

The FBI has not been here



**Geraldine
Barkworth**

Bold Women Big Ideas

Jessamyn West, thought provocateur extraordinaire and 'anti-capitalist' of Vermont, USA is responsible for the Librarian.net website ("Putting the rarin' back in librarian since 1993") and is co-editor of Revolting Librarians Redux (2003). Jessamyn talks with the life coach for library professionals, Geraldine Barkworth, about speaking up, giving a damn and doing something about it.

What's it like, being an internet 'celebrity'?

In short, there are people who think I have some sort of status, in their world, but for people who don't use the internet that much, or don't know anything about Metafilter or librarian culture, I'm just another nerd who spends too much time online. It's very odd how that works and I'm not complaining, but I know people (not me) who are total *legends* of the online world, and when I try to explain how famous or amazing they are, my offline friends just say 'huh?' As much as I wish that being popular online led to real-life social popularity like people lining up to date me or invites to fancy real world parties, it is rarely the case. I knew this when I signed up, but I've always been surprised at the near-total disconnect between being popular in the online and the offline world.

Other people assume that because you're well known they need to 'take you down a notch' and so there are some people I meet who are immediately sort of antagonistic to me as if I think I'm some sort of rock star. That gets a little tiring since I'm just a nerd like everyone else!

Lastly there are some people who take weird subservient positions to me just because I'm well known and they're not. Again I find this really strange. I don't think of myself as anything special – I have strengths and weaknesses. My strength just happens to be in the arena of maintaining a large network of people, being 'plugged in' and somewhat sociable. My life is very... I'm not sure if 'small' is the word, but one of the reasons I can do all this is the things I don't have. I'm not married, I'm not raising a family; I have a very quiet life in rural Vermont. People who are juggling busy lives and family and whatever, are pretty impressive to me.

How do you currently make a living?

I do three main things.

I work with a local vocational high school part-time, staffing an open lab and helping people, mostly seniors, use e-mail and computers/internet generally. As part of that job I also do outreach to the local libraries – maybe about seven of them – helping them with their computers, doing tech work as well as teaching classes, installing wireless, building web pages.

I am a part-time moderator (like a den mother) at <http://www.MetaFilter.com>. In fact I'm the moderator. The other admin type is the guy who runs the site. Metafilter is a community blog with about 40 000 users. We get 50 or 60 posts a day. We have members from around the world, including Australia and China. I work on a part of the site called Ask MetaFilter where people get to ask questions of the other site members. We get questions like: 'What kind of bolts do I need to fix my wooden verandah?' and 'I'm going to Austin, Texas; what's the best route?' My job includes keeping tabs on things and occasionally deleting inappropriate stuff like mad raves.

I am a public speaker on library and digital divide issues. On average, I talk at one conference per month. It's not a job *per se*, but when you live on as low an income as I do, the amount people will pay in honorariums does matter, and it lets me do travelling I wouldn't otherwise be able to afford.

I also maintain a blog called librarian.net but that's not really any sort of job but does factor in to my professional life quite a bit. I also operate my own website, <http://www.jessamyn.com>.

What's the highlight of your life so far?

I don't have just one, I'm proud of a lot of the work that I do. I was really happy that my signs against the USA Patriot Act got the attention that I thought they deserved. The signs read: 'The FBI Has Not Been Here. Watch Very Closely For The Removal of This Sign.' The sign started as a lark on my site and then took off and now can be found in libraries throughout Vermont.

I was pleased to be elected to ALA Council even if the reality of serving was different than I thought it would be. There are more than 60 000 ALA members and ALA really runs itself – elected officials are more like a board of trustees and I found it difficult to impact and influence as much as I wanted. Plus there was a loggerhead between the old guard and the younger net-literate librarians.

I was pleased to be selected to be one of the first bloggers at the Democratic National Convention. I have a love/hate relationship with the Democrats. I applied to go to the convention, got rejected, and then got invited at the last minute. Too many white middle-aged guys and not enough women, I guess. It was fun and I felt more like a librarian emissary. The convention was weird, kind of like a televised private party. I reported particularly on the free speech and access issues.

I'm also really happy with the work that I do on Ask MetaFilter because I think it helps people pretty much every day. I also love the

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work that I do in the computer lab. I'm not sure I have highlights; every day is sort of its own highlight and I have a weird sense of ambition and non-ambition so I don't tend to track achievements that way.

How has the USA Patriot Act affected libraries in the USA?

The Patriot Act came out when the government and a lot of people were really frightened – now things have calmed down and people think it's a bit over the top. It covers lots of things, particularly freedom of speech and violation of people's privacy rights. The FBI can issue a National Security letter – kind of like a court order so you aren't allowed to talk about the contents – and a lot of librarians felt that the Patriot Act allowed law enforcers to go on fishing trips to check out what their patrons were reading. A bunch of librarians in Connecticut took the FBI to court and the gag order got provisionally rescinded. People are less afraid now than they were.

What do you want for libraries in 100 years time?

I'd like them to settle on a plan. I'd like them to embrace technology – I think it's inevitable really. I'd like them to be funded and appreciated and respected. I'd like them to still be places where people can get the information they want and need without worrying that someone is looking over their shoulder. I'd like to see libraries be advocates for people's right to read in ways that I think are just becoming apparent, like dealing with DRM (Digital Rights Management) and copyright issues that inhibit sharing of information.

What have been your greatest sources of inspiration?

I like reading about and meeting other people who fought the system and won. I also like hearing about people who were able to stay calm and/or peaceful in the face of great opposition and won. I like hearing about people who lost the battle but won the war. My parents both inspire me in positive and negative ways. Everyone I meet gives me ideas for what I want to do in my own life. I like living in a small town and being around people whose connection to their own place is so strong. I'm more of a roamer but there is room for both types of people in my community and I appreciate that.

What advice would you offer to librarians who want to develop a strong political voice?

Speak up: a lot of 'being political' in my world is just not being quiet when someone in a policy-making position – whether it's your boss or your elected official – does something you don't like. I don't get people who say they're 'not political'; it's like saying you don't care about things.

Who are you really?

I'm too linear and practical to answer that question. I'm really who I am right here and right now. I don't have any secret me; it's all pretty WYSIWIG.

If you could have more of one thing, what would it be?

Time.

You have a high profile – how does this affect your choices in career and life?

I sort of talked about this before, but the real answer is 'it doesn't'. There are a lot of other choices I've made – to live someplace rural, to live on very little money, etc – that are more guiding forces for me. I have options available to me which I think makes me worry less about my future (I always feel that there is *some* job I could get, somehow) which I think makes me more able to live in the present. Even though I clearly have a career, I don't think about it much in terms of 'what do I want in my life?'

I've been invited to Perth next March 2007 as a guest speaker. When I came to the New Librarians Symposium 2004 (Adelaide) I fell in love with the place and dreamed about Australia for months. Anyone want to give me an Aus-

tralian grant or do an exchange for a couple of months?

One more question I just thought of – if you went back in time 500 years, what kind of role would you play?

Ha, no idea! I can't even really approximate what life would be like. I'd probably be helping people use tools in their community, likely *not* working in some snooty library (which is the only kind they had back then) although who knows; maybe I would be a nun? I don't know what smart women were doing in 1506...

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Geraldine Barkworth, life coach for library professionals, offers a 3 hour workshop, *How To Be A Relaxed Overachiever* – reconnecting with the big picture, as a satellite event with NLS2006, Sydney, 30 November 2006. Open to non-delegates. Contact her at geraldine@boldwomenbigideas.com.au or 02 6685 1917 to register.



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