian to have a master's degree in library or information science in addition to holding a bachelor's degree in just about anything. Librarians are the people staffing the reference desk, selecting items for the collection, arranging and running programs, designing web pages and other online content, or working in an administrative/executive capacity. The people who work at the circulation desk are frequently referred to by the public as librarians but they are not. This is often a very sticky subject, especially since it is the case more often than not that library employees, professional or otherwise, are underpaid relative to their counterparts in other branches of municipal or county government. Unfortunately, when the term "librarian" is used to designate anyone who works in a library regardless of their level of education and training, it makes it easier for uninformed politicians to justify keeping all library salaries low; it also plays into the hands of those who think that libraries can be staffed entirely by volunteers. The accuracy of job titles is important, but so is the notion of respect and equity for all library employees regardless of their job titles. If compensation for library workers were better, the tensions surrounding the distinctions between professional and non-professional employees would be greatly diminished.
- 5. All female librarians are sexually repressed, cranky spinsters who take out their unhappiness on the people who come to use the library. Those who are still young enough can be transformed into the male fantasy "sexy librarian," but**

only if they can be convinced to take off their glasses and let down their hair; think Marian the librarian from *The Music Man*. I would be lying if I did not acknowledge my own youthful encounters with female library staff members who were unfriendly and punitive, but those days are long over. The vast majority of people I know who currently work as librarians are very friendly and customer service oriented. They are also certainly no more or less attractive than people working in just about any other profession, save super model. That old stereotype really needs to go.

6. All male librarians chose this particular field because they have personality issues and can not make it in any other profession. There are many negative depictions of male library workers in literature - *Goodbye, Columbus* and *Sophie's Choice* are two that come readily to mind. To the contrary, men going into the field today see librarianship as a way to combine their interest in technology and literature. The male librarians I know are extremely cool and interesting people.

7. Reference librarians are no longer necessary since everyone knows how to find what they need with google. I first received training to search the web back in 1995 and I've lost track of the number of times I've located information for a patron in a matter of seconds, after having had that person tell me that they had been searching unsuccessfully for that information for hours, if not days. Additionally, librarians are good at finding information on the "hidden web," proprietary databases for which the library has paid subscription fees and which the average person is not aware of.

8. No one would notice the difference if you fired all the library staff and ran it with volunteers. With municipal and county budgets taking huge hits in many parts of the country, it is inevitable that some politicians will try to use this tired old argument. Volunteers have good intentions, but good intentions alone do not bring with them the specialized expertise that librarians and paraprofessional staff bring to their job through education, training and work experience. Most volunteers are looking to contribute a relatively small number of hours per week; today's library circulation systems are sufficiently complex that even the most intelligent volunteer would be hard pressed to develop proficiency working only a few hours a week at the circulation desk. The years of acquired knowledge stored away by a seasoned reference librarian cannot automatically be duplicated by someone with no formal training or experience.

9. The librarian determines what items should be added to the library's collection by reading each book and viewing each DVD before making a final decision. Ironically, even if I quit my job, I wouldn't be able to accomplish this task.

10. The library does not provide materials in digitized format for people with e-readers and other devices. Not true, as libraries have already begun to provide e-books as well as downloadable audio and video. If this is what you want and it is not already happening at your library, you need to speak up.

More misperceptions about public libraries

February 20, 2011

11. A public library is a stress-free work environment. Please note that all of the following have happened to me at one time or another during the course of an admittedly lengthy career that includes time spent in both urban and suburban libraries: A very large swarm of unidentified flying insects entered the children's department through a ground level window; a car overshot the curb of our parking lot, colliding with the library's outdoor storage shed; a different car overshot the curb, crashing into and completely destroying the sign on our front lawn; an adult patron vomited blood in the children's room, requiring us to close the entire department for several hours until it could be properly cleaned; a squirrel somehow entered the building through the roof and became trapped in the duct work; an elderly gentleman who was reading the newspaper became unresponsive, necessitating an emergency call to the rescue squad; early in my career I spent a very scary day being stalked by a patron who alternately stared at me and followed me around in an area of the library that was relatively isolated; undercover vice cops used my department to do surveillance of drug deals taking place in the park across the street; a male patron exposed himself to our student page as she was shelving books; a patron who was observed using razor blades to remove the security strips from book spines so he could sneak the books out of the library under his coat without setting off the security alarm was apprehended by the police and given the perp walk out of the building. This is not to mention all of the times over the years when the circulation system crashed with no warning during the course of a busy afternoon. Yes, all of this stuff, at one time or another, was all in my day's work. You may find this hard to believe, but this list is only partial; there is a small handful of even more stressful events that I have deliberately chosen not to describe here.

12. Librarians spend all their time each day reading. It may look to you like I'm reading a magazine, but I'm actually reading book reviews in *Publisher's Weekly* to decide what to order for our collection. It might also look to you like I'm reading the local newspaper when what I'm really doing is checking to see if the press releases and program announcements I've submitted to the papers were included in that week's edition. I am also paying attention to how well our submissions were positioned -front page above the fold and preferably with a color photo is my favorite. The newspapers also give me the opportunity to keep up with what is going on in other libraries included in our newspaper's circulation area.

13. The library is an archive in which every item purchased should be kept indefinitely. Aside from the fact that some books (medical, computer & travel guides to name a few) go out of date and, for the sake of providing accurate information, should be replaced every few years with updated editions, your typical small town public library is not physically large enough to be able to keep every item, including fiction, indefinitely. Only in the case of local history or some other special collection should the library be expected to serve as an archive. And, unfortunately, this means that the book you donated to the library ten years ago in memory of your neighbor will probably also eventually be weeded from the collection.

14. The public library is interchangeable with my college library. If you are taking English lit 101 and need to find a copy of *Pride and Prejudice*, your public library is as good a place to go as any. However, if you are doing a paper for your second semester psychology class, I'm pretty certain that your professor will not be happy if the only books listed in your bibliography are the ones by Drs. Phil and Laura that you found in our catalog. While we are able to provide some online

resources that would be appropriate for college level research, I am willing to bet that no matter where you are enrolled, your college library - and your college reference librarians - are going to be much better equipped to provide materials that support your course work than we are. With the exception of very large municipal and county library systems, it is important to remember that academic libraries and small to medium public libraries serve completely different functions.

15. The public library is a good place to meet men. In last Sunday's paper, Dear Abby advised a twenty-eight year old woman who was having trouble meeting nice men to quit going to bars and to volunteer instead at either a library, hospital, police station or shelter. Unless this woman is primarily interested in meeting fathers of young children or gentlemen who, if not already collecting social security are pretty close to it, she may want to consider trying one of the other options that Dear Abby suggested. That is, of course, unless she's curious about those cool and interesting male librarians I referred to last week. She should be advised, however, that the workforce in most public libraries is still overwhelmingly female and that the odds are probably not going to work in her favor. (Also, can somebody clarify for me exactly what volunteer opportunities are available at the police department? I think Dear Abby needs to stop phoning it in.)

16. Why don't you have the DVD of that movie that my husband and I saw on our first date back in 1979? Sorry, but my most recent check on Amazon indicates that there are nearly 610,000 DVD titles currently for sale, so you'll just have to forgive us if *Love at First Bite* didn't find its way into our collection. Unless, of course, there is a sudden demand by the public for a George Hamilton film retrospective.

Postscript: For those of you who might have been wondering, we were fortunate that no one was injured in either of the two car crashes; the elderly gentleman reading the newspaper who was assisted by the rescue squad regained consciousness and appeared to be okay; the squirrel was successfully trapped, removed from the library and released at a local park. The woman who vomited blood refused assistance from the rescue squad (she claimed that she was on her way to a doctor's appointment anyway) and, to our knowledge, has never been back to the library.