

## BUNS OF STEEL: FROM LIBRARIAN TO WOMAN IN *STORM CENTER*, *DESK SET*, *PARTY GIRL*

by Noa Wahrman



*“Melville Dewey”, declares chief-librarian Judy Lindendorf, Mary’s godmother in **Party Girl**, “hired women as librarians because he believed the job didn’t require any intelligence. That means it’s underpaid and undervalued!”*

In *Party Girl*, a film from 1995, Judy reflects on what was a common assessment of the librarian’s profession for women throughout the 20th century. What are the common traits of this condescending image? What are its social roots? and has the librarian’s offensive image changed or improved over the years or has it remained the same? This article begins to explore the visual images and stereotypes appearing in films produced in the second half of the twentieth century. Of the four-hundred-odd films featuring librarians, I will focus here on three in which the female librarian is the main character, two from the 1950s and one from the mid 1990s: *Storm Center* (Daniel Taradash, 1956), *Desk Set* (Walter Lang, 1958) and *Party Girl* (Daisy von Scherler Mayer, 1995).

A quick overview of social trends in Post WWII America can help set the scene leading to the images discussed here. Pre-WWII America had women nested safely in their domestic traditional role of homemakers. Social studies, as well as popular culture representations, portray women primarily as mothers, housewives and husband-supporters, women whose primary role was to be the perfect-looking homemaker. As home and family constructed the center of ideal American life, women who did not fit this formula found themselves at the edge of society. These women presented either a serious threat to American family values, like the loose, dangerous women of *film noir* (a prosperous and bleak genre of Post WWII America) or drew pity from the audience for their obvious misfortune as doomed old maids.

The women in *film noir* were, thus, always punished for their evil nature by an expected certain death. On the other hand, women who, for some misfortune, failed to fulfill the American ideal of wife and mother, were forced to work in order to make their living. Amongst the most noted professions in which women could find in those decades, at least by common

stereotype, were telephone-operators and librarians. These women were treated with collective condescension, looked at pitifully by the society around them: even while they filled an essential position in their communities they nonetheless remained in the position of mere Spectators, observing from the outside as others formed romances leading to family-cells around them. Telephone-operators connected lovers’ conversations, while librarians sat behind their desks, strict and foreboding, loaning romance novels to young lovers who came to the library to woo and giggle amongst the stacked book shelves. For a filmic example one needs only to think of Donna Reed in Frank Capra’s 1946 *It’s a Wonderful Life*. Reed, as she walks out of Pottersville’s public library in her potential alternative existence as Mary Hatch, sports every possible detail of the female-librarian stereotype: unmarried, childless and extremely unattractive, “an old-maid”, as she is specifically referred to by Clarence the angel. The other classic example is Marian, the librarian in *The Music Man*, who, at age 26, is considered River City’s pathetic old-maid, with no hope for social salvation despite her broad education and her efforts to introduce further literature and culture to this little Iowa town.

During WWII women found themselves for a short while fulfilling masculine domestic and professional roles, instead of the men who were at war. But shortly after the war this hiatus was over. In 1950s films, and especially in the ever-more popular television, women were depicted in their most conventional female pre-war role models. One only has to think again of Donna Reed in *The Donna Reed Show*, where she is standing by the door every morning bidding farewell to her family, all made-up and perfect, to cook, clean, bake, mend and await their happy return.

The 1950s witnessed fascinating negotiations between contrasting views of social and family values, and in particular the position of women. Donna Reed, in her TV show, as well as her other visual counterparts in various sitcoms of the 1950s and numerous film roles, represented the ideal woman, the one who proudly carried and embodied old-fashioned American family and social values. “Over and over”, says Betty

Friedan in her breakthrough 1963 book **The Feminine Mystique**<sup>1</sup>, “women heard in voices of tradition and of Freudian sophistication that they could desire no greater destiny than to bask in their own femininity. Experts told them how to catch a man and keep him ... They were taught to pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted to be poets or physicists or presidents. They learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights—the independence and the opportunities that the old-fashioned feminists fought for ... By the end of the 1950s the average marriage age of women in America dropped to 20, and was still dropping, into the teens. Fourteen million girls were engaged by age 17. The proportion of women attending college in comparison with men dropped from 47 percent in 1920 to 35 percent in 1958. A century earlier, women had fought for higher education; now girls went to college to get a husband. By the mid-fifties, 60 percent dropped out of college to marry, or because they were afraid too much education would be a marriage bar.” On the other hand, this decade also saw the publication of Dr. Alfred Kinsey’s report on women’s sexuality in 1953<sup>2</sup>. Women responded enthusiastically to Kinsey’s private questions about sexuality and sexual fulfillment. Out of the 5,500 women who responded to the survey, only 5% (amongst them librarians as well!) were professional women and 26% were upper white-collar women, presumably housewives. The early 1950s sexual revolution burst into the American screen with the voluptuous sexually-explicit characters of Marilyn Monroe, but simultaneously, although less sexually-flamboyant, through a new form of professional women; ones who were single yet beautiful, professional yet admirable, dating freely yet respected. Those were the characters played primarily by Doris Day, especially in her series of comedies with Rock Hudson<sup>3</sup>.

At the same time, however, it should be noted that Friedan, while lamenting a lost desire for high education and career opportunities for women half way into the 20th century, did not count librarianship amongst those aspiring vocations. Neither did Hollywood with its sudden reverse of its negative image of the librarian. So let us look at two 1950s filmic examples of female librarians.

Against the backdrop of *Music Man*’s Marian, Alicia Hull’s visual and character introduction are not at all surprising. The heroine of *Storm Center*, the female-librarian of a small town, refuses to remove Communist materials from the shelves, insisting rather that difference of opinion is not sufficient ground for removing books from public access, and threaten freedom of speech and democracy.

*Storm Center*, starring Bette Davis, was based on the true story of Miss Ruth Brown, the public librarian of Bartlesville, Oklahoma, who in 1950 was laid-off

from her thirty-year long position of public librarian of the town. Ruth Brown’s “crime” was her unremitting stance for equal rights and for the open access to all shades of opinion on the shelves of her public library – in this case, during the heyday of McCarthyism, even communist works. Despite strong support in the community, Miss Brown was dismissed from her position. When film-maker Daniel Taradash encountered this story in a letter published in the *Saturday Review*, it inspired him to write a script for a film he was determined to make, a film he called at first “The Library”, in order to show the dangers of unbridled ignorance. Finding a producer who would be willing to invest in a project as potentially controversial as Taradash’s script was difficult. Finding an actress to play the librarian who refuses to give up her principles was no easier matter, given the potential damage that could be caused to this actress’ public image, not to mention bringing her to the attention of the House Un-American Activities Committee’s Hollywood investigation. But Bette Davis saw matters differently. To an accusation made to her by Anne Smart, a crusading-against communism housewife, that “certain interests are using or misusing ... your ability without your full knowledge of what is behind this picture”<sup>4</sup> she responded: “On the contrary ... as an American I was extremely careful of my approach to this film ... I wish my children to be proud of me... it is my conviction that they will be proud of me for having appeared in this motion picture”<sup>5</sup>.

However, principles aside, in terms of her Alicia Hull (Davis’ character in *Storm Center*) joins her fellow female, single librarian’s full-force. Sporting the inevitable librarian’s paraphernalia she walks into the library in the opening scene of the film. Compensating for her singlehood and childlessness she has established herself as a true friend of children. Again, not unlike Marian, a woman of high standards, high education and liberal views, Alicia Hull is still seen as a harmless yet pitiful woman, however known, loved and respected she is by her townsfolk.

But Alicia is kindly and dismissively respected by her town only as long as she remains harmless and non-threatening. The first crack appears in a relationship with a vulgar, ignorant father, whose child is enamored of reading, hence with Alicia herself<sup>6</sup>. Alicia, unlike Marian, is truly middle-aged, as is Ruth Brown, the woman her character was based on. She is not pretty even potentially, hence has no hope for a romantic relief which will expose her external beauty. The men by whom she is confronted, and with whom she later negotiates, the forbidden reading materials’ issue, see her as a sensible and respected member of her community. Even men who are friendly with her or who negotiate complex issues with her, like her friend amongst them, Judge Robert Ellerbee (Paul Kelly)

would never see her as an object of desire. Her complete lack of romantic potential is only accentuated by the character of her library assistant, Martha Lockridge (Kim Hunter) the young, pretty librarian who is engaged to the major opponent to free choice library materials, Paul Duncan (Brian Keith). Not only is Lockridge young, beautiful and marriageable, but her fiancée assumes that her role as librarian will end when she marries him and assumes her position as helpmate to her career-politician husband and mother to their future children.

However, despite her physical and social establishment as a “Mary Hatch/Marian” type, as it were, Alicia Hull can be seen as the first point of departure from the standard pathetic character of the female librarian. This point of departure is neither in the visual sense (no ugly-duckling transformed into swan) nor in the family-status sense (no marriage which will also mean end of the doomed “old-maid” professional career)<sup>7</sup>. Mary Hatch, we recall, is condemned only in the virtual reality world. Marian is “saved” by Roger Hill’s love, which also dramatically and beautifully transforms her physical appearance. But Alicia is neither. I believe one can attribute the bleak ending of the movie not only to the disastrous consequences of ignorance and blind hate, but also to the fact that no wedding bells ring and no beautiful bride emerges on the church’s doorstep with her long-term rediscovered Prince Charming Judge Ellerbee. It is intriguing that despite her central role as a main character of a librarian, the film’s message switches from the romantic salvation of a female character to the exclusively heroic reevaluation of social ideas. Hull/Davis of *Storm Center* is on a mission and the mission is not to save herself but only to serve as a martyr on the altar of principles and the common good. And for this purpose it is essential to keep her character as an ugly duckling. Her portrayal and reestablishment as the strong, undeterred librarian and a proud and loyal member of her community, does not require a cosmetic change as well but, if anything, the opposite. In making this film director, producer and actress wanted to manifest the dangers of small minds and ignorance and fear of unknown ideas. However, even while standing up to other social prejudices, the image of the female librarian in this film did not really deviate from the commonplace stereotype.

Two years later the film *Desk Set* was released. Its four main characters, and especially Bunny Watson (played by Katharine Hepburn) still seem much further away in their characteristic depictions than Alicia Hull, and even further away from Marian, Mary Hatch and their predecessors. More than any other female-librarian-in-a-leading-role film, *Desk Set* serves as the successfully-negotiating/mediating point between the traditional female librarian depiction and her future, at times more positive, screen colleagues.

In a reference library of a big broadcasting company in New York City work four happy, self-fulfilled and professionally successful female librarians. Location is the first hint of change. The move from an anonymous small, rural, prejudiced mid-western town to the big, famous most exciting American city is a significant one. This reference library provides answers to nationwide callers on any subject. It is a highly distinguished information-providing establishment, one that is attractive, spacious and airy, rather than confining and musty: another departure from previous library scenes. Accordingly, the proud librarians look rather different as well. Thus, this film presents a new observation point of not only a highly professional working environment, but also at some new personal and physical traits of the librarians themselves.

To begin with, the ages of the four vary from young (20s) to older (late 40s and 50s). In terms of dress-code, theirs is miles away from their predecessors. Where young Marian, Mary and Alicia Hull wore Victorian-looking, unflattering spinster’s clothes, here middle-aged women Peg Costello (Joan Blondell) and Bunny Watson (Hepburn) dress in an expensive, flattering manner, suitable of highly-professional women in working environments such as a law-firm or the business world. Along with the big city setting grows also the level of sartorial as well as mental sophistication. While in terms of appearance they resemble their younger colleagues, in terms of knowledge they are unsurpassed. Here they represent a most desirable role-model for their younger colleagues, something which would be unthinkable for the small town’s public-librarian of the previous films. What’s more; with every one of the above-mentioned, earlier films, while the women themselves are proud of their vocation (perhaps with the exception of Mary Hatch) the townsfolk around them do not share this pride or are, for that matter, able to even fathom it. For the others this is seen as the bottom of the pit, something which is bluntly but clearly articulated in the character of Mary Hatch. But *Desk Set* brings a new dimension to the librarian’s character and self-esteem. Here are four highly-educated single women, living on their own in Manhattan. These women date freely, are highly fashion-oriented; one only needs to note their dress-to-kill look and the phone call Ruthie secretly makes to a dress shop, asking for the windows’ display strapless dress’ price.

*Storm Center*’s Alicia, a librarian who is really committed to her vocation to the point of not allowing herself romantic aspirations, or indeed any other aspirations, is nonetheless a far cry from the librarians of earlier films, in her pride and confidence in the value and importance of her work. But for Bunny Watson, head-reference librarian, her workplace is ideal and desirable. To Richard Sumner’s question: “do you like

working here?" she answers, "I love working here. If I didn't work here I'd kill to get in!" Bunny is the first screen librarian to articulate her pride in her vocation in such enthusiastic terms (and given Katharine Hepburn's strong screen persona the message of women representing their own agenda is even more reinforced here). The reference room is her kingdom, she knows every book in it, location and contents. Her spectrum of knowledge is unbelievable. From Longfellow poems through Biblical quotations to Santa's reindeer's names, Bunny recites an endless range of sources, quotes and references. Despite Bunny's status as the head of the reference library, each librarian is in charge of a certain research area and thus they refer questions to each other as appropriate ("I'll pass you to our baseball expert" says Miss Blair to a caller, while diverting the call to Peg, who instantly provides a speedy and accurate answer).

In filmic representations that came before *Desk Set*, a clear distinction has been drawn between a woman and a librarian. The illustration of the female-librarian has been not only unflattering but doomed. This working woman, in her eternal glasses, "bunned" hair, sensible shoes, tweed skirt, severe facial expression and well-known "'shushing'" position, seemed mostly like an old woman, regardless of her real age. Not only was she always single, but any suggestion of a romantic attachment seemed, to her and to others, preposterous. Small wonder, therefore, that when George Bailey chases Mary into the crowded tavern, shouting "Mary, you're my wife!" she faints into the arms of the people around her. Similarly, as a librarian, *Music Man*'s Marian embodies the same stereotypical traits. However, when the unbelievable happens to her and she is saved by love – what Roger Hill refers to as "getting under her glasses" – not only do her behavior and physical appearance change radically, but there are no more scenes that take place in the library. In combining external femininity with proud librarianship *Desk Set* seems to me to be the first film to allow for a unified figure of librarian and woman and appropriately for a reference librarian, she conquers not only with her looks but also, powerfully, with her brain.

And yet, this transformation in *Desk Set* was not complete. In the end, the film was transitional, still retaining some aspects of the earlier figure of the female librarian while rejecting others. Bunny is a single not-very-young woman (Katharine Hepburn was 50 years old when playing this role). Despite her asserted independence, her self-assurance and her suggested sexual freedom, Bunny is still possessed by the idea of marriage and the fear of being left a bitter spinster for the rest of her life (thus reincarnating the "old-maid" curse). Her uncertain affair with Mike Cuttler (Gig Young), officially her boss but practically her emotional and professional exploiter, exposes

unexpected insecure feminine sides in her which the audience and her peers (here embodied and articulated by Peg and her blunt, albeit just, criticism) find unpleasantly surprising. When Mike's secretary secretly calls to warn Bunny of Mike's momentary arrival in her office (a gesture of secret-camaraderie among single women) Bunny's cool professionalism flies out the window as she panics over a lost lipstick. Moreover, despite her independence, Bunny is locked in old-fashioned ideas about the relationship between men and women and thus, continually, remains passive in her relationship with Mike, always waiting for him to make the next move. Bunny has come a long way from her earlier vocational sisters, but she is yet to cross the fear of singlehood in order to become the full independent agent she represents in any other aspect of her life.

But there is a new danger too, one presented by progress itself. Modernity in *Desk Set* may give the female librarian more freedom, but also threatens her through the agency of the machine. Will the fate of the female librarian, just as she achieves this freedom, be replaced by a computer?

Richard Sumner is the inventor of a computer brain named EMERAC, operated with love and narrow mindedness by Miss Warriner, a computer programmer. Miss Warriner, however, while very able as a computer programmer, is really capable of very little else, especially in the human department. Her social skills are deficient, she seems to have no romantic attachments, she is only interested in her work. In other words, it is Miss Warriner who really is a "librarian" in the old, unsexed meaning. So while Bunny, Peg, Sylvia and Ruthie resent her personally, they also clearly see the threat she presents to them in threatening to bring the old stereotype. So what Miss Warriner presents is actually a double threat: on the one hand she embodies all the unattractive characters that used to be the hallmarks of the female librarian. She also threatens with her new-fangled machine to make the newly emancipated librarians completely redundant. On the other hand, by bringing a machine to replace people, and placing herself as the sole operator of the formerly very-human library, Miss Warriner makes the library and female-librarian again an undesirable environment, taking the human progress a step back despite the technological progress represented by the computer installment as an information-providing tool in the library. In this, however, a threat that echoes common fears of the 1950s, she fails. In a wonderful scene, in which Miss Warriner is helplessly trying to get information out of EMERAC, while failing the most basic human steps to draw such information, Bunny and company not only demonstrate her information as wrong, they also manage to find and provide the accurate information at top speed. They prove indispensable indeed.

The film's romantic ending's relief also hails the female librarian as a liberated woman. Mike expects Bunny to melt at his finally-delivered marriage proposal, and to drop her job to move to the west coast with him as the supporting wife of a high-career executive (reminded of Martha Lockridge's fiancée in *Storm Center*). In so doing he finally proves himself to be disrespectful and unworthy of her. On the other hand, what Sumner falls in love with is really her mind. What he sees in her is her rare mental capability and outstanding professionalism. Sumner sees no other option for Bunny but to keep on doing what she does best. But at the same time he sees her as an object of desire and certainly as a marrying kind. It is highly appropriate that he will propose to her in the library and use EMERAC for this purpose. The end of *Desk Set* promises the new future librarian, now proudly and successfully combining her profession and her femininity into one.

So where does the new librarian go from here? Is the promise made in 1958's *Desk Set* to deliver a new female librarian kept over the years? 1995's *Party Girl* is a fascinating example of the changes in female librarian's reel image in the four decades since *Desk Set*. Female-librarian characters which appeared on screen in the second half of the twentieth century did not do justice to the liberated, feminine positive image of the librarian. The only major change noticeable in films of this period is the introduction of male librarians into this formerly strictly-female profession. But in filmic examples such as in an episode of the television series *Get Smart* in 1965, or 1984's *Ghostbusters*, or 1993's *The Gun in Betty Lou's Handbag* (even if the librarian in this latter film is married) the character of the recognizable offensive librarian stereotype was back in full force.

In one recent film, however, *Party Girl* of 1995, the promise of *Desk Set* seems to be kept. The setting, appropriately, remains the bustling modern city of New York. By the late twentieth century, of course, New York also represents new problems of the urban environment: not only questions and redefinitions of familial and domestic roles for both sexes, but also unemployment, drugs and sex, lack of professional interests or skills, the overwhelming loneliness of a big city and immigrants' hardships. The character of Mary is a failure and a misfit; in this she fits the many other misfits in this film. And yet she is a far cry from the self-assured, intelligent and professional Bunny Watson.

Mary's godmother, Judy, the professional librarian in charge of a small branch of New York's public library, does little herself to strike the *Desk Set* chord. "Veteran" librarian Judy and "newly-initiated" librarian, Mary, portray in juxtaposition to each other the hardships of the librarian's vocation as well as the injustice of this stereotype. So this film not only moves gradually

from a condescending vision of a questionable career opportunity to one of value and pride, precisely the type of image prefigured by the 1958 *Desk Set* crew.

Mary is a young, jobless, penniless uneducated woman in 1995 New York, living on the edge of constant eviction. It is only as a result of her godmother's dare that she accepts the temporary low-paid, low-respected job of a library clerk, much to her godmother's and her own surprise. The point to note is that both godmother and god-daughter, at this stage, seem to confirm the stereotype of the woman who was left in this position because she had no other choice. As Judy is a pitiful figure personally and professionally, it is really up to Mary, in the course of the film's plot, to restore the profession's honor to the heights proposed by *Desk Set*. In her training as a library clerk, while growing to appreciate its advantages and importance, Mary comes to see the library as a place used not only for knowledge but also as a social center. Where Judy represents the old-world librarian, hence clinging to the old separation routine between woman and librarian, Mary represents the modern new librarian, the one who combines the two. It is amusing to watch Mary at the end of the film, when trying to prove to Judy her seriousness regarding becoming a librarian, sporting a librarian's look: black skirt-suit, hair in a bun and glasses. But here Mary does not intend to mock the librarian's appearance; only to reinforce her respectable and dignified look as preparation for this respectable and dignified profession. Here she uses the familiar librarian's physical and sartorial features but elevates them to a degree of fashion and respectability. In a way, more than any other, the transformation Mary undergoes, from undertaking upon herself the most degrading job of a library clerk to the self-conscious person who voluntarily chooses to become a librarian, liberates librarians on the screen from the condescension of society.

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- *Party Girl*, USA 1995, color. Dir.: Daisy von Scherler Mayer, Scr.: Harry Birckmayer and Sheila Gaffney. Cast: Parker Posey, Sasha von Scherler, Anthony Joseph De Santis, Omar Townsend, C. Francis Blackchild.
- *Storm Center*, USA, 1956, B & W. Dir.: Daniel Taradash, Scr.: Daniel Taradash and Elick Moll. Cast: Bette Davis, Brian Keith, Kim Hunter, Paul Kelly, Kevin Coughlin, Joe Mantell, Sallie Brophie.

## Referential:

- *Down with Love*, USA, 2003, color. Dir.: Peyton Reed, Scr.: Eve Ahlert and Dennis Drake. Cast: Renée Zellweger, Ewan McGregor, David Hyde-Pierce, Sarah Paulson, Tony Randal.
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- *The Music Man*, USA, 1962, color. Dir.: Morton DaCosta, Scr.: Meredith Wilson and Franklin Lacey. Cast: Shirley Jones, Robert Preston, Buddy Hackett, Paul Ford, Pert Kelton, Ron Howard.
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## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Friedan, 1963, Chapter 1, p. 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> I wish to thank Jennifer Bass of the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender and Reproduction, in Indiana University, Bloomington, for her help in providing this statistics of women's response to Kinsey's questionnaires.

<sup>3</sup> It is highly piquant yet not really surprising that Renee Zellweger and Ewan McGregor, in a recent film, 2002's *Down With Love*, 2003, follow closely on a Doris Day-Rock Hudson dynamics/plot-line, however with the surprising end-twist of Zellweger's character, the highly successful Barbara Novak, who writes the sexual-independence bible for women, herself an extremely-transformed ugly-duckling from mousy, scared, unloved librarian to a hot, successful blond feminist author, advising and looked-up to by other women; this is the ultimate feminine transformation: from the bottom of the professional and visual pit - a small town public librarian - to a successful, beautiful and sought-after professionally and personally alike woman.

<sup>4</sup> *The Dismissal of Miss Ruth Brown*, Louise S. Robbins. Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 2000, p. 145-6.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Here, claims Louise Robbins (Robbins, 2000, p. 149) this is clearly depicted as a love-story between Alicia and 10-year-old Freddy; these is a love affair of the mind but also fulfills strong emotional deprivations for the older-childless woman and the culturally-deprived boy respectively.

<sup>7</sup> It is hard not to be reminded here of Davis' character in *Now, Voyager*, where her appearance radically changes along with her state of mind, both there to prepare her for her later role as Paul Henreid's love interest and the popular expected message that love conquers all, even physical appearance.