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Portrayal of librarians in Australian creative writing.

Michael Middleton

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Abstract

An exploration is made of the ways in which librarians have been depicted in Australian creative writing. Reference is made to characters in novels, short stories, drama and poetry. With respect to novels, there is some consideration of characterisation and its relationship to plot.

Introduction

Why would anyone want to analyse writing about librarians in ‘Ozlit’? For me there were a couple of motivators. Firstly, I occasionally encountered librarians as characters in my recreational reading. It seemed appropriate to anthologise the works for those who may be interested in their foibles. Secondly, there has been sporadic academic analysis of perception of librarians through the role that they play in literature and the media. Another contribution might help to renew that interest, particularly if some empathetic rationale may be identified in the characterisations

Some members of our profession periodically fret about their perception by the general public. In Australia, interest in such matters was piqued by the 2007 ABC television series *The Librarians* (and its 2009 and 2010 sequels). Was Frances O’Brien an archetype? Are there comparable insights being brought to the creative table?

In the US, there has been some examination of how librarians are represented on film. For example *The Hollywood Librarian* (2007) is mainly a documentary that through interviews and observation promotes the cultural significance of librarians there¹. However, it is intercut to show Hollywood impressions of the profession with excerpts from films such as *Desk Set* (a Tracy and Hepburn vehicle), *Music Man* (the ‘76 trombones’ musical), and *Goodbye Columbus* (from Philip Roth’s book). Representations of librarians in these films vary from engaging to officious.

Media analysis has been extended by Poulin (2008) who considered how librarians are represented in *YouTube* videos. He found that nearly all depictions that were created and posted by independent end-users were negative (in contrast to recent literature finding that images of librarians on television and film were becoming increasingly positive).

Also in North America, there has been recurring interest in how the literature of fiction represents characters. Brown-Syed & Sands (1997) have provided an overview of earlier work, along with some analysis of novels that have featured librarians in various roles. Burns (1998) in an annotated bibliography that is focused on North

American literature, mentions a few Australian works. *Marginal Librarian* (1999) has included a bibliography and analysis in a section on fictional librarians and North America.

Australian writers have also shown curiosity about fictional librarians. For example Connors (1990) looked into depiction of librarians in books, and Frylinck and Oliver (1990) drew upon a bibliography that they compiled in order to consider how authors envisage librarians either by physical attributes, or behaviours such as sexual idiosyncrasies.

More recently Jon Noble followed suit (Noble, 2001). He considered genres such as detectives, romance and science fiction. His scope was international, however he did make detailed reference to an Australian author, Sean McMullen. This was with respect to *Souls in the Great Machine* - the first of the *Greatwinter* trilogy (McMullen, 1998-2001)

Another Australian, Jo Goodman, has also considered fiction (Goodman, 2001). Her sampling is international as well, and she muses on both librarians and libraries (for example citing Pratchett's *Discworld*, Borges' *Library of Babel*, and Eco's *The Name of the Rose*.). With respect to Australian content she makes some reference to characters in children's and young adult writing.

This contribution attempts to complement and update the previous Australian publications². It would be satisfying to claim that this had been framed within an appropriate systematic approach. However, it has grown from recreational reading, and a systematisation has been imposed subsequent to much of the reading. Yet, research questions that have emerged are: is there a stereotypical way of representing librarians in Australian literature; how much variation is there in depictions; and have writers sought or found ways of associating the professional and the personal?

With respect to the novels I have tried to amplify the analysis by some discussion of the role of librarian in literature in terms of their characterisation.

Whereas the viewpoints in literature reviewed were generally not geographically constrained, my approach focuses upon Australian literature and attempts to provide an overview of this output. The study is divided into forms of creative writing: the novel, short stories and poetry. There is also brief reference to written drama. The focus is on adult material although there is some mention of children's literature.

The novel

Many Australian works make mention of libraries and librarians. A limited number have any character or role development. Given the proportion of females in the profession, one might expect most literature to employ females. However, male librarians have put in a number of appearances.

Probably the most profound character analysis of a librarian is that of Waldo Brown in Patrick White's *The Solid Mandala* (White, 1966). Waldo and Arthur are inseparable twin brothers. Waldo is a hypocrite with unrealized literary ambitions who is scornful of his brother. Lumbering Arthur is generally regarded as a simpleton, but has deep spiritual insights, and is much more capable of engaging with their mutual acquaintances than is Waldo. Through doubtful patronage Waldo becomes a librarian at 'Sydney Municipal Library'.

Very little happens as their lives and pitiable relationships are chronicled in splendid language. This is despite the backdrop of two world wars to which Waldo is practically oblivious: "The peace, he remembered, had caught up with him a couple of years after his momentous transfer to the Public Library" (p. 182). It is in this library (the Mitchell reading room) that a climactic scene takes place between the brothers. The underestimated Arthur has surreptitiously become a reader (raincoat and all). Waldo approaches him "deafened by his own squelching heart and other people's catarrh" (p. 197). After an altercation during which Arthur "was mashing the open book with his fist", Waldo marches him from the building (p. 201)

This is a forerunner to Waldo's demise in the presence of Arthur as they mutually plumb the depths of despair.

In Brian Castro's *The Garden Book* (Castro, 2004), Norman Shih, a rare book librarian, pieces together the lives of his parents, Swan Hay (born Shuang He), the daughter of a country school-teacher, and playboy aviator-architect Jasper Zenlin. They, along with Swan's husband Darcy Damon, denizen of the Dandenongs, conduct their affairs in the ranges outside Melbourne in the period leading up to and during World War II.

Norman gets to speak as narrator interspersed with first person accounts from the others or fragments of their diaries. Although he 'writes the book' his role is minor compared to that of his mother as construed from her calligraphic poetry, and the role of the men in her life as they try to construe her, before dying together in New Guinea.

They don't have to be Australian librarians to figure prominently in Australian fiction. In Geraldine Brooks' *People of the Book* (Brooks, 2008) (which is dedicated to librarians), her narrator Hanna Heath (conservator) meets dishevelled Ozren Karaman, professor of librarianship and chief librarian of the National Museum of Bosnia (p.16), with some erotically charged consequences (p.32). Karaman had at one point saved the haggadah (the book in question), but is subsequently implicated in some shady handling of the same tome (p.352). Meanwhile we hear about many other episodes of its precarious existence and its illustration, which through forensic work is determined to be by an Iranian during the 15th century Spanish *Convivencia*.

Another pivotal character who is a librarian is Niesmann of the Grotius Institute in Nicholas Hasluck's *Bellarmino Jug* (Hasluck, 1984). Niesmann might be the person who has both translated the Pelsaert fragment and replaced an index card that points to its presence at the Institute. The fragment is purported to be an appendix to Pelsaert's journal regarding the ill-fated Batavia wrecked on the Abrolhos Islands off Western Australia in 1629. The mysterious fragment is politically inflammatory as it

implicates the son of the Institute's founder Grotius, in the mutiny instigated by Jeronimus Cornelij. This in turn has reverberations with respect to Indonesian independence from the Dutch, and for British atomic bomb testing at the Monte Bello Islands.

All of this is recollected by or pointed out to Davies, a top student at the Institute during his interrogation thirty years after a 1948 student uprising at the Institute in Den Haag. The uprising is ostensibly about the expulsion of an Australian student Aveling whose motives for attending the Institute are linked to agitators in the then Dutch East Indies who are promoting independence.

Niesmann, the wily old librarian in his winged collar (p. 31) seems to be responsible for the disappearance of a card 772 (p.53). Aveling finds that the fragment has been 'indexed under Maritime Discourses, the most obscure classification possible' (p.65), and 'everything seemed to keep coming back to Niesmann' (p. 130)

There are echoes of the librarians from Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast* when Niesmann is tracked down in hiding in Amsterdam: "The old man, his grey hair fluffed out at the ears, his dark suit surmounted by a stiff collar, would have startled anyone. Like an apparition of his former self emerging from a corner of the library" (p.138). There he disclaims the translation and attributes it to an earlier librarian in Sweden (p. 142) where its creation could equally have been motivated by deception.

Niesmann is shown also to have anti-imperialist tendencies – he's sympathetic to Dr Melik Sanwar who had earlier been imprisoned by the Dutch – and he likes a drink – "Niesmann floundered around among a cluster of empties to find his current glass" (p. 147)

He also lets fly with a few adages "knowledge is power and we must fight with both hands" (p. 138) and "Perhaps it was a mistake to have kept the Pelsaert fragment under lock and key ... Suppression presumes the existence of reality ..." (p.143-4), before his denouement (p.239 – 243) at which he (possibly) reveals all "If only I had told the truth in the first place gentlemen".

Female librarians make a greater number of fictional appearances, although their role is usually less central. An exception is Belle, the narrator in Thea Astley's *Reaching Tin River* (Astley, 1990). She spends much of the novel trying to find her centre. She is the daughter of an itinerant mother drumming her way around the Queensland regions, and an absent American GI trumpeter who found himself caught up in Brisbane by a "clerical error".

Belle announces (p. 68) that she is embarking upon a library traineeship. At later stages she calls herself variously a library assistant, archivist and research librarian. In these capacities she has to deal with co-workers such as "a head librarian who summons female myrmidons with a whistle and snap of the fingers, who knows the Dewey system by heart – every category – and refuses to listen to any proposed changes. A natural Luddite, computers are killing him..."

Still, her circle of friends, all librarians, have "a hair-shirt quality of endurance and a gentleness the public service has never been able to damp out" (p.74). She begins a

relation with Seb, the section head, and they ““achieve a quiet marriage” attended by four archivists, six cataloguers and Mother in a plaster cast. The marriage soon founders, brought on by his infidelities, and her whims such as flying to the US for a weekend in order to seek her father.

Meanwhile, deep in the stacks, she has become fascinated by century-old newspaper photographs of Gaden Lockyer, a shire councillor. She spends a good part of the novel retracing Lockyer’s track. These end in Tin River, as does she, doltily at one with him.

In one of Australia’s better known novels, *My Brother Jack* (Johnston, 1964), David Meredith begins an affair with Helen Midgley, a librarian. The liaison begins after she initially shocks him by presenting herself to him in a backroom of the library wearing only a gold locket (p.173). We don’t read much of her profession, except through her professional advice “I’m sure you’ll like Mowrer – he has something to say” (p. 168).

They marry and sink into to a domesticity that irks Meredith as it gradually begins to feel an imposition. He finally cracks (p.253) in his study: “... after this I turned my attention to the book-case because I realise that I hated books behind glass anyway, and there were all the books so treacherously imposed – in the ordered required reading specially selected by the ‘librarian’ in the stipulated dosage of necessary culture, and I began to shovel them out onto the floor ...” World War II separates them. Their increasingly barren relationship founders with the arrival of Cressida Morley.

David Malouf’s narrator ‘Dante’ in *Johnno* falls in anguished romantic love with “A silly bitch of a librarian who read comics off-duty because ‘she worked all day with books’”. (Malouf, 1989, p. 91) This girl with a molasses voice, Binkie, the daughter of a Mackay cane miller is passionate about the reckless drinking game of ‘bottles’. But unlike Johnno, Binkie survives the novel. She meets up again with Dante at Johnno’s funeral after a gap of seven years. Now she’s “changed like hell” (p. 160) and has a couple of children.

Joan Levick writing as Amy Witting includes a librarian in *The Visit* (Witting, 1977). The visit in question is by the poet Roderick Fitzallan made to the town of Bangoree (supposedly Kempsey in northern New South Wales) where his river poems may have been inspired by an affair with a mysterious woman.

The librarian Naomi Faulding is a noteworthy character. She is a long-separated mother with a teenage son Peter, resolutely carrying out her duties despite the attention of Mrs Latter who maintains an outlook for pornography (pp. 14-16). Peter worries that they are “fringe dwellers” (p.19), but in fact they are central to events.

Fitzallan’s biography is being researched, and a request is made from the Mitchell Library for Naomi to help out. The approach makes Naomi look with new eyes at a bridge over the river on which she lives: “I believe I never really see a thing till I’ve read about it” (p. 65). Her research is helped by friends such as Barbara and Robert. Barbara’s friendship with Naomi is a thread running through the work. Robert’s grandfather knew the poet, and their house reveals some secrets about him.

Naomi also is involved in the town's amateur theatrical group. At one stage she has to put off the cataloguing backlog to attend to a reading. As the novel progresses, a number of the main characters are also involved in putting on a play (Beckett's *Endgame*) which Naomi is directing. Late in the book, responding to a potential suitor's comment she says "But I'm the librarian. Culture's hireling" (p. 205)

Earlier, reflecting upon the words of borrowers, and responding to compliments about her talents, instead of "here lies Naomi Faulding, librarian of this town", she proposes a librarian's epitaph "I'd like something a little bit different this time" (p.11).

Friend of Dorothy (Lonie, 1996), is one of three novellas published together as *Acts of Love*. These works each focus on a significant event in a gay man's life, and 'Dorothy Ruthven', a teacher-librarian in a Queensland Sunshine Coast community is a strong figure of influence for Adrian as he becomes sexually aware. She takes him under her wing and introduces him to unimagined joys of the fine arts, opera and books, while elsewhere he introduces himself to the joys of sex³.

She is an enigmatic figure. Although we learn a fair bit about Adrian and his family, despite her strong influence for a period, we don't know what the influences have been on her – neither do we learn much about her librarianship, except for book selection policy.

Colleen McCulloch also has a novella in which a librarian is a catalyst for the broadened experience of one of the main characters. In *The Ladies of Missalonghi* (McCulloch, 1987) one of those ladies breaks from her banal existence, stimulated by Una, a librarian with a mysterious past.

Russell Clark, who was better known for his humorous novels written as Gilbert Anstruther, also wrote under his own name including *Epitaph for Joey Long* (Clark, 1978). This book revolves about the relationship between Yang Chi Li, a Chinese businessman with a veiled past, and Long, an ailing ex-lightweight boxer.

Long lives in Gongalong, a heritage town in a valley with a valuable coal seam. When the town's historical society, geed on by the local newspaper, decides to oppose development, they turn to the local librarian (p. 52). Jenny Potro has a rebellious spirit, un-dampened since her student days when she had organised anti-Vietnam War protests. Later she runs a public meeting, and manages the speeches: "by skilful manipulation, kept them all cut back to an endurable length".

I'm glad to say that these fictional librarians are a diverse bunch. A stereotype does not emerge. Yet in several of the novels there is some attention paid to what the librarians undertake professionally and how it may be interrelated with who they are. For example it could be said that Clark's 'Potro' allies managerial skills with her nonconformism for the benefit of the local populace. Similarly Witting's 'Faulding' has her research skills interwoven with her local and popular theatrical activity.

More intrinsic to their respective plots are Hasluck's 'Niesmann' and Astley's 'Belle'. Niesmann is drawn as a politically aware character who has an agenda. A tool of his trade, in this case classification, seems to have been used in order to hinder the recovery of a crucial document⁴. This and his subsequent dissembling about retrieval

possibilities for the document have bearing on the development of the narrative. Nevertheless, although his political engagement is relevant to the plot, elaborating upon his inner life is not found to be necessary.

In contrast, Belle's character drives the plot, and her disposition seems to some extent formed by her employment. It may be that she is on a journey searching for the unattainable, but using her research skills to try to get her there. This unattainable seems to be Gaden Lockyer, a man in a sepia photograph. She does at least seem to find herself, as we see through some of Astley's typical sardonic irony.

If we wish to immerse ourselves in a creative take on professional functions, much of the McMullen's aforementioned *Greatwinter* envisages a country run by librarians. His trilogy is an operatic post-apocalyptic series taking place in the 40th century⁵. The character development is fanciful and the plot twists are fantastic. Nevertheless there are some fascinating ideas explored, along with amusing allegories of issues such as paraline (railway) gauge standardization, and library staffing to support calculator (computer) processing.

The first part, *Souls in the Great Machine*, and third part, *Eyes of the Calculator*, take place mainly in 'Australicus' (future Australia) which consists of various mayoralties. Among the more civilized of these is the Rochestrian Commonwealth which is based roughly in North Eastern Victoria. Its civilization is anchored in the Dragon Librarian Service (*Eyes ...*, p. 19), the "glue that binds government" (*Eyes ...*, p. 21). The librarians are also enforcers with a colour-coded hierarchy based upon martial arts. They maintain Libris, the vast and ancient mayoral library.

By Part 3, *Eyes of the Calculator*, the service is headed by a Highliber (rank Dragon black) named Dramoren who has responsibility for the calculator (now ZAR3, in its third incarnation - truly incarnate since its components are dragooned humans). Dramoren enlists the services of an assassin monk Martyne, and Velesti Disore, a lethal individual, who after a vicious assault, has been brought back to life. She is capable of projecting other deceased characters.

The calculator had been the creation of Zarvora Cybeline in Part 1. She used it as an important strategic facility that helped maintain power over other more barbaric mayoralties in places like Woomera. This, along with her association with the Aviads, the bird-like genetic modification of humans, enabled her to be 'OverMayor' of much of the continent.

The remnants of civilization in Mounthaven (North America) are trying to re-establish trade links across the Pacific per medium of primitive flying machines with which they succeed in bridging the Pacific (shades of Kingsford-Smith). One of their airlord leaders is Samondel. She has "the dedication of a room full of chief librarians" (*Eyes ...*, p.354)

There is a droll meeting between Dramoren and his gold librarians (*Eyes ...*, p.18) that harks back to 20th century library pre-occupations and management concerns.

McMullen (perhaps drawing upon his own professional experience), makes plausible his speculations about a world run by a class responsible for the storage and

manipulation of knowledge. Though, just as plausibly, they are brought undone by the machinations of power.

Short stories

Short stories often have quirkier content than the longer form of prose. As we might expect, the librarians who appear in short stories are a quirky lot, though their quirks seem to share no specific direction. This section therefore merely anthologises references without trying to assign tropes to authors.

In 1990 for the first national conference of ALIA, a publication was commissioned that looked at representations of librarians in Australia (Macphail, 1990). Many of the contributions were about libraries rather than librarians, or were memoirs by librarians. However, there were some fictional representations. These included Ione Dean's Barry the cataloguer (Dean, 1990) whose carefully ordered domesticity is disrupted by his sister and her friend, and Mary Walker's proprietorial Mrs Hope (Walker, 1990) who finds redemption in a visit from the chief librarian. There are also two eccentric library assistants: Sean McMullen's Roland (McMullen, 1990) who conducts a fantasy as an emperor with passing borrowers as members of his court, and Ridley Allen's Annie (Allen, 1990) who explores erotic possibilities with tattle tape.

Murray Bail's librarian (Bail, 1977) Kathy, is British, reflecting upon her times in Karachi where as an ex-pat she learnt Urdu, reigned over a bungalow qua salon in Karachi, had an affair with a local artist Syed Masood, and generally inclined to the local culture until this closeness disturbed her superiors.

The chief librarian at the British Council considered it inappropriate for her to wear a sari. She ends up doing her reflecting in London.

The story is perhaps most concerned with differentiating between things and how these things are denoted by words. However there is some character development for the "marmoreal" Kathy who initially feels hot and awkward in Syed's company, but later trusts him when others don't.

In *Ultima Thule* (Vavere, 1988) Simon is attempting to create an itinerary to 'Ultima thule' for some ephemeral clients. He seeks the help of "the most dessicated young woman he had ever met" (p. 79) ... "how could she keep all those facts in her head?" This girl (who may have been called Edda, and may have been from the Library) had the steady gaze of "a confident girl in a TV ad" (p. 81), and recited poetry backwards!

In *The Secret Sin of Ms Antonia Laker* (Witting, 2000), three female librarians (one young, the others old enough to remember Antonia) carry on a verbal skirmish in the communal tea room. They are trying to make sense of the handwritten Latin commentary of a professor that makes reference to his fellow academic, Ms Fraser. Did they or didn't they have an affair?

They get agitated "She began to stack the crockery, breathing through her nose with a pure, fierce sound like an archangel snoring", but cool down as they come to realise

what is meant in the manuscript. We don't glean much about librarians except a respect for technical services: "If you leave a greasy fingerprint on it, Accessions will have my hide".

In a short prose piece Serge Cerne (1989) (who might be a librarian, or at least someone who works in a library - it's on Swanston Street) has to work in maps with a cicada-like individual, Mike Harris. He has difficulty relating to Harris who has a fit and goes away.

In *Russian Roulette* (Hill, 2009) a romance develops between the inexperienced librarian narrator ("I have no ambitions"), and a colleague Jessica through their joint interest in art.

Barry Hill frequently explores the psyches of his characters, and in *The Albatross* (Hill, 1983), he explores the relationship between the sisters Edith (a spinster and former librarian), and Judith, full of reckless energy. They share a house following the death of Judith's husband. Her children have moved on. At one point Edith is trying to discourage Judith from going to China, and harks back to her former employment which must have been in a strange library "...I remember where the books on China were kept. They were stuffed in near Bootmaking because no one ever read them" (p. 155)

The last word in brevity should probably go to Munyard (2003). It may still be a bit verbose for tweeters, but this *Canberra Times* microstory rejoices in the 'Wollumbindi librarian', a glamorous goddess, who could be trusted to return husbands on time.

Drama

I haven't had the opportunity to see any librarians on the stage – not in the theatre anyway! However, there has been some reference to them by our playwrights. For some reason, librarians seem to inspire dramatic possibilities in Melbourne.

However, the drama has not always been published. For example *The Terms & Grammar of Creation* (Gore & Garner, 1998) is a play that tells of the conflict between librarians Armstrong and Brazier, fighting for control of the Public Library of Victoria at the turn of last century. The same writers followed with *The Future Australian Race* (Gore & Garner, 2008). In this work Redmond Barry founder of what is now the State Library of Victoria, and writer Marcus Clarke ponder the nature of the future peoples of the nation⁶.

Shhhh! (a play without words) (Kaleva, 2009) was produced at La Mama Carlton in 2009 directed by Xanthe Beesley. *The Age's* critic thought that "Despite the lack of dialogue, this show is anything but silent", and "... underneath all that repression there lies a seething tumult of lust desperate to tear up the pages of all those airport paperbacks and wallow in an orgy of passionate expression" (Ball, 2009)

Three male librarians, Ivan, Tim and Jock in *Overnight Loan Only* (Davison, 1984) engage in a progressive bed swap with their philandering wives. Jock thinks all librarians are dull “what’s so exciting about cataloguing a Russian chemistry book?” (p.25), but later entreats the wives not to underestimate librarians. The women who have outmanoeuvred their respective spouses, assure him that they won’t.

It wasn’t drama for the stage, but *The Hard Word* (2002), a double-crossing caper/heist movie, should also get a mention. It begins with the robbers, who are brothers with the motto “no-one gets hurt”, languishing in gaol. Their leader, the smart one, Dale, is prison ‘librarian’ who lends out such self-fulfilling fiction as *Portnoy’s Complaint*.

Poetry

Turning to verse, we might look for examples of the librarian as muse. However, it does not seem that the likes of Murray, Paterson or Wright have been thus inspired. Those who have remarked upon librarians seem somewhat melancholic in their observation. Is it because they are musing on male librarians?

It seems to start in *The Bulletin* back in the nineteenth century (Wiremu, 1893). The writer takes 22 stanzas to relate how the townsfolk elected Bob librarian despite his disability. They had doubts about whether: “... persons kickin’ up a row/ should promptly be ejected ...”

More recently, in a few short stanzas, Jenkins (1975) sees her male chief librarian as “master of the closed reserve”, with “stamp in hand and fixed in gaze”, Her focus is on librarian as lender, but not as romancer: “... a solitary man, he is, you/ could say,/ overdue, in the lending of his heart ...” which has been returned unread too often.

There are other female views of male librarians. Maegraith (1979) has a librarian who “... picks with his fingernails/ meticulously/ the scabs on the skin of his hand ...” and “his fingers plough furrows/ as he moves through corridors/ of dust ...” There is also despondency from Masterson (1987) on a librarian opening up for business: “... He sees the clock and despair kills his happiness./ In a few minutes he must destroy the early morning calm ...”

I could find three male views of female librarians. Keir (1981) wants to draw the attention of an assistant librarian with winsome eyes who has “classical restraint, such unimpeachable civil service decorum ...” that she makes him want to “do “yodelling cartwheels on top of the bloody catalogue/just once to make her look ...” Guess (1983) has a librarian who endures: “the litter of the years was catching up” and “... empty spaces/touching down on her/grew larger than the ancient book-lined rooms ...” Nevertheless, returning in mornings would be “a constant sort of/ emigration”.

Most recently Warman (1998) asks “Do I love the librarian because of her looks?/ Or is it my preoccupation with books?”. He worries that her affection may be due back in two weeks like her books.

Duggan (1978) is not fussed about gender. In 5 pages of (deliberate?) incoherence on a library, his only staff reference is "... how can it be anyone's manifest destiny to be a book-labeller ...” (p.25)

A couple of poets found inspiration in real librarians. Edwin Wilson directed his attention to J. Edgar Hoover, the American more famous as director of the FBI than in his preceding vocation as librarian: “A Dewey zealot/ hoovering for dirt ...” (Wilson, 1997). Rae Sexton was closer to home with her ode to Valmai Sexton, former rare books librarian who “adjusts her eyes from the p.c. screen ...” to return to the real world (of books) (Sexton, 2001). Harold Darwin also inspired verse: “bereft of loving wife/ ... with books he loaded up his van/ people on him relied ...” (Devlin, 1988)

The last line might rest with Chao Sheng, an academic visiting Australia, and writing as Chao (1996). He envisions beams of light pouring through a library (p. 11). His librarian dreams of a reader as ginseng within a bottle of wine.

So we have had a few odes to librarians, but we await a more extensive and reflective analysis. A *Fredy Neptune* from the stacks or a sleuth like Jill Fitzpatrick from *Monkey's mask* is still to emerge in verse.

Children's/Young adult

It is impractical to be inclusive on the subject, and children's literature presents a particular challenge for this reader! However, although emphasis has been on adult literature, I'll mention a number of children's and young adult works that have passed my way.

Goodman (2001) reminded us of the inimitable Prue Theroux and her unfortunate robotic substitute Mr Boycott (Rubenstein, 2001). Material from this book (for example the chorus: “When you don't know what to do/ When you haven't got a clue,/ Go and talk to Miss Theroux”) has been incorporated into a rock musical by South Australia's Patch Theatre. Patch includes a pre-show activity pack for attendees (*Keep Ya Hair On* - activity pack, nd).

A differently named Pru features in Jackie French's French's 'Phredde' books. These involve her schoolgirl adventures with friends, the touchy phaery Phredde, and Bruce, a frog.

In *Phredde and the Leopard-skin Librarian* (French, 2002) they are stuck back in the time of the dinosaurs. Miss Richards their karate-kicking librarian, who is along for the ride, supports them using searches on her laptop, for example coming up with bush remedies (p. 124). In *The Curse of the Zombie Librarian* (2000, p.26) Pru gets into difficulties with the relieving librarian. Miss Snagglethorpe is a zombie who keeps losing bits of her body (p.46) and whose pet books suck people's memories from them. Pru is tied up by the zombie until rescued by her friends.

Things aren't quite so hair-raising for Lily – the heroine of Natalie Prior's book (Prior, 2003). Prior (a former librarian) has Lily enter the library at Skellig Lir (p. 27)

on her quest for a special book. Upon meeting the female librarian, Lily and her companion immediately go down on their knees. Such reverence for the profession is a welcome angle: “When the librarian moved the air seemed to sigh and tremble around her ...” Later (p. 141) she finds out the library is magical, and that the librarian has been there since the beginning of the world.

Conclusion

Although some stereotypes may be read into depictions of librarians in Australian literature, there seems to be a refreshing diversity of characterisation. The profession need have no trepidation about the way it is represented in the creative contributions to library collections.

The two substantial works in which a librarian is the key figure throughout the book are White’s *The Solid Mandala* (Waldo), and Astley’s *Reaching Tin River* (Belle). In each case there is significant characterisation. However this personification is much more directed at who they are, rather than what they do. Though as noted earlier, Belle’s investigative skills are brought to bear with respect to her extramural mission.

Each of these writers has written works in which the who they are and what they do are entwined in depth – for example Astley’s composer in *Acolyte* and White’s painter in *The Vivisector*. So we still await ‘the great Australian librarian novel’. McMullen’s trilogy gives the ‘what they do’ aspect an amusing extrapolation into the future. However, the ‘who they are’ is constrained by the nature of the genre in which he has written.

An analysis such as mine is a work in progress. No doubt there will be addenda suggested, particularly as more full text becomes available digitally for searching. Anyone wishing to supplement the work is welcome to the bibliography available as a database from the author.

As the role of librarians evolves, perhaps there’s an ‘industry’ for us in examining depictions of others’ vocations in creative writing. For example Paul Genoni (2004) has studied representation of Australia’s explorers in its literature. No doubt a starting point, given current popular taste would be chefs in Australian fiction.

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¹ For me the most entertaining sequence was the outtake *Book cart drill sequence* from the first 'world championship' in Chicago. This also raises the question – how do you catalogue something that's excluded from the published work?

² This paper does not attempt a comparative analysis of librarians' role as carried out by Brown-Syed & Sands. However, it does draw upon recreational readings, admittedly selective, but complemented by readings from indexed references reported in the *Austlit* database.

³ At time of writing, under development as a film script *The savage garden* (<http://www.scriptcentral.com.au/team.htm> 16.08.2010)

⁴ Not, we assume, the normal intention of library professionals!

⁵ For SF aficionados it is said to be written in steampunk style.

⁶ About which more can be read at www.australianstage.com.au.