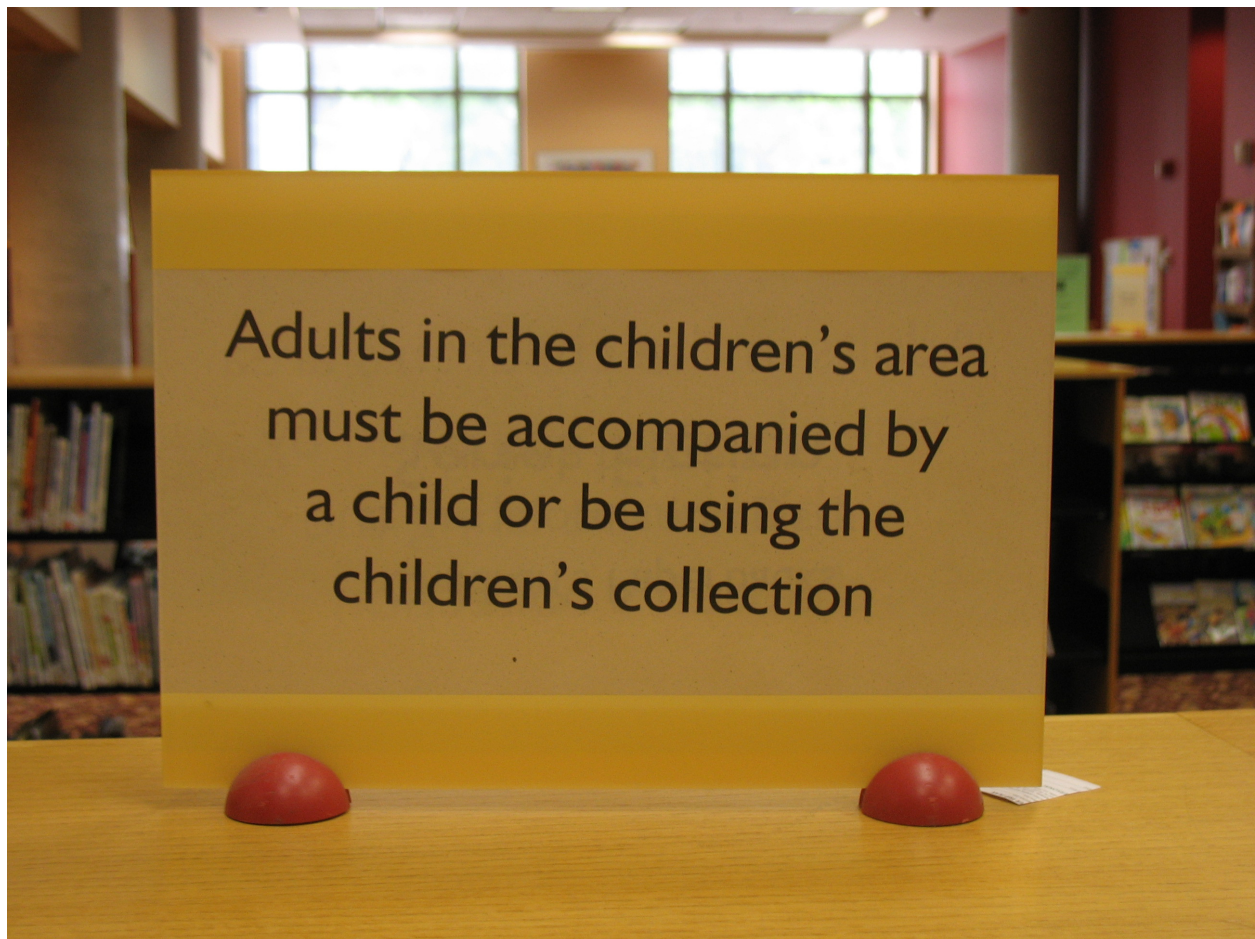


By: Jason Hammond
UWO Student Number: 250352538
Mailbox Number: 140
For: Lynne McKechnie
MLIS 566 – Children’s and Young Adult Literature
Assignment #3 – Optional Essay

**“You Must Have A Lot of Young Readers In Your Family” –
The Experiences of Lone Male Patrons In Children’s Libraries”**



“You Must Have A Lot of Young Readers In Your Family” – The Experiences of Lone Male Patrons in Children’s Libraries

There were two distinct incidents that led to me choosing this as a topic for this essay. The first was when I mentioned to another student at FIMS that I was taking the Children’s Literature course.

“You must be the only guy in that class,” he said.

“Actually, there’s half a dozen or so,” I replied. He didn’t mean anything insensitive by it but his comment made me wonder why being a male who is interested in children’s literature is still seen as rare or abnormal behaviour by many people, even sometimes by those within the library world.

The next incident happened the first time I visited London Public Library’s Central Branch to borrow some children’s books for our weekly reading assignments. Although I went with my wife, when I walked into the children’s section (which is on the main floor but separated from the rest of the library by a wall with two open entranceways) I felt a strange sense of uneasiness – as if everyone was watching me. It felt as if the librarians at the desk were making special note of my presence and the parents were gripping their children just a bit closer. When my wife wandered off to look in a different part of the library, I felt worse, as if I was doing something wrong, just by being a man, alone in the children’s library.

In an indirect way, my own sense of unease was confirmed when I went to the main checkout with a selection of children’s books.

“You must have a lot of young readers in your family,” were the first words the clerk said to me in a tone that can only be described as cautious.

It wasn’t accusatory but at the same time, there was a definite sense that she was doing a check on why a thirty-something male with long hair and a beard (as I had at the

time) would be taking out so many children's books and nothing else. I replied that I was a library student taking a Children's Literature course and it was as if a cloud lifted.

"Oh, that's wonderful!" she exclaimed.

We then proceeded to talk about some current issues in children's literature, the importance of authors visiting schools to make personal connections with children and how one of the books I'd chosen was a favourite for both of us.

At first I didn't connect these two incidents but the more I thought about it, the more I realised they were very closely related indeed. Seeing this connection made me wonder if my experiences as a male patron visiting the children's library were unique. Was I just being paranoid or did other men - whether they were young or old, single or married, fathers or childless – have similar feelings when they entered a children's library?

Before we look specifically at the experiences of other men, it is worthwhile to consider why this feeling might exist in the first place. Over the last thirty years, our society has developed a number of irrational fears, spurred on by a few low incidence but high profile cases that are exaggerated in the media and increasingly, also sensationalized on the Internet (Glassner, 1999). One of the greatest fears, especially for a parent, is anything to do with their child being taken or harmed so any cases dealing with child abductions, child predators or child abuse receive a disproportionate amount of coverage in the media and on the Internet. (Hadfield, 1999.) I believe the fear that has manifested itself in many people seeing any unfamiliar male as a possible child molester is a large part of why many men who enter a children's library are viewed with suspicion by parents and library staff. Similarly, this is also why many men who harbour no dubious intentions still feel a sense of guilt when visiting a children's library.

Add to this, the belief among many parents that the library is one of the last “safe havens” in society where, unlike the mall or the park or even school, they can take their children and leave them relatively unguarded yet have them remain safe. This is another reason why anyone who has the potential to disturb this comfort zone, simply by their presence, might be regarded with some suspicion.

I sent an e-mail to my six male children’s literature classmates on June 10, 2006 requesting their assistance with the project (see Appendix One) and also posted the same request to my blog¹ as I know it is read by many people both within and beyond the FIMS community. I received four responses from my classmates, another from a current library student who is not in this class and one from a PhD candidate at FIMS who was interviewed verbally. Two agreed to have their full comments included with this paper (see Appendixes 2 and 3).

There were a variety of experiences reported by the men who responded. One classmate who is younger than me as well as being unmarried and childless, expressed similar feelings to the ones I’d had upon entering the London Public Library:

[On the rare occasion when I visit a children’s library], I do sense 'something' is sort of going on...something might be 'off'. Maybe it's my own anxieties or maybe I am being watched differently. I can say that there are not any explicit signs that my presence unwelcomed [sic], but for some reason (which you might be able to imagine), I wonder how others interpret my belonging there.”
(Anonymous, 2006)

Another person stated: "it's kind of unfortunate that I feel barred from these areas [children’s sections of libraries and bookstores.]"

Interestingly, the first three responses that came back were all from fathers who were eager to tell of their experiences (and made me wonder if the whole subject of this paper

¹ http://blog.jason.hammond.net/blog/_archives/2006/6/10/2022381.html

might have missed the mark slightly?) One commonality in their replies was that all felt being parents gave them a certain level of comfort going into children's public libraries. This was because they tended to have a regular branch (or branches) they visited frequently which led to them being known by the librarians. "[I] spend many hours in libraries with the girls. So, I am reasonably well known in a few branches. I do not feel uncomfortable in those locations. Beacock, in particular, is our home branch and the people there are familiar with us and never give a second look." (Fyfe, 2006) But this respondent still felt noticed sometimes, especially by other parents. "Occasionally, I notice parents give sideways looks when they see me alone in the children's section. I put that down to a natural wariness about strangers. I don't know that I have felt as if I was being targeted or unduly monitored."

Another respondent observed that the unique layout of the London Public Library's children's section is part of the problem. "Usually we've lived in small communities or used smaller library branches. The children's libraries are often a corner or section of these smaller facilities, and so it doesn't seem so much like you're crossing a boundary when you go into the children's section." (Miedema, 2006) He does go on to say that the new LPL children's section is a vast improvement over the previous location where "the children's section was separated from the main library by a cavernous hallway off the lower level. The lower level had washroom facilities, and there were known problems with men using this area for rendezvous. I noticed a certain vigilance in the eyes of the children's librarians when a male entered the children's library. In the new location, that look of vigilance is gone."

Two of the respondents commented on the responsibility of the library staff to maintain a professional demeanour, even if they have a heightened awareness of any lone male who may enter the children's area. This professionalism should be evident, both in terms of staff comments and actions.

For example, in an echo of the questioning comment about my book choices that I heard on my own visit to LPL, one person observed:

I have on occasion had circulation people make a comment when I was collecting books, either for research or for my daughter's purposes. I don't know if they would ask the same question of a female patron: "My, you have a lot of books on Cinderella" etc. It could be an expression of genuine interest or a desire to pass the time of day. It also could be an expression of concern about my motives: which would be inappropriate. After thinking about this topic I feel I do not want to read too much into simple behaviours. I think staff needs to be wary of making any comments on a patron's books. (Fyfe, 2006)

Another respondent focussed on the (lack of) attention from the library staff when he first came to London. He admitted to feeling a bit more uncomfortable going alone to the library in a new city than at his home branch which he frequented with his children but goes on to say: "If [the staff] were watching me more than anyone else they were a model of discretion." (Thibault, 2006).

As with so many questions in life, perhaps the best answer is to be provided by a librarian. When we visited the Lillian H. Smith branch of the Toronto Public Library for our class field trip, I spoke to a children's librarian about my idea for this essay. She said that "we have a lot of incidents. In fact, more than you can imagine" but went on to say that if a person was either new to the library or just felt uncomfortable being there for some reason, the simplest solution was also the best – identify yourself to a staff member and explain why you were there. Other adults who are there with children may still be uncomfortable but the staff will know your purpose and why you are there which will help you feel more at ease and also help prevent possible misunderstandings. Although it's unfortunate that male patrons may have to take this step, it's a minor one that helps everyone deal with the current reality in our society.

Bibliography

- Anonymous Classmate. Personal e-mail correspondence. July 9, 2006.
- Anonymous Classmate 2. Verbal discussion. July 14, 2006.
- Anonymous LIS PhD Candidate. Interview. June 30, 2006.
- Dickinson, Thad E. "Looking at the Male Librarian Stereotype." The Reference Librarian, 78.2, 2002.
- Fyfe, Bruce. Personal e-mail correspondence. June 10, 2006.
- Glassner, Barry. The Culture of Fear: Why Americans Are Afraid of the Wrong Things. New York: Basic Books, 1999.
- Hadfield, Bruce. "Child Abductions Down Despite Increased Media Coverage" BYU Newsnet. September 2, 2002. <http://newsnet.byu.edu/story.cfm/39653> (Accessed: July 9, 2006)
- Miedema, John. Personal e-mail correspondence. June 12, 2006.
- Singer Gordon, Rachael. "The Men Among Us". Library Journal. June 15, 2004. <http://www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA423789.html> (Accessed: July 9, 2006)
- Thibault, Michael. Personal e-mail correspondence. June 12, 2006.

Appendix One – Letter to Male Classmates Requesting Assistance (June 10, 2006)

Hello,

Some of you I've spoken with already but for some of you, this is unannounced. I have chosen to do my "Choose Your Own Topic" for our Kid's Lit class this semester as an exploration of the experiences of male patrons in children's libraries.

I'm asking for your assistance by sending me a short summary of your experiences and thoughts on the topic. Some things you might consider: when you go to a children's section, do you go alone or with someone (female friend/wife/children/someone else)? What time of day do you go? How often do you go? Which branch(es)? Do you feel comfortable going to the children's section of a library? Why or why not? Have you had any interactions with staff that were positive or negative? How do parents who are there tend to react to your presence?

There are a couple reasons I want to do this as my topic - when I told someone I was taking this class, they said "Oh, you must be the only guy" and I replied, "No, there's about half a dozen of us." But this made me realise that even being a male who was interested in this area was seen as abnormal somehow. Then I talked to Lynne who said they used to have a part of this class where the students visited a children's library but had to cancel it because the men felt so awkward (Lynne, I might not have that detail exactly right but hopefully have captured the gist.)

Anyhow, I'm not planning to hand in the paper until later in the semester (Lynne, is August 2 okay with you?) but if you can send me your response as soon as possible, I'd appreciate it.

Thanks in advance,

Jason Hammond

Appendix Two – Response from Michael Thibault (Reprinted With Permission)

My recent experience with Children's collections is split. On the one hand, I feel very comfortable in my home branch back in Ottawa because I have been going there for years with my kids and the head of children's services is a neighbour and friend. Even when I go by myself and there is unfamiliar staff on the desk I feel very comfortable.

When the kids were younger, I worked part-time and would take them to the library in the afternoons. More recently it has been early evening.

Here in London, having to foray into the children's collection at LPL for class, I felt much more self-conscious than usual -- although that still wasn't very self-conscious. Being self-conscious I was trying to be aware of the staff's awareness of me. If they were watching me more than anyone else they were a model of discretion.

I have only ever been in the LPL during the morning or early afternoon -- there has been the occasional Parent's Group (the politics of parent's groups is a whole 'nother bag of snakes, so their reactions should be taken with a grain of salt) with toddler's that I've crossed paths with, but usually it has been nearly empty... well, except for other students from class.

As a parent, I understand and appreciate the safety issues involved. I don't take it personally.

Hope that helps. If you have any other specific follow-up questions, feel free to drop me a line or buy me a beer. ;-)

Cheers

Mike

Appendix Three – Response from Bruce Fyfe (Reprinted With Permission)

I get to the library with my youngest daughter (age 10) at least once a week. I spend most of my time, when we are there, in the children's section, and do not notice any odd or uncomfortable behaviours on the part of staff or patrons. I will often sit in the children's section reading my own book while my daughter is busy doing something else in the section or in another part of the library. Of course, I have my daughter with me most of the time so I do not feel uncomfortable at those times. When I am at the library with my 15 year old I only notice all the boys looking at her: one of the hazards of being a father of girls.

Before my wife passed away we would spend many hours in libraries with the girls. So, I am reasonably well known in a few branches. I do not feel uncomfortable in those locations. Beacock, in particular, is our home branch and the people there are familiar with us and never give a second look. Occasionally, I notice parents give sideways looks when they see me alone in the children's section. I put that down to a natural wariness about strangers. I don't know that I have felt as if I was being targeted or unduly monitored.

However, I have felt slightly uncomfortable at branches where I am not known and when I am not with one of my girls. At Central, I spent some time on my own in the children's section doing some research for a paper and looking for some extra readings. When I approached the desk for some assistance on a reference source I sensed some hesitation on the part of the Librarian. I am not sure if it was in fact a reaction of the librarian or if it was my hypersensitivity to "potential" anti-male bias in this particular context. That is, if I was looking for it I would probably find it no matter what behaviour I witnessed.

I have on occasion had circulation people make a comment when I was collecting books, either for research or for my daughter's purposes. I don't know if they would ask the same question of a female patron: "My, you have a lot of books on Cinderella" etc. It could be an expression of genuine interest or a desire to pass the time of day. It also could be an expression of concern about my motives: which would be inappropriate. After thinking about this topic I feel I do not want to read too much into simple behaviours. I think staff needs to be wary of making any comments on a patron's books. Are there specific guidelines in libraries about the type of comments that should or shouldn't be made regarding a patron's choices?

Have a look at Dickinson, Thad E. (2002) "Looking at the Male Librarian Stereotype." *The Reference Librarian*, 78.2, pp. 97-110. It doesn't look at your question specifically but does offer an interesting perspective.

Hope this helps. Let me know if you need any more information.

Bruce