

# The Librarian in the College Novel

By EARL TANNENBAUM

HERMAN MELVILLE, a frequenter of libraries, left an apt memorial and tribute to librarians. Fortunately, it was buried deep in the whale and is scarcely noticed by present day practitioners. In part it reads: "So fare thee well, poor devil of a sub-sub . . . thou belongedst to that hopeless sallow tribe which no wine of this world will ever warm." And so the portrait of the American librarian of the mid-nineteenth-century partakes of what went before and embellishes what came after. There are many other early, quaint prose pictures of librarians that could be cited here, but rather than enumerate them, let the reader hurtle through the century to the present.

Academic librarians today are obsessed by the image they cast in their specific community. Professional and semiprofessional journals are filled with articles tracing causes of past images and offering nostrums for future ones. Librarians must become more professional. They must have status. It is true they have won some skirmishes in their cold war with faculty colleagues and administrators. But have they really "arrived"? What is their true image in the halls of learning? No universal test exists. Individuals can sometimes assess their own situations to a certain extent; yet, for apparent reasons, subjectivity can and will skew these appraisals. An objective approach is needed to take the measure of the librarian in this situation. The modest proposal of this paper is to use the academic novel as a contemporary yardstick.

The academic novel is not a new genre. Recent increased productivity in this form has had its rewards. It has been legitimized by a scholarly, book-length study and by several articles. John

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O. Lyons states in his *The College Novel in America*, "A study of the novel of academic life in America must inevitably be concerned more with the history of the novel as a literary form and social document than with genius." Here, the pertinent phrase is "social document." If the college novel is a social document, and if the library performs an essential role in the society it describes, then presumably its pronouncements regarding the library ought to have some objective validity. This paper proposes to investigate this thesis.

The definition of the academic novel used in this paper is the one given by Lyons. Of the some two hundred college novels he has listed in his bibliography beginning with Hawthorne's *Fanshawe* (1828), the group was narrowed to a selected fifteen published between 1950 and the present time. The main reason for using these more recent dates is that during this time academic libraries have experienced a period of great growth. Expanding campuses, to some degree or another, have pointed up certain library problems, including the need for new library buildings, improved staffing of libraries, and the insidious need for status. Hypothetically, therefore, it is during these years that libraries and librarians should have made their mark in the college novel.

In most of these novels the library, whenever it is mentioned, is referred to only as a part of the scenery or a place where someone meets someone else. It seems to be taken for granted. More spe-

cific comments usually are concerned with its contents, or a title is used, or it is a target for satire. Professor Schneider in *Purely Academic* observes that the library "bulged with things like Engel's Law, little obvious things and massive platitudes, but most of them solemn, documented proclamations of the completely obvious."

A few authors notice such standard library regulations as "a whisper adjusted to library rules" or the fact that Pnin has to use a rare book in the library ("not to be removed") and that he was "urgently requested" to return a book needed by another reader.

Out of the some forty-five hundred pages in the fifteen novels only about forty short quotations refer in any way to the library or librarian. This is an average of only one reference per hundred pages of text. This fact becomes even more remarkable when it is recalled that in *The Stones of the House* the main thread of the story hinges on the president's struggle to get a new library building. Throughout this novel the library is mentioned only six times.

One bright spot occurs in the description of the library in *A Small Fire*. The narrator finds in it "the possibility of peace without total silence, community without responsibility. . . . It was this duty-free companionship I was looking for in the library—that and the essential charm of the place."

Librarians themselves are rarely mentioned; if they are it is usually within the pejorative framework of a current cliché. No librarian has a role of even minor importance or unimportance. In most of these novels he does not exist except as an anonymous wraith.

Several examples chosen from the few will serve to illustrate the above. From *Pnin* comes this observation, "Suave Mr. Case, a lank, pink-faced librarian with sleek white hair and a bow tie." In the *Groves of Academe*, "The middle-aged librarian respectfully bustled up and of-

fered to help him." Again in the *Groves* the author hints at the librarian's role when she equates him with various "key individuals," a gestalt psychologist and the secretary of the faculty.

The aforementioned *Stones of the House* is an interesting case in point. The pivotal situation is the president's struggle to get a new much-needed library. At least, this need triggers the main actions of the book. But it is a nebulous affair as concerns the library. It must be admitted that a new science building, a new dormitory, or grounds building could have served just as well as the *deus ex machina*. The librarian has no place at all in the important business of planning a new library. The president and the library committee carry all the responsibility. The librarian is mentioned only once as praying every night that the temporary building which houses a valuable collection "won't go up in flames."

Interpreting this evidence or lack of evidence may be difficult and may lead to contradictions. The possibilities are simply listed with no attempt to arrange them in order of importance.

1. Libraries and librarians are not important in the academic worlds portrayed in these novels; they are scarcely noticed.

2. Librarians, unlike their colleagues in the English or science or other departments, do not make good dramatic material.

3. Librarians, despite their efforts, have not succeeded in making themselves felt as a force in the academic world.

4. Perhaps it is good that librarians are not dramatic material. Many of the characters portrayed are objects of satire or have peculiarities of some kind. So it can be argued that the librarian is a colorless, efficient person whose books and duties seem to provide perfect camouflage for him.

5. It may be that the authors themselves, despite their academic back-

grounds, are not really aware of what a library or librarian actually does. They cannot or do not penetrate through the forest to see the trees. The camouflage is excellent. Also, an author must select his details to tell his story and, perhaps, librarians have nothing to add to his book except a little local color.

6. The fact that libraries and librar-

ians get short shrift in these books may indicate that they have "arrived," that they are accepted and no comment is necessary.

7. There is always a lag between the time of the actual social event and its appearance in a novel. Perhaps the "library explosion" has not yet sounded in fiction. ■■

## Preconference Plans

"WESTERN AMERICANA" will be the theme of a joint preconference of the Rare Books Section of ACRL and the History Section of the Reference Services Division to be held July 12 and 13, prior to the American Library Association annual conference at Chicago (July 14-20).

Preconference headquarters will be the Knickerbocker Hotel in Chicago. Other meetings are planned for the Newberry Library and the campuses of the University of Chicago and the Northwestern University. Attendance will be limited to 180 persons. Details concerning accommodations in Chicago and a complete program of the meeting will be mailed to members of the two sections in May.

Three significant fields within western American history have been selected for particular attention during the two-day meeting. "Transportation as a Factor in the Development of the West," "The Economic Development of the West," and "The Urbanization of the West" will be subjects of historiographical and bibliographical papers. The historiographical papers will stress the special problems found in the history of western America, and the nature of the scholarly publication in the fields. The bibliographical papers will cover such topics as the historical resources that are or should be available for research, the problems of evaluating and using them, and the bibliographical apparatus that is available or should be available.

General papers summarizing and commenting upon the general character of bibliographical activity in western Americana also will be presented. Among the speakers on the program are Archibald Hanna, Jr., curator of western Americana, Yale University; Richard G. Wade and Bernard Weisberger, both of the department of history, University of Chicago; James S. Holliday of the department of history, San Francisco State College; Colton Storm, curator of the Ayer collection, Newberry library; and Robert Dechert of Philadelphia, a collector of rare Americana.

Program plans for the preconference have been made by Kenneth Nebenzahl; Robert Rosenthal, curator of special collections, University of Chicago library; and Mr. Storm. Local arrangements are being handled under the chairmanship of Richard D. Olson, curator of rare books and special collections, Northwestern University libraries, Evanston, Illinois, assisted by Donald W. Krummel, head, reference services, Newberry library, and Robert Adelsperger, assistant reference librarian, University of Illinois library, Chicago. ■■