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 imagine 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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Notes
2. Ibid., 17.