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Books Are Us

by **Anne K. Robichaux** (Professor Emerita, Medical University of South Carolina)
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Column Editor's Note: This column covers fictitious accounts of people in our industry—librarians, publishers, vendors, booksellers, etc.—people like us. All contributions, comments, suggestions are welcomed. —AR

The Dewey Decimal System of Love (New American Library, Penguin Books, 2003, ISBN 0-451-20971-0), by **Josephine Carr**, is easy, quick and fun to read. Each chapter opens with a reference to the **Dewey Decimal System**, appropriate to the subject covered in that chapter, which is the most appealing aspect of the book to me. In one chapter this condition is described as the “Dewey decimal disease,” the compulsion to mention where in the library one might find information on the subject being discussed!

The narrator of the novel is **Alison Sheffield**, librarian at the **Free Library of Philadelphia**, who describes herself as a forty-year old spinster, a thin and vaguely anorexic looking woman who has a mild distaste for food. Long, auburn hair, worn in a French twist (not quite a bun). Glasses. Tiny boobs. Celibate for fifteen years, ardent only for books. Just the sort of woman you'd find behind the reference desk of your local public library (the author's words, not mine).

Her mother still buys clothes for her — lots and lots of “librarian blouses, with high necks, made of heavy silks and thick linens.” Long skirts that cling to her hips, but flare out below the knee: nothing that nips or tucks, but clothes that cover up her body completely.

While reserved, detached, vaguely repressed in her public persona, **Alison**, counter to all the tired old librarian stereotypes, drives a convertible, drinks martinis, and indulges in sexual

(though mild) fantasies. At home, in her own environment, sans clothes, she imagines herself a “glittering, gleaming creature with white, silky skin... (her) taut body like the spine of a beautiful book with gold-embossed lettering.”


As head of the Reference Department, **Alison** advises Acquisitions of major reference works for purchase, in addition to assisting people with reference requests, both of which require “an enormous amount of reading and a good memory.” She also enjoys straightening up the reference area, and loves the odor of old books. She has always wanted to be a librarian, and believes that “most librarians feel that way.” She is a bookworm, and thrilled to the core — most of the time — to be a librarian.

Her best friend at work is her boss, the director of the library. He's depicted initially as a strong and handsome Casanova type, with many women in his life. Neither appears to be interested in each other as anything more than friends and colleagues, having nothing other than their professions in common. Their conversations also seem to be primarily discussions of his current love interest, or his date of the night before, and only occasionally library issues, such as a “problem” library patron.

As the novel progresses, the reader learns that the spinster **Alison** had a date with a Medical Librarian four years ago, supposedly a perfect match (they both read a lot). During their one date, she fantasizes about marriage and buying a mansion on Rittenhouse Square. They transform an entire floor of the mansion into a library for their personal collections, resulting in a lead story in *Architectural Digest* on their home. She further fantasizes that this creates “the librarian as archetype,” resulting in “an explosion of films and books with the Librarian Character as hero.”

We also learn at the beginning of the novel that **Alison** is totally smitten by the new conductor of the **Philadelphia Philharmonic**, a married man, handsome, foreign (Finnish), **Harvard** educated, with a “buoyant” conducting style. To attract his attention, she must first lose her “librarian” image: restyle her hair, remove her glasses, and wear more revealing clothing. The story is more involved than **Alison's** crush on the conductor, including a mystery, a murder plot, the theft of musical scores, and librarians depicted as home wreckers, or devious thieves.

Reviewers at **Amazon.com** provide nearly as many negative as positive overall reviews of this book, with the reviewers who identify themselves as librarians fairly equally divided between those who enjoyed this lightweight novel, to those who felt insulted by it. I personally found the stereotypes as amusing as the story, with its somewhat predictable ending.

Dedicated to the author's mom, **Jo Carr**, “the paragon of a passionate librarian,” the author also acknowledges the **Allentown Public Library**, “with its dedicated and brilliant leader, **Kathryn Stephanoff**.” **Josephine Carr** further advises her readers with these words of wisdom: “may you continue to honor the extraordinary literary heritage found in our free library system and the librarians who help us discover its enduring wealth.” 



And They Were There

Reports of Meetings — 24th Charleston Conference Issues in Book and Serial Acquisition, Charleston, SC, November 3-6, 2004

Column Editor: **Sever Bordeianu** (University of Mexico) <sbordeia@unm.edu>

See additional reports from the *Charleston Conference in Against the Grain* December 2004-January 2005 issue, v.16#6, p.66-80 and February 2005 issue, v.17#1, p.82-84. The entire *Charleston Conference Proceedings* will be published by **Greenwood/Libraries Unlimited** later this year.

Lively Lunch — Reading and Reading Habits and How They Are Changing — Friday, November 5, 2004 — Presenter:
Lucretia McClure (Special Assistant to the Director, Countway Library of Medicine, Harvard Medical School)

Report by **Ramune Kubilius** (Galter Health Sciences Library, Northwestern University) <r-kubilius@northwestern.edu>

Lucretia McClure (Harvard Medical School) shared insights from 40 years of observing reading habits in universities, especially medical schools. **McClure** has observed a decline in original thought and ability to evaluate and critique sources. There is a decreasing quality in papers and a lack of book citations therein. Pressures perceived by medical students has resulted in “poverty of expression” and students are often “immigrants to the culture of literacy.” Many curricula have dropped humanities tracts, and one **NEJM** study found that readership has dropped among residents. Medical students could and should read classics, and also recent books by physicians, such as **Sherwin B. Nuland**, who claims that “instrumentality has come between student and book.” Session discussants included working librarians, students (of master's and doctoral levels), and a professor. They commented on generational specifics of

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