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ATG Interviews Marilyn Johnson

Author, *This Book is Overdue: How Librarians and Cybrarians Can Save Us All*

by **Dennis Brunning** (E Humanities Development Librarian, Arizona State University) <dennis.brunning@gmail.com>

Column Editor's Note: ***Marilyn Johnson's*** *wise and witty book* ***This Book is Overdue: How Librarians and Cybrarians Can Save Us All*** *is worth owning just for its cover. Super Librarian, red-caped and ready to save the world — or at least answer a few thorny questions.*

Don't let this one get by you. ***Ms. Johnson*** *has done her homework, hung out with the smart side of the profession, and has written an edgy and authentic book on us.* ***ATG's @ Brunning*** *caught up with* ***Marilyn*** *during her book tour. —* ***DB***

ATG: What — a book about librarians? Why?

MJ: I thought librarians would be fun people to follow in the midst of an information revolution. I especially wanted to track those who are adapting creatively to all the challenges. It seemed like interesting and relatively uncharted territory. Librarians are smart and articulate, and nobody else seemed to be talking to them. Like most people in service professions, they're somewhat invisible to those they serve.

ATG: For those of us who have been around the profession, I think most, perhaps not the Annoyed Librarian, will admit: you've nailed us. Are you sure you are not a librarian?

MJ: I take that as a compliment — thank you! But no, I'm not a librarian. I couldn't pass cataloging!

ATG: You credit librarians as key agents in your online socialization. How did this happen, and why is it so important?

MJ: I was trying to make it as a freelancer after leaving magazine publishing. My biggest challenge was technical. I couldn't afford to have a computer expert come to my house every week and help me get and stay connected and updated, and also help me figure out how to organize my online work. Where could I turn? Who was affordable and trustworthy? The same people who have been there for me when I've had any question, from how to get a drivers license or read a utility bill to how to save my research on the Web.

ATG: You've come up with some keywords for understanding librarians and their art. In order, tell us about smoochy, poop, cyber-missionary, tattooed librarians, and information sickness.

MJ: Now there's a twisted vocabulary list! One of my sources wrote, "So how did I become a librarian? Is it too *smoochy* to say I think I always was one?" Like so many librarians, this one has a great sense of humor and a creative way with words.

I wrote about *poop* because so many librarian blogs reported "rogue turds" as a problem; they found it behind the stacks or in the book drop, believe it or not.

I followed some inspiring *cyber-missionary* librarians who were using their expertise in computer networking to advance a human rights agenda. I also wrote about some alluring *tattooed librarians* I met through the **Facebook** group **Tattooed Librarians**.

As for *information sickness,* that is the phrase that propelled me into **NYPL's** collection looking for a novel from the Eighties (*Easy Travel to Other Planets* by **Ted Mooney**) that described this affliction. The characters would be so overwhelmed by news and facts that they'd fall to the ground babbling and bleeding. I often feel I'm suffering from information sickness these days. Don't you?

ATG: You devote an entire to chapter about blogging librarians. What is so important about librarian bloggers?

MJ: They give voice to the marvelous and terrifying changes we are all witnessing in this age of information. They tell us how to navigate technology, software, social networks, the wired world. They're also beacons — they invite us to follow them, message them, use them as resources. And some of them are very entertaining!

ATG: There is a unique romance ongoing in the profession. Tell us more.

MJ: Unless we're off the grid, or computer experts ourselves, we've become increasingly reliant on tech people. As long as they're wiring us, fixing our machines, or coaxing our files from a crashed hard drive, we love them. But a virus or rocky upgrade or cranky machine can cause us to swear and throw plates. I say in the book, "This is the greatest and most fraught romance of modern society, the marriage between the IT staff and those who depend on them."

ATG: Can Library 2.0 and Library Year 300 BC reconcile?

MJ: Absolutely. Libraries that embrace everything from the OED to the World Wide Web, from the classic texts to **Twitter** feeds, do that every day.

ATG: Librarians in Second Life — you look at virtual reality as librarians have engaged it. What's your take on this evolution of librarianship?

MJ: Virtual reality is a new technological toy, and I think it's significant that librarians are playing with it. I think of **Second Life** as a kind of research-and-development department for the profession. The librarians there are experimenting with bringing services to people in immersive environments. And why not? It's fun, it's cheap, and you can network with other librarians from around the world. Soon enough, I think, we won't be clicking through Web pages to get to other Web pages; we'll be traveling into spaces on our computer screens that, like **Second Life**, feel three-dimensional. And there will be librarians, already familiar with that territory, waiting to help us.

ATG: You observe, engage, and write about librarians in many settings, especially the public library. Along the way did you have any opportunity to investigate our elaborate anthropology: academic, special, school librarians?

MJ: I actually wrote about almost as many academic librarians as public librarians, but as one librarian said to me, "Are you crazy? You can't write about all kinds of librarians. There are too many!" It's like trying to write a book about doctors. So I'm crazy, and I haven't done justice to law librarians, medical librarians, culinary, veterinary, government, school, corporate, or special librarians. I did consult sources from all these fields (except veterinary librarians, alas). I'm sorry I couldn't tell all of their stories.

ATG: Your chapter, Gotham City, describes the New York Public Library as it moves forward into the digital age. Surprisingly, its story is one of constant change even before computers. You express both excitement and sadness. Is the New York Public Library a poster child for "the library?"

MJ: **NYPL** is far luckier than most libraries, because it is funded by the city and also as a charitable foundation; some of the wealthiest and most generous people in the U.S. have endowed it. Compared to the **Philadelphia Free Library**, which has a brilliant head librarian (**Siobhan Reardon**) trying to keep it funded with spit and glue, the **NYPL** is in relatively good financial order. It is also galloping into the digital age with great speed and engaging its patrons in wonderful new ways. I do feel sad when I think of the scholarly librarians who knew their collections so well and are no longer there to guide users. There are world-class collections at **NYPL**, but fewer experts who can connect patrons and scholars to them.

ATG: Librarians promote access and preservation. In your chapter on archives, you ask the question: what is worth preserving? In a few words, what is worth preserving and what is worth having "right now?"

MJ: I don't know if everything that people save is worth saving — but that's what gets saved, and that's how we build our culture. It's really simple. History is written out of the scraps that get saved. If you feel something should be saved, by all means, save it.

ATG: If you wrote a sequel to "This Book Is Overdue," what do you imagine would be its handle or tag line?

MJ: I don't know...This Text Is Morphing?

ATG: Any book or writing projects on the horizon we librarians ought to know about and note in our online calendars?

MJ: I'm looking for the subject of my next book. I welcome your suggestions!