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-BARBARA GENCO,
Collection Development Librarian
Brooklyn, NY

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By Marilyn Johnson

ISBN 13: 9780061431609

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CHAPTER ONE

"In tough times, a librarian is a terrible thing to waste."

The Frontier

Down the street from the library in Deadwood, South Dakota, the peace is shattered several times a day by the noise of gunfire—just noise. The guns shoot blanks, part of a historic recreation to entertain the tourists. Deadwood is a far tamer town than it used to be, and it has been for a good long while. Its library, that emblem of civilization, is already more than a hundred years old, a Carnegie brick structure, small and dignified, with pillars outside and neat wainscoting in. The library director is Jeanette Moodie, a brisk mom in her early forties who earned her professional degree online. She's gathering stray wineglasses from the previous night's reception for readers and authors, in town for the South Dakota Festival of the Book. Moodie points out the portraits of her predecessors that hang in the front room. The first director started this library for her literary ladies' club in 1895, not long after the period that gives the modern town its flavor; she looks like a proper lady, hair piled on her head, tight bodice, a choker around her neck. Moodie is a relative blur. She runs the library and its website, purchases and catalogs the items in its collections, keeps the doors open more than forty hours a week, and hosts programs like the party, all with only part-time help. When she retires, she'll put on one of her neat suits, gold earrings, and rectangular glasses and sit still long enough to be captured for a portrait of her own.

Moodie is also the guardian of a goldmine, the history of a town that relies on history for its identity. She oversees an archive of rare books and genealogical records, which, when they're not being read under her supervision, are kept locked up in the South Dakota Room of the library. Stored in a vault off the children's reading room downstairs are complete sets of local newspapers dating back to 1876 that document Deadwood's colorful past in real time. A warning on the library website puts their contents in a modern context: "remember that political correctness did not exist in 19th century Deadwood—many terms used

['negro minstrelcy,' for instance, and 'good injun'] are now considered derogatory or slanderous, but are a true reflection of our history."

If you want a gauge of how important this archive is to Deadwood, Moodie will take you into the vault, a virtually impregnable room lined with concrete and secured by a heavy steel door. No fire or earthquake or thief is going to get at the good stuff inside this place. A dehumidifier hums by the door. Newsprint and sepia photos, stored in acid-free, carefully labeled archival boxes, are stacked neatly on shelves around a big worktable. In her spare time, the librarian comes down here to browse the old articles, which a consultant has been indexing, systematically listing the subjects and titles of each story for the library's electronic catalog.

 The town's past lives on in this catalog, linked with all the other libraries in South Dakota. Anyone can log on as a guest, consult the library's index online, and learn that the *Black Hills Daily Times* published a story in 1882 called "Why Do We Not Have Library & Reading Rooms?" and three years later, "Reading Room and Library Almost Complete," alongside stories like "Accidental Shooting Part of a Free For All" and "Cowboys Shoot Up Resort."

Moodie, like her predecessor a century ago, is essentially organizing the past and making it available to the citizenry, but she's doing so in ways that the librarian of the late 1800s could never have imagined, preserving images of one frontier with the tools of another. What would the proper lady in the portrait make of current librarian's tasks, the maintenance of the website, for instance, with its ghostly and omniscient reach?

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There's another Deadwood library on the digital frontier. This one doesn't resemble the elegant Carnegie building in the real town in South Dakota—it looks instead like a crude wooden storefront—but it, too, evokes the period that characterizes Deadwood, the late 1800s, the gold rush, and the Wild West. The difference is that this library exists solely on the Internet in the virtual world known as Second Life. People at computers around the globe, taking form of

avatars dressed in chaps and boots or long prairie dresses and playing the roles of prospectors, saloon keepers, and ordinary citizens can visit the library in a historic reenactment of Deadwood in Second Life. They can enter this ramshackle building and, by typing questions in a chat box, ask the librarian what sort of outfit a prostitute would have worn, or where to find information on panning for gold. Or they can browse the collection the librarian has gathered in the form of links to dime novels and other old-time books, available in digital form from sites like Project Gutenberg and the Internet Archive.

The librarian, Lena Kjellar, shows up onscreen as a cartoon woman in a bustle skirt. The person behind this avatar was trained to provide Second Life reference services by a real-life reference librarian and is part of an information network anchored by hundreds of professional librarians who flock to this interactive site for fun and stay to volunteer their skills—they figure everyone should be able to use library services, even avatars. In fact, "Lena Kjellar" is a retired electrical engineer and locomotive buff from Illinois named Dave Mewhinney; he feels that taking on a woman's shape in Second Life makes him more approachable.

Somewhere between Jeanette Moodie's frontiers and Lena Kjellar's is the story of a profession in the midst of an occasionally mind-blowing transition. A library is a place to go for a reality check, a bracing dose of literature, or a "true reflection of our history," whether it's a brick-and-mortar building constructed a century ago or a fanciful arrangement of computer codes. The librarian is the organizer, the animating spirit behind it, and the navigator. Her job is to create order out of the confusion of the past, even as she enables us to blast into the future.

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I became interested in librarians while researching my first book, about obituaries. With the exception of a few showy eccentrics, like the former soldier in Hitler's army who had a sex change and took up professional whistling, the most engaging obit subjects were librarians. An obituary of a librarian could be about anything under the sun, a woman with a phenomenal memory who recalled the books her aging patrons read as children—and was also, incidentally, the best sailor on her stretch of the Maine coast—or a man obsessed with maps,

who helped automate the Library of Congress's map catalog and paved the way for wonders like Google Maps.

There were visionaries like Frederick Kilgour, the first to link libraries' computer catalogs to one another back in the late sixties. This was a great act in the history of knowledge—its efficient and useful multiplication. Under Kilgour's direction, what began as a few dozen college libraries in Ohio sharing their catalogs soon snowballed into a world catalog, the Online Computer Library Center. Now anyone can go to WorldCat.org, the OCLC's catalog of a gazillion library records, and find all the libraries that carry the item you need; WorldCat has made every computer a portal to institutions from the Library of Congress to the Tauranga (New Zealand) District Library. Kilgour lived to the age of ninety-two and taught till he was ninety. His obituarist noted that during World War II, "like many librarians … [he] gravitated into intelligence work." Good librarians are natural intelligence operatives. They possess all of the skills and characteristics required for that work: curiosity, wide-ranging knowledge, good memories, organizational and analytical skills, and discretion.

I met Judith Krug, another visionary librarian, in the course of my research. Krug fought censorship for four decades while running the Office for Intellectual Freedom in the Chicago headquarters of the American Library Association (ALA). She was tiny, beautifully turned out, and ferociously clear about the librarian's role in fighting censorship. I didn't realize until I read her untimely obituary that Krug had launched Banned Books Week back in the eighties, a bold and pointed celebration of everything from *Huckleberry Finn* to trash and political incitement. The banners flying in my public library the last week of September each year had been dreamed up by her.

But the first in a long list of memorialized librarians who made me want to inhabit this world was Henriette Avram. She beckoned from the obits page, with her mysterious, knowing smile, the chain-smoking systems analyst who automated the library records of the Library of Congress and wrote the first code for computerized catalogs (MARC—*Ma*chine *R*eadable *C*ataloging), a form of which is still used today. She inspired a generation of women to combine library work and

computers. Her intellectual daughters gather now at conferences wearing giant buttons bearing the image of their gray-haired heroine, edged in black ribbon, with the legend *Mother of MARC.*

Whether the subject was a community librarian or a prophet, almost every librarian obituary contained some version of this sentence: "Under her watch, the library changed from a collection of books into an automated research center." I began to get the idea that libraries were where it was happening—wide open territory for innovators, activists, and pioneers.

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The profession that had once been the quiet gatekeeper to discreet palaces of knowledge is now wrestling a raucous, multi-headed, madly multiplying beast of exploding information and information delivery systems. Who can we trust? In a world where information itself is a free-for-all, with traditional news sources going bankrupt and publishers in trouble, we need librarians more than ever. We might not need a librarian to tell us that the first chapter of the Wikipedia entry about a Red Sox ballplayer, which we happened to look up during a slow moment of a Boston blowout of the Yankees, was scurrilous mischief : "[He] keeps his beard grown out to hide a rare birth defect. [He] was born with a huge vagina where a normal human chin would be. This would explain … why [he] is constantly fidgeting around in his beard because yeast infections are common in chin vaginas." This passage disappeared from Wikipedia in minutes, but not before I'd preserved a screen shot of the page and my printer had spit out a copy. Chin vaginas! What next? But in this age of mutating wikis, how much else is untrue? With the same number of keystrokes, I could have found more than a dozen articles in a database on my local library's website, and called up any of them using my library card. Or I could have summoned a librarian via one of the chat services that proliferate on the Web, like the one at the Boston Public Library that offers "24/7 reference—A Professional Librarian, on Your Computer, at Your Convenience." I didn't need a card to claim the undivided attention of a professional who made it her job to find me reliable information, whether it was

about something as important as a Supreme Court decision or as frivolous as a baseball player's beard.

Librarians' values are as sound as Girl Scouts': truth, free speech, and universal literacy. And, like Scouts, they possess a quality that I think makes librarians invaluable and indispensable: they want to *help*. They want to help *us*. They want to be of service. And they're not trying to sell us anything. But as one librarian put it, "The wolf is always at the door." In tight economic times, with libraries sliding further and further down the list of priorities, we risk the loss of their ideals, intelligence, and knowledge, not to mention their commitment to access for all— librarians consider free access to information the foundation of democracy, and they're right. Librarians are essential players in the information revolution because they level that field. They enable those without money or education to read and learn the same things as the billionaire and the Ph.D. In prosperous libraries, they loan out laptops; in strapped ones, they dole out half hours of computer time. They are the little "d" democrats of the computer age who keep the rest of us wired.

In tough times, a librarian is a terrible thing to waste.

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When the School of Library Science at Rutgers University became the School of Information Science in early 2009, a change the universities of Michigan, Syracuse, Berkeley, and others had already made, it was announcing that computers had taken over part of the curriculum. "Information science" is code for "don't worry, we're not dinosaurs; we've got the electronic age covered." About a third of the library graduate programs in the United States have now ditched the word *library*. Not that librarians, as a rule, have begun identifying themselves as *information scientists,* or, for that matter, *cybrarians*—I use this last word to conjure up the new breed of tech-savvy librarians, part cyborg, part cat's-eye reading glasses. Unless librarians take jobs with exotic and semi-contrived names like *digital media specialist* or *metadata and information architect*, or, as the city of Edinburgh tried to (seriously) rename its librarians, *audience development specialists*, they are, mainly, and I hope forever, librarians.

Although this book starts and ends in public libraries on the East Coast, where I live, the story stretches across the country and beyond. We're all connected. What happens in one place is happening in another—or it will be. I walked into my local library one day to find it had come to a complete standstill while the cataloging software was upgraded. Remember libraries without computers? I could, but only barely. It was an eerie step back in time, and was, as it turned out, a fitting illustration of the intimate and sometimes strained relationship between professionals who serve the public and professionals who serve machines. No matter how tech savvy my local librarians have become, like the rest of us, they rely on computer technicians and cope with the frustrations and challenges of ever-evolving software and hardware. Incorporating the new technology while keeping the old material useful and accessible—this is just the latest task in the long list of librarians' tasks. That they manage this while holding firm to principles of free speech and the right to privacy is remarkable, which is why I wanted to visit the Connecticut librarians who challenged the FBI's right to examine the records of their patrons' computer searches. Theirs is a story not only about the triumph of the First and Fourth Amendments but also about what can be accomplished when librarians and computer experts work together as a team. They can stand up to the government.

This book can be read as a journey into increasingly activist and visionary forms of library work. The walls of the library have grown porous now and in some cases are merely virtual, as librarians have come out from behind their desks to serve as active enablers in the digital age. I found librarians who took to the streets alongside political protesters in order to provide them with immediate, vital, and reliable information, and academic librarians who have reached out to students halfway around the globe, teaching them the computer skills necessary to link them and their villages to the international human rights movement. But no matter where or how they use their training, members of this once quiet and private profession have taken to talking—and gossiping—on the Web. Early on, many of them recognized the potential of blogs as sources of information and training, and became bloggers themselves. Passionate, funny, and often profane,

this crowd of computer age librarians vent about their patrons while making wicked sport of themselves and those old jokes and stereotypes.

On every level, the field is bending and broadening, especially as it moves into cyberspace. Librarians are collaborating to create a universal network of virtual library services on the 3-D web. At the Library of Congress, with the largest holdings in the country, the staff continues to expand its collections, not just in size but in kind. Librarians there welcomed the first "born-digital" collection when they took charge of a trove of e-mails, voice mails, and other electronic artifacts gathered after the attacks of 9/11. Another behemoth, the New York Public Library system, is cooking up all sorts of digital initiatives, and at the same time addressing the needs of those who seem overwhelmed by technology. These include, perhaps surprisingly, artists and writers, whose works fill the shelves and archives of libraries everywhere.

At the often forgotten edges of library work, the archivists, those trying to capture history before it dissolves into the unrecorded past, toil in this transitional period that's turning out to be something of a dark age. It's not just mock wiki entries about chin vaginas that disappear almost as fast as they're created; hundreds of days of electronic messages from the Bush White House went missing for years, and only 14 million were recovered. *Only* 14 million! How do you manage such a massive and slippery outpouring? Fortunately, there are heroic archivists, librarians, cybrarians, and computer scientists determined to save the world, or at least a corner of it, whether it appears on an elusive flickering webpage or a sheet of dead wood.

This is a story about these professionals and their world, researched partly on a computer in mazes so extended and complex—every link a trapdoor to another set of links—that I never found a sturdy place to stop and grasp the whole. Information used to be scarce; now we're buried in it. We can copy the same piece of information in endless files, duplicating with abandon; we can have our info everywhere we want it, on little data sticks, on hard drives with remote backup software, in clouds in cyberspace. And yet, whole chapters of

contemporary history are disappearing into the ether as e-mails get trashed and webpages are taken down and people die without sharing their passwords.

We know the first words uttered on the telephone, because Alexander Graham Bell wrote them down: "Mr. Watson. Come here. I need you." The first e-mail? As one of the digital histories points out, "In 1964, the first electronic mail message was sent from either the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the Carnegie Institute of Technology or Cambridge University. The message does not survive, however, and so there is no documentary record to determine which group sent the pathbreaking message." Its contents are a mystery, a little smudge where history has been erased.

So where does one go in such a wobbly, elusive, dynamic, confusing age? Wherever the librarians and archivists are.

They're sorting it all out for us.