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Review of ‘The Librarian Stereotype: Deconstructing Perceptions & Presentations of Information Work of journal’

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ABSTRACT: Review of Pagowsky, Nicole and Rigby, Miriam, eds. *The Librarian Stereotype: Deconstructing Perceptions & Presentations of Information Work*. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2014. 294 pages. ISBN 9780838987049.

Keywords: stereotypes, librarianship, identity



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The Librarian Stereotype: Deconstructing Perceptions & Presentations of Information Work is an edited collection of critical examinations of stereotypes surrounding the library and archive sectors. The book could be described as a tool for advocacy through self-examination.

The editors in their introductory chapter explain how they have, within the book, examined librarianship through anthropological and sociopsychological discourses/lenses, through which they aim to frame an understanding of a profession that has, historically, been constantly self-examining and anxious about its status.

The book chapters are a mixture of research projects, think pieces, and literature reviews. Chapter 8, “Librarians and Felines: A History of Defying the ‘Cat Lady’ Stereotype” by Dorothy Gambrell and Amanda Brennan stands out as presented in a comic strip style, unusual for an academic text but very engaging. Many of the chapters include examinations of the history of the library and archive professions, and as a critical contribution to the field of the history of Western librarianship, focussed in the US, this is an important addition. Although the majority of the chapters deal with stereotypes regarding librarianship, Chapter 6, “Rainbow Warriors: Stories of Archivist Activism and the Queer Record”, by Terry Baxter, specifically examines archivist’s radical responses to changes within their profession, from “passive cataloguers”, to “promoters of powerful agents of social change” (p. 134).

There is much said online about librarian stereotypes, but this is the first edited book I have come across that examines these stereotypes through a critical lens. The book mentions several sites that aim to deconstruct the stereotypes, such as Dusty Archive Kitten Deaths (dustyarchivekittendeaths.tumblr.com) and The Librarian Wardrobe blog (librarianwardrobe.com). The chapters include bibliographies that vary in length, and easily accessible notes linking sections in the text to further reading.

The research focussed chapters are varied in their aims and methodologies. Chapter 2, “Academic Librarian Self-Image in Lore: How Shared Stories Convey and Define our Sense of Professional Identity” by Sarah K. Steiner and Julie Jones, is an examination of interviews with master’s students in library and information science, to collect library folklore that reveals shared beliefs and values of academic librarians. The stories collected will be familiar to many working librarians, and include amusing but also some concerning library legends. The findings concluded that librarians collectively have shared, caring, values and a sense of community through a collective sense of professional self.

Chapter 11, “Student Perceptions of Academic Librarians: the Influence of Pop Culture and Past Experience”, by Melissa Langridge, Christine Rigg and Allison Schultz, is a work-based investigation of student’s perceived librarian usefulness and if that alters depending on age or wardrobe. A sample of students were presented with pictures of library staff members varying in age, race, gender, and wardrobe choices and asked various questions regarding

who looked the most professional, the most approachable etc. Their research also examined the feelings of librarians towards workplace attire. The conclusions suggested that college students prefer to approach librarians to appear similar to themselves. It is the librarians who are guilty of an obsession with the existing stereotypes: patrons form their opinions of librarians based on their experiences of received help from them. This research project could be expanded to include a wider variety of librarian images, and also examine library patrons outside of the College student spectrum, as it would be interesting to note the differences of perception of librarians from people with varying information needs.

Stereotypes, according to the foreword by James V. Carmichael Jr., come about because of truths, but also because of the divisive, sexist rhetoric surrounding the world of work. This book examines if stereotypes of librarians are truly negative in terms of their influence on non-librarians, and argues that the most effective way of combat stereotypes that could be seen as negative is to work for greater social justice and to give greater voice to marginalised groups. The non-sexual, or sexually closeted “spinster” image is only negative in fact because in heteronormative Western societies it is unacceptable to be a woman in a caring profession that is also in a position of power.

The book also demonstrates how the “new” stereotype of cool modern “hipsters” with tattoos is perhaps a cause for concern, although some chapters seem to have varying opinions regarding this. Chapter 9, “Between Barbarism and Civilisation: Librarians, Tattoos and Social Imaginaries” by Erin Pappas concludes that disseminating images of tattooed librarians digresses the established norms of the profession, whilst the editors in their opening chapter quote the argument that making statements of self-expression can be a privileged act, if that person’s status is otherwise secure. It is hoped that there will be another edition in the future that further critically evaluates how librarian stereotypes have shifted with the wider sharing of images of diverse librarians in recent years.

The chapter that gave me the most to think about was Chapter 4, “That’s Women’s Work: Pink-Collar Professions, Gender and the Librarian Stereotype” by Ayanna Gaines. Reading this chapter gave me a sense of needing to reclaim my own worth as a member of a help-giving profession. Librarianship was a profession that became feminized and therefore, because of patriarchal hegemonies, devalued. It is as care-givers and helpers that our worth is defined by our stakeholders, and we should be actively promoting this. By framing advocacies around a devaluing of our care giving role, instead promoting a more “masculinized” professionalism, we are also promoting a divisive, sexist rhetoric, which silences divergent voices and degrades all femocentric helping professions.

People working in libraries and archives looking to hear divergent or misrepresented voices, or wanting to read a more critical approach to histories of the profession would do well to read this book. The book’s chapters are very Western/US centric in both their approaches to

librarianship and societal norms that shape the stereotypes it is deconstructing, but it is a good starting point for thinking more about the profession and advocating for it.