Image *is* everything

So go get one already

by Angelynn King

I don't want to sound like Andy Rooney or anything, but I for one am sick and tired of hearing librarians complain about their image problem. One attendee at a recent library conference was embarrassed because the librarians, he said, were so easily identifiable. "You could spot them from miles away. Every time I saw someone with a bun and sensible shoes, I'd ask if she was a librarian—and of course she'd say yes!"

Well, pardon my French, but DUH. First of all, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that if there is a library convention in town, anyone wandering around in the middle of the day within five blocks of the convention center is probably a librarian. Second, what kind of statistical sampling method is that anyway? Was he approaching people who looked like Nobel-prize winning Victoria's Secret models or kickboxing rap singers and asking if *they* were librarians? He might have been surprised.

This begs the question: Who exactly has the image problem? When a black, female CEO is mistaken for a secretary, does she lock herself in her office and whine about her "image problem"? Probably not. I image

she recognized that it's somebody else who has the problem; what she has is the fallout of the problem. Fortunately, she is addressing the problem simply by being who she is; anything more is extra credit.
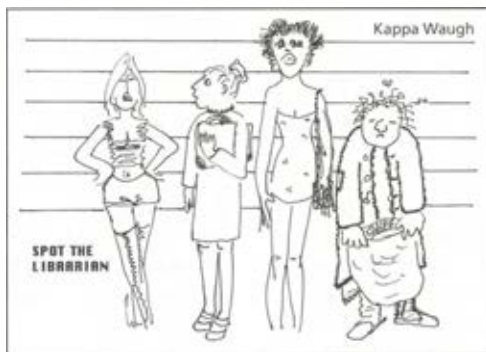
My father was a librarian. He was a hard-drinking, hard-traveling socialist and social commentator who was more likely to be found discoursing on Thorstein Veblen in the breezeway than crouching over a desk in a green eyeshade, penciling tiny numbers on catalog cards. Growing up, my image of a librarian was a sort of cross between Will Rogers and Ernest Hemingway. It never would have occurred to me to assume that a librarian had to be bespectacled, female, or heavily hairpinned. (My father would have given his left arm for enough hair to marshall into a bun, but that's another story.)

The same disgruntled conventioneer mentioned above went on to say that he hates to admit he was a librarian because he feels so hemmed in by other people's stereotypes. But clearly he isn't doing anything to address those stereotypes. If anything, having internalized them himself, he's making them worse.

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Tired of the image problem? Be part of the image solution. In your next triathlon, wear a T-shirt that says, "Conan the Librarian."

When you accept your Oscar, thank the dean of your library school. And when someone remarks that you don't *look* like a librarian, take a page from Gloria Steinem and say, "Yes, I do. This is what a librarian looks like."

Maybe once people realize that librarians, like those in most other professions, come in every shape, size, sex, sexual preference, tonsure, decibel level, and body-fat composition, we'll feel free to just relax and be ourselves. It just so happens that I *do* wear my hair in a bun. It's great for kickboxing. ■

Recent articles in *C&RL News* on ACRL President Maureen Sullivan's theme of "Leadership and Learning" challenge all of us to be both leaders and learners and have offered insights into ways to do so within our libraries today. Another challenge is to stop thinking about learning as something that happens only in a classroom. By participating in various groups and teams doing real work in real time, we can both learn and lead.

Notes
1. Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus. *Leaders: Strategies for Taking Charge* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997): 176.
2. Ibid., 17.
3. Peter B. Vaill. *Learning as a Way of Being: Strategies for Survival in a World of Permanent White Water* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996).
4. Bennis and Nanus, *Leaders Strategies*, 178–9. ■

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to validate users' passwords. The user stations are password-protected at night, which effectively limits access to UT students, staff, and faculty. Some universities have adopted open policies toward Web access, while others have initiated strict sign-up policies.

The final topic under discussion .dealt with electronic reference services. Most libraries now offer some type of e-mail reference service although not all have established procedures for monitoring these services or tracking statistics. The next discussion at the Annual Conference will focus on GIS and data services, planning for science libraries, and 24-hour library access. The Discussion Group welcomes all librarians who are interested in these topics to attend its meeting in New Orleans.—*Anne Garrison, reference librarian at Georgia Tech Library, e-mail: anne.garrison@library.gatech.edu* ■