

BAD TO THE BONE, LIBRARIANS IN MOTION PICTURES: IS IT AN ACCURATE PORTRAYAL?

by Monique L. Threatt



In 1992, author Mary Jane Scherdin used the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) instrument to survey personality traits of 1,600 librarians. The study resulted in an overwhelming number of librarians displaying personalities consistent with being Introverted / Sensing / Thinking / Judging (I/S/T/J) followed by Introverted / Intuitive / Thinking / Judging (I/I/T/J). She conducted this survey in response to a 1984 survey done by the Center for Applications of Psychological Type which had concluded that librarians were Introverted / Sensing / Feeling / Judging (Scherdin, Beaubien 3).

It is this author's intention to compare how accurately the personality traits listed in the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) instrument and the findings of Scherdin's survey reflect the personalities of the librarians caricatured in films such as: *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), *Sophie's Choice* (1982), *Ghostbusters* (1984), *The Name of the Rose* (1986) *The Gun in Betty Lou's Handbag* (1992) and *Philadelphia* (1993).

What is the purpose of the MBTI instrument? The MBTI (available online at: <http://www.discoveryourpersonality.com/MBTI.html>) is a psychological personality instrument based on the cultural observations of psychologist Carl Jung in the 1920s, and human behavior observers/researchers Isabel Briggs Myers and her mother Katharine Cook Briggs in the 1940s. The MBTI is used by many schools, businesses and organizations to determine which personalities are compatible with certain careers, assess leadership potential, and determine why people do or do not work well together. The MBTI is geared to find out which environments or situations people feel most comfortable and natural with. The primary areas of the test determines a person's "Direction in which Attention and Energy is Easily Drawn" (Introverted or Extroverted); "Way of Gathering Information" (Sensing or Intuition); "Making Decisions and Coming to Conclusions" (Thinking or Feeling); and, how that person "Seeks Closure" (Judging or Perceiving). Based on feedback, a person is then categorized into one of 16 possible personality groups such as an I/S/T/F or E/S/F/P (Bayne 15-39).

What definitions do the MBTI use to determine personality traits? *Introverts* are considered inward, focused on thoughts and ideas, likes quiet space and quiet concentration, prefers to write instead of talking. *Extroverts* are outgoing, focused on people, active and interactive with others, likes variety. *Sensing* people prefer facts, is realistic, practical, patient and good with details. A person who is *Intuitive* sees possibilities, is speculative, and impatient with routine. *Thinking* people are fair, firm skeptical, critical, analytical, and may hurt feelings unknowingly. A *Feeling* person is considered warm, sympathetic, trusting and enjoys pleasing others. A *Judging* person is organized, likes to have things settled and decided, in control and structured. *Perceiving* people are flexible, tolerant, easygoing, open to change and leaves things open.

Several years ago, contestants on a popular television show were asked to name characteristics associated with being a librarian. The top 5 chosen were: quiet, mean or stern, single/unmarried, stuffy, wears glasses (Walker and Lawson 16). In this author's opinion, the contestants did not entirely come to their conclusion based on reading books, but rather by visual representations in various media venues such as advertisements and movies. Which begs the question, did Hollywood create the archetype librarian from its imagination or do the cinematic portrayals listed below reflect the results of the Scherdin MBTI survey?

In the classic Christmas tale, *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), George Bailey (James Stewart) is given the opportunity to see what life would have been like if he had never been born. Clarence, who is George's guardian angel, takes George to the public library where he learns that his otherwise beautiful wife (Donna Reed) ends up as an old-maid librarian. Mary wears dark clothing; she wears glasses; and looks homely. In an effort to get Mary to recognize him, George grabs Mary's arms and tells her that he is her husband. A look of horror engulfs Mary; she let's out a blood curdling scream because the thought that she could be desirable or someone's wife mortifies her. She escapes George's clutch and runs into the arms of nearby women where she faints.

Sophie's Choice (1982) is a tragic and poignant film set during World War II. Sophie (Meryl Streep), is an Auschwitz survivor and Polish immigrant. One evening while attending night class to learn English, a fellow immigrant incorrectly gives her the name "Emile Dickens" instead of Emily Dickinson. Sophie enters a branch of the New York City Public Library and approaches the reference desk. The male librarian does not acknowledge her presence, is arrogant, wears glasses and busies himself with the card catalog. The librarian also yells at her and likens her to a child when he proffers "Look I told you we have no such listing for the American poet Charles Dickens, do you want me to draw you a picture?" The frail woman collapses after her ordeal and the librarian offers no medical assistance.

Not all films are tragic, but the image of the librarian is the same. In the fantasy/science fiction film *Ghostbusters* (1984), Drs. Peter Venkman (Bill Murray) and Raymond Stantz (Dan Aykroyd) try to rid the New York City's Public Library of its ghost librarians and other monstrous apparitions. As card catalogs start to fly everywhere, a ghost from the past "shushes" a hysterically screaming, poorly-dressed modern-day librarian. In this film, audiences see two types of stereotypes coming together in one scene. The ghost librarian is dressed in 19th century clothing; her hair is in a bun, long skirt, and high collar. The modern day librarian's hair is not in a bun, but it is nearing gray; she appears unmarried, and unassuming. Eventually, Drs. Venkman and Stantz are able to "suck up" the ghost librarian with what looks like a backpack in the shape of a vacuum cleaner.

The Name of the Rose (1986) is a murder mystery set in an Abbey, during the 1300s. It is a film that reflects the original gatekeepers of information—religious leaders. However, in this story, a nonconformist monk William of Baskerville (Sean Connery) and his assistant Adso von Melk (Christian Slater) are sent to investigate the murder of priests who are dying under strange circumstances. This is one of the most fascinating illustrations of a medieval monastic library. Audiences are treated to images of monks as transcribers and translators. However, Bernardo Gui (F. Murray Abraham) and other priests are secretive about the Abbey's historical documents and try to use scare tactics to prevent Baskerville and Melk from entering the Archives.

The Gun in Betty Lou's Handbag (1992) involves the portrayal of two female librarians. Betty Lou Perkins (Penelope Ann Miller) is a young, quiet, attractive librarian who is admired by the children. However, she is often ignored and does not stand up for herself. Her supervisor is totally the opposite. She is middle-aged, ultra-conservative, wears glasses and tells the children

to read quietly and be quiet. In one scene she says that the goal of the library book is to be returned to the shelf un-mutilated. She does not care for patrons in her library. The idea of having a reception in her library to raise funds mortifies her. However, in the end, it is Betty Lou who wins over the admiration of the community and becomes an independent thinker while the supervisor's role is pushed to the background.

In the film *Philadelphia* (1993), two male law librarians are portrayed. Joe Miller (Denzel Washington) eats a sandwich in the library where he receives a menacing stare from an unidentified librarian. A few seats away, Andrew Beckett (Tom Hanks), a gay lawyer stricken with AIDS, is treated with disdain and disrespect from the law librarian (Tracey Walker) who is thoughtless, and uncaring. The law librarian notices lesions on Andrew's skin and asks him if he wouldn't feel more comfortable in an isolated room. In response, Andrew says: "Would it make you feel more comfortable?" The scene illustrates how Hollywood uses a librarian as an unofficial mouthpiece against people with AIDS.

These six films represent but a small fraction of films with negative portrayals. For a more in-depth look of films featuring librarians, see Martin Raish's filmography at <http://www.lib.byu.edu/dept/libsci/films/introduction.html> and Steven Schmidt's filmography at <http://www.filmlibrarian.info>.

In conclusion, it is this author's inference from having watched the above films in their entirety, the librarians do possess characteristics in synch with Scherdin's findings. The librarians display characteristics that are Introverted/Sensing/Thinking/Judging (I/S/T/J). The librarian's behavior on screen seem to imply that they are more focused inward and not outwards towards patrons; wanting the facts; unknowingly hurt other's feelings; and, are in control and organized. This author believes the librarians do share a love for books, but not necessarily an innate desire to interact with the general public. Does this characteristic or personality trait make them bad librarians? No. But, what is evident and a common thread interspersed throughout these films is that the librarian provides unacceptable or inadequate reference assistance. That, in this author's opinion, is bad behavior.

If Scherdin's MBTI survey is an accurate reflection of librarian personalities, then is it appropriate to generalize all librarians who have been categorized as I/S/T/J to be providers of poor customer service? No. Katherine Adams points out in her article, "Some librarians are prim, unconcerned with fashion and unfriendly. But, this observation only becomes a stereotype when it is assumed that frumpiness and fussiness is both natural and innate to librarians and they are generalized to the entire population of librarians" (Adams 293).

The reality is that Hollywood's primary function is to make money and provide entertaining films. As film scholar Martin Raish points out, "I don't think we have it worse than any other field. I think the way people deal with life to a large extent is by stereotyping. Librarians are relatively well-off in terms of being stereotyped and fairly well-respected. People think we have a low stress life—that's a lie—but that's okay, too" (Brooks 22). Raish may be correct, but what is troubling is that the cinematic librarian caricature is rarely given a chance to grow. Even in 21st century films such as *Star Wars II: Attack of the Clones* (2002), or *Down with Love* (2003) the portrayal of librarians as old-maids or suffering from low self-esteem respectively does little to uplift the profession. Librarians on screen rarely escape the mold of being tragic and one-dimensional.

Hollywood is also unlikely to portray librarians in modern-day fashion. Unfortunately, what was appropriate dress for librarians in the 17th century still continues to manifest into cinematic exaggerated stereotypes in 20th century films (Harris 165). For example, in films such as *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Ghostbusters* and *The Gun in Betty Lou's Handbag*, the negatively portrayed female librarian is dressed in dark, unadorned, ultra-conservative clothes that sometimes start at her neck and end at her ankles. Her shoes are usually dark and unadorned, and her only accessory is a pair of glasses. Comparatively, the male librarians in the films *Sophie's Choice*, *the Name of the Rose* and *Philadelphia*, fair no better than their female counterpart. The reality is that many librarians dress no differently from other professional occupations such as educators or businesswomen. They also have the option to wear contact lens, and wear various manicured hairstyles.

Where do we go from here? In 1989, the negative portrayal of librarians had reached an all-time high prompting Linda Wallace, then Director of the American Library Association's Public Information Office to write an article in how to reevaluate the role of the librarian. Her first suggestion was that the profession be given more respect. Her "Ask a Professional" campaign encouraged librarians to be proud of their profession and their contributions to society. She also encouraged librarians to dress for success, take risks, make friends with the media and "last but not least, lighten up and learn to laugh at ourselves and do everything in our power to make the rest of the world take us seriously" (Wallace 24).

In 1999, graduate student Beth Yeagley wrote a dissertation based on the impact of Wallace's campaign. She concluded that films produced by Hollywood between 1989 and 1999 showed a significant improvement in its portrayal of librarians. She cited such films as: *Quiz Show* (1994), *Monkey Trouble* (1994), *Matilda* (1996) and *At First Sight* (1999) (Yeagley 27-28). Unfortunately, by 2002, Hollywood had resorted

back to its negative portrayal with the release of *Star Wars II: Attack of the Clones*. It is this author's opinion that if librarians want a more accurate portrayal on film, then it would be advantageous for the American Library Association to hire a documentary or sympathetic feature filmmaker to direct, produce and market its own production.

WORKS CITED

- Adams, Katherine C. "Loveless Frump as Hip and Sexy Party Girl: A Reevaluation of the Old-Maid Stereotype." *Library Quarterly*, Jul 2000:287. *Academic Search Premiere*. EBSCO Publishing. (AN3524895) 11 Apr. 2002. <<http://www.epnet.com>>
- Bayne, Rowan. *The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator: A Critical Review and Practical Guide*. New York: Chapman and Hall, 1995.
- Brooks, Jon. "Reel Librarians Don't Always Wear Buns." *School Library Journal*, Aug 1997:43. *Academic Search Premiere*. EBSCO Publishing. (AN9710050305) 31 Oct. 2002. <<http://www.epnet.com>>
- Down with Love*. Dir. Peyton Reed. Perfs. Renée Zellweger, Ewan McGregor. Film. Fox2000 Film, 2003.
- Ghostbusters*. Dir. Ivan Reitman. Perfs. Bill Murray, Dan Aykrod. Videocassette. Columbia Pictures,, 1984.
- Gun in Betty Lou's Handbag*. Dir. Allan Moyle. Perfs. Penelope Ann Miller, Eric Thal. Videocassette. Touchstone Pictures, 1992.
- It's a Wonderful Life*. Dir. Frank Capra. Perfs. James Stewart, Donna Reed. Videocassette. RKO Radio Pictures, 1946.
- Harris, Michael H. *History of the Libraries in the Western World*. New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1995.
- Names of the Rose, The*. Dir. Jean-Jacques Annaud. Perfs. Sean Connery, F. Murray Abraham. Videocassette. Dist. 20th Century Fox, 1986.
- Philadelphia*. Dir. Jonathan Demme. Videocassette. Perfs. Tom Hanks, Denzel Washington. TriStar Pictures, 1993.
- Sophie's Choice*. Dir. Alan J. Pakula. Perfs. Meryl Streep, Kevin Kline. Videocassette. Prod. Incorporated Television Company, 1982.
- Scherdin, Mary Jane and Anne K. Beaubien. "Shattering Our Stereotype: Librarian's New Image. *Library Journal*, July 1995: 120. *Academic Search Premiere*. EBSCO Publishing (AN: 9507257719) 1 Sept. 2003 <<http://www.epnet.com>>
- Star Wars II: Attack of the Clones*. Dir. George Lucas. Perfs. Natalie Portman, Ewan McGregor. Videocassette. LucasfilmLtd., 2002.

Walker, Stephen and V. Lonnie Lawson. "The Librarian Stereotype and the Movie." MC Journal: The Journal of Academic Media Librarianship, Spring 1993: 16-28. 6 Mar. 2002. <<http://wings.buffalo.edu/publications/mcjrnl/v1n1/image.html>>

Wallis, Linda. "The Image and What You Can Do About it in the Year of the Librarian." American Libraries, January 1989: 20. Academic Search Premiere. EBSCO Publishing (AN: 8903200089) 1 Sept. 2003. <<http://www.epnet.com>>

Yeagley, Beth. Shelving, Stamping and Shushing: Librarians in the Movies. Dissertation/Thesis. July 1999. ERIC. EBSCO Publishing (ER:ED435392) 11 April 2002. <<http://www.epnet.com>>

FILMOGRAPHY LIST:

Raish, Martin. Librarians in the Movies: An Annotated Filmography. Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University. (Last updated 8 July 2003) <<http://www.lib.byu.edu/dept/libsci/films/introduction.html>>

Schmidt, Steven J., Compiler. Top Ten Films Featuring Libraries, Librarians and Book Art. IUPUI. 4 Sep. 2003 <<http://www.filmlibrarian.info/>>