

Kristina Clement and Rhiana Murphy

Loving It Enough to Critique It

A Year of Exploring Why We Choose Librarianship

Academic Library Workers in Conversation is a *C&RL News* series focused on elevating the everyday conversations of library professionals. The wisdom of the watercooler has long been heralded, but this series hopes to go further by minimizing barriers to traditional publishing with an accessible format. In past issues, the topics were proposed by the authors. However, during 2026, this feature will focus on the authors' stories of librarianship. How they got here, why they stay, and even why they consider leaving or transitioning at times. During this time of great upheaval in higher education, exploring our many "whys" is a worthy venture. —*Dustin Fife, series editor*

Kristina Clement (KC): When I tried to answer the question, "Why do you stay in academic librarianship?" I kept finding myself slipping into one of two voices. In one version, I sounded like a promotional brochure for the profession; in the other, I sounded like I was giving a confessional. Neither one felt like the honest middle. It's hard to talk about what we love and what we struggle with at the same time—because while work *can* matter and be deeply meaningful to us, librarianship still deserves constant critique.

Rhiana Murphy (RM): That tension is exactly why I wanted to have this conversation. The pull toward "selling" librarianship is real, and the pull toward "surviving" it is real too. But the truth lives in the mix: the genuine meaning, the genuine costs, and the things we've learned about boundaries, especially in a profession that can drift into vocational awe¹ and treat criticism like betrayal.

KC: So, Rhiana, tell me how you found your way into academic libraries.

RM: My path into libraries started with the assumptions a lot of people have: that libraries are quiet, interesting places to work. I was also drawn to the idea of libraries as one of society's democratic promises, and I wanted work that felt meaningful. In other words, I came in idealistic and shaped by outside perceptions—some accurate, some not. I was also seeking stability, something neither my parents nor I had fully experienced. I know now academic libraries aren't universally stable; I've held underpaid, precarious roles, and not all library jobs are created equal. Still, compared to the blue-collar work I did before, my current position feels steadier.

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KC: My entry point was different: My parents were academic librarians, so I grew up around academic libraries and had a clearer picture than most people of what the job can actually look like. Even so, it took me a long time to admit it was the career for me. I resisted it for years—I didn’t want to follow in my parents’ footsteps, and I wasn’t sure what I wanted instead. For a while, I even imagined becoming a professor because I loved universities and university life.

What finally made it click was realizing academic librarianship sits at a rare intersection of two things I enjoy most: business administration and academics. Libraries are mission-driven spaces, but they’re also operational realities—budgets, systems, planning, people, strategy. That hybrid is what made the profession feel like home. And in hindsight, I feel fortunate: Because I grew up around the work, I didn’t run into the same “hidden curriculum” surprises I’ve seen so many others have to decode on the fly.

RM: One of the biggest surprises for me was the emotional labor. I didn’t expect to navigate pressure from the institution, within the library, outside the library, and sometimes from the public. I imagined I’d spend a lot more time on programming and “fun stuff,” but librarianship is often caregiving, and I learned quickly that the work asks you to carry other people’s stress alongside your own. I spend far more time caring for others and worrying about organizational realities than I ever expected. And contrary to popular belief, I’ve never had time to read a whole leisure book at work.

I also didn’t realize how much the schedule would matter to me. Time off matters more than it might to someone who’s always had it. As a first-generation professional, I know my parents never had a predictable Monday-through-Friday rhythm; their work often meant sunrise-to-sunset obligations for months at a time. So I don’t take nights, weekends, or holidays off for granted. While librarianship hasn’t turned out to be exactly what I imagined, the steadier schedule, the option to work from home, and a culture that respects work-life balance are big parts of why I can see myself staying. For me, those aren’t perks—they’re necessities. They’re also worth advocating for because they help keep the work sustainable and keep our jobs from becoming our entire identities.

KC: That mismatch between expectation and reality is common—in this profession and others—and it’s one of the reasons I think these conversations matter. Sometimes people come into librarianship expecting “books,” and what they find is teaching, relationship building, collaboration, and emotional work layered into the job. Even when the work is rewarding, it still has weight, and a lot of that weight is invisible until you’re in it, and even thereafter.

RM: I’m glad you mentioned collaboration because the best parts of the job still feel deeply human to me. For me, that often shows up in collaboration, like working with a colleague to review a workshop we’ve been doing—including integrating student feedback, making our own observations, and considering our colleagues’ observations—and then trying to make the workshop better. That kind of reflection can be self-critical in a way that isn’t punishing—it’s enriching and growth inspiring. When collaborative projects go well, that creative process is genuinely fun.

The other place I feel the “why I stay” most strongly is in one-on-one research consultations. Those conversations allow space for vulnerability. Students open up when they feel comfortable, and that’s when you get to join them in part of their journey. That moment—just

connecting with another human being—can be both important and rewarding in a way that’s hard to quantify but easy to feel.

KC: I stay for the human connection too, but I’m also aware that my role and identity have expanded over time. Being an academic librarian is a big part of who I am, and I’ve reached a point where I can say that directly without apologizing for it. But I also know it can’t be all of me. I might show up at work as “100% librarian,” but when I go home, I try to leave that part in the office and not let it follow me. I have to remind myself that having a boundary like that is not a lack of commitment—it’s what makes the commitment sustainable.

RM: Oh yes, I resonate with that so deeply. Libraries often draw people who genuinely care about the position of libraries in society and in higher education, and I count myself among them. It can be hard to live in the middle ground between carrying everything and not caring at all. That’s where vocational awe shows up: You find yourself wondering why a colleague doesn’t care about something the way you do, and suddenly “caring” becomes a moral measuring stick. The trap is that vocational awe can feel like commitment, and it can be hard to become self-aware about it in the moment.

This makes me think of a situation at my last job where some colleagues surveyed students about their perceptions of the library. One student replied, “It’s just a library, my dudes.” That comment stuck with us and became a phrase we’d repeat whenever our work started to feel like the center of the universe. I encourage others to adopt it because it offers a sobering perspective. It doesn’t mean the work isn’t meaningful; it means we’re trying not to let meaning turn into martyrdom.

KC: That’s so grounding: “It’s just a library, my dudes.” I think higher education, as a culture, can become intensely mission-driven in ways that turn unhealthy fast. When “the mission” is treated like a constant moral emergency, urgency becomes normal, sacrifice becomes expected, and boundaries start to look like disloyalty. “It’s just a library, my dudes” is a reminder that we don’t have to position ourselves as the center of the world to justify our work. And when everything feels like a crisis, burnout isn’t a surprise—it’s the outcome.

RM: There’s also external pressure that feeds this, especially when institutions are under financial strain. In some environments, “student experience” becomes a retention strategy with revenue implications, and that pressure can make us feel like we must do more and more because the stakes feel existential. You can see it in the small moments, like extending a student consultation fifteen extra minutes because it will be “more helpful,” even when you have other responsibilities waiting. That impulse can feel like virtue, but it’s still self-sacrifice. In a profession that celebrates going above and beyond, it’s easy for self-sacrifice to become normalized and even reinforced in ways that are unhealthy.

KC: This leads into a spicy question I want us to consider: What’s a truth or thought you hold about librarianship that sounds cynical but is actually clarifying? My version of the clarifying cynicism is harder to phrase because it can sound like a dismissal when it’s not meant that way. The blunt version is: In academia, the bar can be low compared to corporate culture—and academia moves slowly. That can be frustrating, but it’s also a gift. The

pace of the semester, the layers of governance, and the structure of the institution can create time to iterate. It can create space to say, “No new projects for the rest of the year” or “Let’s finish what we started.”

RM: Wow, yes, that truth is clarifying because it reframes something people often criticize. Bureaucracy deserves critique, but it can also protect us from haste. We may feel frustrated by the pace, but most of the time, we aren’t hurried into rashness. It’s a privilege to be able to slow down,² rethink, revise, and make work sustainable. That slower pace also connects back to shared governance, which is so valuable and important. That kind of participation is rare in other sectors, and I think it’s part of what makes academic work feel worth doing. And as we reflect on why we stay in the profession, we also need to consider the other side: how we bring new people into librarianship.

KC: When we talk about retention, I keep coming back to how we invite people into librarianship in the first place. We owe prospective colleagues honesty about what the work is, how it functions, and what it costs. Academic hiring can feel needlessly secretive—like you’re supposed to endure it without ever being handed the rules. It doesn’t have to be that way. Transparency isn’t just a courtesy; it helps people decide if librarianship is what they want, and it lets them enter the field with expectations grounded in reality, not just idealism.

RM: Yes! I think about graduate students and early career librarians. People are entering the field after us, and things don’t have to be done the way they’ve always been done. When we’re imaginative and intentional about what it feels like to enter librarianship, it shapes culture and influences who stays, how they stay, and what “normal” becomes. There’s a difference between inviting someone into a profession and simply letting them survive it. This is where mentorship comes in—it helps demystify the hidden curriculum.

KC: I don’t want to dodge the tension here. I genuinely love this work, and I want to say that out loud. But we also know the structural realities, like tight job markets, uneven compensation, workload creep, and the gap between what grad school implies and what the job actually requires. That’s why the invitation matters. Not to discourage people but rather to be honest while still being enthusiastic.

RM: If we want people to stay, we can’t keep recruiting them into a story that only celebrates the halo. We have to invite people into the real work, including the meaning, the boundaries, the pace, the emotional labor, the parts that are joyful, and the parts that are hard. It’s better to enter with clarity than to enter with idealism that has the potential to result in burnout.

KC: Vocational awe has been a thread running through this whole conversation, so it feels fitting to end with one last question: What do we refuse to let vocational awe weaponize in our profession?

RM: I love helping people, and I’m unapologetic about that. I like helping people find what they need, and I find it fulfilling. It brings genuine happiness to my work. I also like being

the person in the room with the answer—or at least someone who can point the room in the right direction so we can get to the answer together. I do try to keep it in perspective, but I’m not interested in pretending that joy doesn’t matter.

KC: For me, the thing I refuse to let vocational awe weaponize is empathy. Empathy is part of what makes the work meaningful because it supports human connection, and human connection is what makes almost anything worth doing. But empathy also needs to be understood and personally regulated. If it isn’t, it can become a detriment—something that ruins you, ruins workplace culture, and poisons the environment you’re trying to make better. I want to keep empathy as a strength without letting it become a mechanism for self-erasure.

And I think that’s the simplest version of why we stay: not because librarianship is sacred but because it’s human. We stay for the moments of connection, the small gestures that change someone’s day, and the chance to build something better over time. We stay with our eyes open—loving the work enough to critique it and setting boundaries strong enough to make the love sustainable. ♪

Notes

1. Fobazi Ettarh, *Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves*, January 10, 2018, <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/>.

2. Meredith Farkas, “What Is Slow Librarianship?” *Information Wants to Be Free* (blog), October 18, 2021, <https://meredith.wolfwater.com/wordpress/2021/10/18/what-is-slowlibrarianship/>.