

DOES MY (HAIR) BUN LOOK BIG IN THIS PARADIGM?

When Edgar Crook heard that INCITE was looking for contributions on the theme of 'smashing the stereotype', he says he "died a little". Why?

Since forever, some in the library profession have been fretting over the librarian stereotype that has long been presented by the media—the severe lady shoosher, the hairbunned dowdy spinster, or alternatively, the ridiculously handsome man in tweed.

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While stereotypes are popularly used in the media as visual shortcuts, in real life they don't have to apply. The users of a library, because they actually deal with librarians in all their diversity on a frequent basis, are not, presumably, supporting or promoting this stereotype.

But, let us examine the stereotype just the same. The shooshing lady librarian stereotype existed because (a) there have been more lady librarians than men for a very long time, and (b) it was historically part of the librarian's job to maintain a quiet and research-like atmosphere in libraries. As to the ridiculously handsome man stereotype—that too is to be expected. While there are generally fewer men working in libraries, the ones that do, do appear to be in the top percentile of attractiveness—it's a curse that we've all just had to learn to live with.

So why do some librarians still take it all so seriously? In recent years, in some quarters, huge joy has been elicited at the number of librarians who don't fit the supposed stereotype—through their choice of hair, clothing or tattoos. Indeed there are now books, calendars and large swathes of the internet devoted to exploiting tattooed librarians. Worse still there are library promotion materials and (heaven forbid) even library journals that are promoting hipster librarians.

Having this focus on what librarians look like, rather than what they can do, is problematic. And let us be clear, the original librarian stereotype was not just about how a person looked but also indicated a person who was professional,

knowledgeable and authoritative—can we attribute the same qualities to the 'alternative' or 'hipster' stereotype we are now supposed to be supporting and creating?

Of course, I am not saying that librarians shouldn't be able to look like any other member of an outlaw motorcycle club if they want to, but this should be just personal choice and shouldn't be subsumed into the profession as a whole.

It is a real problem that librarians seem so desperate for attention that they are prepared to be focussed on something as trivial as how they look. Geologists, lawyers, accountants and other similar professionals are not similarly begging for attention by adopting and advocating hipster costumes and lifestyles—and they seem to be getting along fine.

We are living in the information age. It is a period unlike any before, a period when information and access to information is paramount. It is our time. If we as librarians can't make ourselves relevant by our actions now, then we may as well all give up.

Aside from the lookism suffered by male librarians, there are some real problems in librarianship—de-professionalism of the industry is one of them. Being 'hip' isn't going to stop that and promoting librarian tattoos isn't going to stop library closures.

Rather than looking radical, maybe we could try actually being radical—and start concentrating harder on our professional role and our users. A new paradigm against the free spread of information is in the ascendant and a new austerity is coming that could potentially match the mass closures of libraries we have seen in the US and UK. Let's try and think more about addressing those things and less about how we dress.

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