



The Hollywood Librarian

An Interview with Ann M. Seidl

Kathleen Hughes

Ann M. Seidl is an independent library consultant with a master's degree in library and information services. She provides research, database, and mapping products and services to a wide variety of library clients. Seidl has been developing a feature length documentary about Hollywood librarians and is currently working with a screenwriter and a director on the project. She has presented "The Hollywood Librarian" in Florida, New Jersey, Nevada, Colorado, and Illinois, and will be in Vermont and Michigan in 2003. This interview was conducted via e-mail in September 2002.

PL: Please tell us a little about yourself and your background in librarianship.

AMS: I have an MLIS from the University of Denver, and currently I am working as a library consultant. My specialty is research and geographic information systems (GIS) in libraries, as well as training, staff development, and computer coaching.

PL: Please tell our readers about your documentary film project *The Hollywood Librarian*.

AMS: Around the time I was getting into library school in 1995, I saw a documentary based on Vito Russo's book, *The Celluloid Closet*, by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman. The film looked at the image of homosexuals in cinema from the beginning of movies through the present. It is a wonderfully written piece, narrated by Lily Tomlin. I've always loved compilation pieces like *That's Entertainment*, clips and bloopers, that sort of thing, and *The Celluloid Closet* has dozens of clips from both famous and little-known movies. It occurred to me to find out if anyone had done the same thing with librarians. That is, used film clips as a backdrop for examining the image and stereotype of librarians. Well, no film existed, so I was hooked on the idea. At that precise moment, a friend of mine in library school recommended that I watch *Party Girl*. I loved that movie! So it was a coincidence, a kind of a harmonic convergence of these three things—*The Celluloid Closet*, *Party*

InterViews is an occasional column highlighting unique perspectives, individuals, and institutions in the library world.

Girl, and going to library school—that planted the seed in my life. But it wasn't until 2000 that I started getting serious about producing this project.

I began a list of librarian characters and images of libraries that I remembered seeing in movies, and I started researching filmographies, reviews, and film dictionaries. Then I discovered the incredible filmography maintained by Martin Raish of BYU called "Librarians in the Movies: An Annotated Filmography" (www.lib.byu.edu/dept/libsci/films/introduction.html). It was first printed in *Collection Management*, and now it's available online. It's an amazing resource, and it was like discovering a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

I got in touch with a director, a screenwriter, and a sound designer and began the process of talking to the experts. I've got some background in radio and I've been involved in public television for years. Barbara Jabaily is an Emmy award-winning independent filmmaker I know from Colorado, and she was interested from the start. Also, I am working with Valliere Richard, the associate dean of the Film School at Florida State University, and an experienced documentarian. She has agreed to help me get the script in place. She's been a wonderful resource and very encouraging.

The primary message of *The Hollywood Librarian* is that librarians are interesting individuals who are vital in our society, and never more so than right now. The title is a deliberate juxtaposition, almost an oxymoron. "Hollywood" usually connotes glamour and fame, "librarian" presumably the opposite. By comparing the image we see on screen with real librarians in interviews, we will be able to show the diversity of the women and men of our profession and the fascinating places that real libraries are today. I'm going to take the stereotype out of Hollywood and use it as a pretext (okay, *bait*) to look at the history of librarians and libraries in America as well as our future.

The main stages of filmmaking are preproduction (writing, fund-raising, planning, obtaining permissions, etc.), production (traveling, shooting the interviews, developing the film, and so forth) and then postproduction (editing the film, adding narration, and distributing it). With a little luck, the film process will move along; it probably won't be done any sooner than 2005, but hopefully not later than 2007. I expect it will wind up as a feature-length piece, meaning it will run between 105 and 115 minutes, which is a lot of work, but necessary, in my opinion.

PL: What is the process of documentary scriptwriting, and how did you come to learn it?

AMS: A documentary script is quite different from a screenplay for a fiction film. In a fictional movie, you can tell what's going to happen from the script. In a documentary, you sketch things out—the kinds of interviews you're going to shoot, the order you think is best, some of the voice-over dialogue—and then the film itself takes over, the structure of the documentary evolves organically. Hopefully, the interviews will be compelling and honest. I'm planning to interview every kind of librarian, plus library historians, architects, library patrons, and current library school students, among others. I want to listen to them talk about their lives, show them on their jobs, hear

their views and experiences with their collections and programs, maybe intellectual freedom challenges, the full range of who they are and what they do. So a documentary is much more fluid—it goes where it goes, not necessarily where you tell it to go. That’s the exciting and scary part. The letting go, and seeing where people take you.

I’d also like to talk to movie stars who have played librarians—for example, Tim Robbins, Goldie Hawn, Parker Posey—and ask them about their role preparation. And a script can assist in fund-raising; if it’s well written, it can give your funders and investors a clear picture of what your film is about, even if it’s more of a wish list than a strict formula.

And getting good people to make the film—so much rests on the quality of your camera work and sound. I’m a stickler for good sound, so I want to get an experienced sound designer for *The Hollywood Librarian*. I have someone in mind, and I want to raise the funds to be able to use him, and shoot it on 16mm film, which is more expensive but better quality than video. And in postproduction, good film editing is essential for a quality piece.

I developed a Microsoft Access database of film scenes because there is so much information I need to keep track of: the length of the movie, the running time of a particular librarian scene, actors, director, writers, year of release, whether it’s a black-and-white film or color . . . in other words, all the metadata around the film. Most importantly, in some ways, the database also lists who owns the distribution and broadcast rights. Getting permissions to include film clips will be one of the most challenging parts of making this picture, and it could become very expensive, although not necessarily. Studios have been known to be generous with rights for a nonprofit project like this, but I’m not counting on it. It’s not unheard of to pay as much as \$5,000 per minute of footage from a commercial film.

PL: Please describe a few of the film clips that will be used in this documentary.

AMS: Depending on whether we can secure permissions from the rights holders, I have dozens of short clips I’d like to use. Many of them will focus on a theme. For example, the “Nasty Librarians” have their own category. The world’s worst librarian appears in *Sophie’s Choice*. A mean bookmobile librarian appears in *Billy Elliot*, and even *Citizen Kane*, which many consider to be the finest American film ever made, features a very domineering librarian. Then there are the “Shushers”: *Philadelphia Story*, *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, and *Stanley and Iris*, to name a few. I have a cluster about flirting and sex in the library (*American Pie*, Stephen King’s *Christine*, the scene in *Love Story* when Ali McGraw and Ryan O’Neal meet, etc.) and a cluster of clips that reveal danger in the library (*Foul Play* with Goldie Hawn, Jason Robards in *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, and the haunted library in *Ghostbusters*).

Films involving children’s librarians are great. Specifically, I think *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, *Matilda*, and *Goodbye, Columbus* have excellent scenes that focus on children and their interactions with librarians.



Ann M. Seidl

Then, of course, there’s what I call the “holy trinity” of librarian films: *Storm Center* (1956), *Desk Set* (1958), and *Party Girl* (1995). These are films where the librarian is the lead role, where she is portrayed as competent, and she is actually a full human being, not a cartoon. All these movies have multiple speaking parts for librarians, and the three leading actresses are recognizable names: Bette Davis, Katharine Hepburn, and Parker Posey. Finally, Marian in *The Music Man* is in a class by herself, in my opinion. I’m quite fond of her, because, for one thing, she’s a fine advocate for intellectual freedom. Her dialogue with Mrs. Shinn, the mayor’s wife, is eerily contemporary.

These are just a few of the ones I’m planning to use, partly to laugh at ourselves and partly to celebrate. So I come not only to bury but also to praise.

PL: How are you using libraries and librarians to help conduct your research?

AMS: I have been using the online resources at New York Public Library, UCLA, and the Library of Congress, which are outstanding. The Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com) is a valuable source for technical information and backstory. In addition, I have an advisory board of librarians and scholars for the film, including Wayne Weigand at the University of Wisconsin–Madison; Michele Besant out of Florida State University; Louise Robbins, also at Madison and the author of a wonderful book called *The Dismissal of Miss Ruth Brown* about the real-life *Storm Center*; Kathleen de la Peña McCook at the University of South Florida; Jan Radway, a humanities scholar at Duke; and Noa Wahrman, a librarian at Indiana University who has a film background. And, as I mentioned, Martin Raish and all the wonderful librarians who contribute to the filmography.

PL: Have you noticed any trends in film portrayal of librarians and librarianship over the years. Have things gotten more balanced?

AMS: Unfortunately, no. Recent releases have used the same tired image—librarians in buns who are self-satisfied and unhelpful. The one rule of thumb I’ve found is that the larger the role, the less stereotypical a librarian on film tends to be.

PL: What aspects of librarianship in film and in real life will be most surprising to people as they watch?

AMS: I think the diversity of real-life librarians will be a huge surprise to general audiences. Whenever someone goes from a two-dimensional stereotype to a three-dimensional human being, it’s generally a surprise. Librarians, like every group, are individuals who are varied and interested in many things. It’s also possible that the diversity of the librarian on screen may come as a surprise to some librarians.

PL: Are you hoping to affect how Americans think of librarians?

AMS: Definitely. Most Americans love and support their libraries, but their support is passive in nature—it shows best when the library is threatened. Depending on the success of the distribution of this film, I would like everyone who sees *The Hollywood Librarian* to go away with a larger understanding of librarians as people and professionals, as well as a renewed appreciation of what it takes to run a modern library. I would love it if they also get excited about all the things a library can do for them, either as patrons or even as recruits to the profession.

PL: Have any ideas for future projects arisen out of this experience?

AMS: The whole recruitment initiative and the looming shortage in our profession has given me new ideas about how

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The Hollywood Librarian can be used in the future. For example, I love the idea of high school guidance centers showing this film to juniors and seniors as part of a career fair. It might also be helpful to recruiters for library schools, particularly in rural areas and with minority populations where we desperately need to draw new members to the profession. I am also talking with Steven J. Schmidt, a librarian at Indiana University–Purdue University at Indianapolis about being his coauthor on a book about the cinematic image of librarians.

PL: Were there any surprises uncovered as you researched this film?

AMS: I guess I am surprised at how often the image of the librarian pops up in both mainstream and independent films. Also, as a librarian myself, I have been amazed at the tenacity of the stereotype. Just recently I was in a casual conversation with a few strangers at a restaurant. One of them asked me what I do, and I told him, “I’m a librarian.” His response was “Oh, do they still have those?” I was flabbergasted. It’s another example of the gap between how I see myself and how the world sees librarians.

Many people think there is a single stereotype, but in my research I have found that the image of librarians in film is by no means monolithic. In some movies, the librarian and the library, as entities, are seen as one and the same, either entirely positive or altogether negative. At other times, they have their own categories: the *librarian* is seen as positive (helpful or warm or special) while the *library around them* represents the establishment, an iconographic oppressive force. Sometimes it’s vice versa—what I call the “bad apple” syndrome—where a film reflects positively on the value of the library but shows a cold or discourteous librarian. In some films we see librarians in nonlibrary settings, and in others we are shown libraries without any librarians at all. And finally, in some movies, the true value of libraries is revealed only in worlds where they are no longer available. Movies like *Soylent Green* from 1973 (starring Charlton Heston) and Ray

Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* show the consequences of their absence. So I was surprised at the variety of our image.

And one of the most surprising films for me was *Pleasantville*, which is a profound examination of American culture that really nails the issues of freedom of expression and the freedom to read. I found out that Gary Ross, its writer and director, is a former library commission member for the city of Los Angeles library.

PL: Who is the film’s intended market, and do you think it will have widespread appeal (outside of the library world)?

AMS: I do think the film will have widespread appeal. There’s something for everyone, be they film fans, history buffs, or library users. There’s some film criticism, some library history, some American history, some architecture, plenty of kids, and a certain amount of star power. There will be an enormous human interest in the stories of the real-life patrons and the librarians we will interview.

Ideally, if librarians like this picture, they will buy it for their video collections, which is the likely primary source of tape sales. But it could also find its way into rental stores and will hopefully be seen on public television and cable.

PL: Of the films you have researched on this subject, do you have a favorite?

AMS: One of my favorite motion-picture library scenes is from the 1994 film *Philadelphia*, which is about a young lawyer (Andrew Beckett, played by Tom Hanks) who is dismissed from a corporate law firm because he has AIDS. In the film up to that point, Beckett’s case has already been turned down by ten lawyers, including Joe Miller, who is brilliantly played by Denzel Washington. Miller is ignorant of AIDS and loathes homosexuals. In the library scene, the two men are in a law library, where a librarian is assisting Beckett in finding legal precedents. The librarian has a short but compelling role; he is both the facilitator of information and at the same time the enforcer of prevailing mores. He tries to isolate Beckett, voicing the prejudice and fear of AIDS of the other library patrons, asking him, “Wouldn’t you be more comfortable in a private research room?” Hanks, visibly suffering from the fatal disease, replies thoughtfully, “No. Would it make you more comfortable?” There is a tense, silent standoff between the Hanks character and the librarian, only broken when Washington comes over and offers a greeting, thus subtly siding with the discriminated man. They go on to discuss the nature of discrimination within the law, and their common experience with prejudice proves stronger than any difference between them.

What I love about this scene is that it incorporates so many societal tensions into a single scene: black and white, healthy and sick, married and single, straight and gay, working class and Ivy League. The film is saying, Look, there are so many places in America where these two men are literally segregated—separated by race, class, sexual orientation, life circumstances, and profession. Where do they find common ground? In the library. Where can they dialogue about things like discrimination and prejudice? In the library. Where are they most capable of humanity? In the library. The scene is quite beautifully shot, too, ending with an overhead pan of the library reading room. This is a perfect example of what film can capture so wonderfully—the human dynamic in all its pain and all its dignity.

PL: Do you have any interest in moving on to fiction films?

AMS: No. I'm a librarian by training and inclination, not a filmmaker. Once *The Hollywood Librarian* project is over, I'll probably revert to my status as avid amateur.

PL: You present workshops on this subject at library conferences and meetings. Please describe a typical "Hollywood Librarian" presentation.

AMS: I love doing this presentation! It's vital that we as a profession examine and critique the image Hollywood has of us. Sometimes I give a straightforward forty-five- to seventy-five-minute talk, and sometimes my presentation precedes a panel discussion on the image and status of librarianship. I show short clips of several films and then elaborate on their background and meaning. One thing that always happens is the audience invariably has lots of questions and comments. Many people also have great trivia about library films, and everyone has their favorite. I love the Q&A sessions after a presentation—I learn a lot. I have presented in Florida and New Jersey and will be speaking in Vermont, Colorado, Illinois, and Nevada later this year. ■

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providing the materials, programs, and customer service that our customers want.

- Our communities are becoming increasingly diverse.
- Teens are accustomed to instantaneous delivery of information and service.
- We face a crisis of recruiting and training the next generation of public librarians.
- Trustees and other grass-roots advocates must bring a unified message to elected officials and other decision makers to increase funding.
- Public librarians should unite with colleagues in academic libraries and school media centers on the role that good libraries play in the life of our communities.

Thanks to the PLA leaders who responded to our request. For a future column, we invite your own thoughts on the questions posed, as well as on the answers you've read here. ■



The purpose of this column is to offer varied perspectives on subjects of interest to the public library profession. All correspondence should be directed to the contributing editors. **Hampton (Skip) Auld** is Assistant Director, Chesterfield County Public Library, 9501 Lori Rd., Chesterfield, VA 23832-0297, (804) 748-1767; auldh@chesterfield.gov. **Nann Blaine Hilyard** is Director, Zion-Benton Public Library, 2400 Gabriel Ave., Zion, IL 60099; nbhilyard@zblibrary.org.



Celebrate National Poetry Month This April!

First Time at the Library

Michael Sullivan

My daddy said that I could pick
Most any book I see
From rows and rows and rows of them
Stacked high as two of me.

The books were falling off the shelves
And piled up on the floor
The lady there behind the desk
Was stacking even more.

I asked if I could take one home
She said, "Take two or three.
I have to put the rest away
And need the space you see."

She showed me every single book
That fell within her reach.
"Here's one for reading on the bus
and one for on the beach.

"Here's fifteen pets piled on a bed,
And here's a flying frog,
A girl with pigtails long and red,
A teacher who's a dog.

"Here's one about a pig that sings,
A spider that can write."
So many, many, many books
Without an end in sight.

I trembled as I said, "I want
The one about a horse.
It's blue, I think," I said, "but I
Forgot the name of course."

My daddy slowly shook his head
He didn't see much chance.
But then the lady stopped and stared
Like she was in a trance.

A thousand books piled all around
Ten thousand, maybe more!
Her eyes took in the lot of them
stacked ceiling to the floor.

I thought that she had gone to sleep
So rigid did she stand
Then smiled so sweet, reached out and put
Black Beauty in my hand.

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