

## Picture perfect?

Ann Seidl's documentary film, *The Hollywood Librarian: A Look at Librarians Through Film* premiered in 2007 in North America and at ALIA 2008 in Alice Springs, but she began her research back in 1997, scouring filmographies and old movies for glimpses of librarians. Ann built a relational database of individual scenes, including whether the representation of the librarian was positive or negative. INCITE asked Ann about what she found.

In the beginning, I was working under the idealistic hypothesis that I would find some kind of evolution of the image of the librarian in film, some kind of upward trending curve, like other antiquated stereotypes. I was operating on the assumption that the old fashioned 'shusher' librarian would naturally give way as society itself developed and films came to reflect more current attitudes.

I was dead wrong. The same old unfeeling gatekeeper image of the cinematic librarian was just as prominent in the 2000s as it had been for decades. Over and over, I felt like Caesar being stabbed by his best friend Brutus as my librarian ideal was betrayed by Hollywood in film after film.

As far as I can tell, the librarian stereotype remains firmly in the minds of filmmakers. Need a laughable stereotype to play off your protagonist? Enter the cartoonish caricature of a librarian. Guaranteed laugh or plot turn.

I can count on one hand the films that feature librarians in a positive light (*Lorenzo's Oil* in 1994, *Desk Set* from 1958, and *Party Girl* in 1995, for example). My comic side adores the awkward, *The Office*-like humor of *The Librarians* TV series on ABC, but my librarian side still flinches.

On the other hand, I was first (and remain) a research librarian before becoming a documentary filmmaker. I have done a good deal of market research and analysis on the public image of libraries. I have read study after study, in country after country, that show that the public trusts us. The 'librarian' in the public's mind is seen as a trustworthy figure. People everywhere like and support libraries. Statistically, the support of even non-users of libraries is on par with that of regular library users.

This is key. People want to feel trust in their institutions. I think we as human beings want to trust each other. It is my personal belief that the library is

# THE HOLLYWOOD LIBRARIAN A LOOK AT LIBRARIANS



the manifestation of people's best intentions for their society. The library's 'take anything you want and just drop it back' philosophy is itself trust incarnate. I would even go so far as to call our industry enlightened.

In our increasingly cynical age, this kind of solid trust is not something to be found everywhere. The government, legislators, the corporations, the telephone companies, restaurant chains, the Apple computer people, goodness knows the US military – all have been scandal-ridden in recent years. In the age of Wikileaks, public trust is a rare and precious commodity. In this environment, perhaps we should

be more focused on what kind of librarians we are and take heart in the undeniable trust and respect of our patrons.

I once did an exercise at a library conference in Texas. I handed out cards that contained the

ten qualities a good librarian should possess. I listed things like 'knowledgeable', 'technologically forward', 'savvy', 'conscientious', 'educated' and 'shrewd'. Then I did something sneaky. Most of the cards included 'warm' in the list, but on about 10% of the cards, I replaced 'warm' with 'cold'. All the cards looked identical and I deliberately gave the impression I was handing out the same list to everyone.

I gave people a minute or two to read through the list. Then I asked for a show of hands about whether these qualities should be the correct standard for our profession. All the people with 'warm' on their cards resolutely held up their hands. But all the people with 'cold' fought the idea tooth and nail. There was a lively debate in the audience before people caught on about the cold/warm trick.

It was an epiphany for me. Out of ten qualities, the single trait of 'cold' was enough to cancel the other nine. We can be excellent at everything else; we can be on the cutting edge of technology, we can be diligent in our selection and efficient in our

"OVER AND OVER, I FELT LIKE CAESAR BEING STABBED BY HIS BEST FRIEND BRUTUS AS MY LIBRARIAN IDEAL WAS BETRAYED BY HOLLYWOOD IN FILM AFTER FILM."



# W D A R I A N I A N S T H R O U G H F I L M

circulation.  
But it  
profiteth  
us nothing  
without  
warm, non-  
judgmental  
human  
empathy.

"PEOPLE EVERYWHERE LIKE  
AND SUPPORT LIBRARIES.

STATISTICALLY, THE SUPPORT OF EVEN NON-USERS OF LIBRARIES IS  
ON PAR WITH THAT OF REGULAR LIBRARY USERS."

Technology will always change. Perhaps our representation in movies and television never will. But we can take heart in the foundation of trust the public has in us and continually work to merit that. We can insist that every patron feel a warm human connection with us librarians, and re-examine any policy of ours that needlessly inhibits it.

When I was putting together my documentary, I realised I could not count on Hollywood to tell the story of librarians because their depictions of our profession were mostly cold and heartless. But I also

realised that the beautiful, warm real life librarians I interviewed were more than enough to counter the celluloid ones.


My film is but one drop in the Murray River of mainstream images. I am not discouraged, however, because there is the face others see and the face we show. The changing face of the industry may have less to do with the how the image-makers portray us and more with the way we show our true colours. To blatantly plagiarise Shakespeare, "The fault, dear Brutus, lies not in our movie stars/But in our selves." The same goes for our strength.

Annie Seidl  
Writer/Director  
The Hollywood Librarian:  
A Look at Librarians Through Film  
[www.hollywoodlibrarian.com](http://www.hollywoodlibrarian.com)



**Wondering what to wear?**

Our American colleagues are hard at work making over the stereotypical library wardrobe. They are even reaching out to embrace the much maligned cardigan. Check it out here: [librarianwardrobe.com](http://librarianwardrobe.com)



**At Chess Moving, we have the industry expertise and specialist equipment to make your next library move fast, simple, secure, and 100% reliable.**

- Fully enclosed trolleys safeguard against loss
- Fixed height shelving prevents damage to books
- Rapid access contents during transport if required
- Efficient relocation and reinstallation
- Sequentially numbered trolleys preserve your library numbering system
- Purpose built plastic waterproof crates that offer complete security for books, files etc.

Chess Moving also specialises in relocating your office and corporate executive, and in providing short and long term storage.

**Phone Australia wide**  
**13 14 69**  
**Branches Australia wide**

**Chess moving**