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BOOK REVIEW

Poet-Librarians in the Library of Babel: Innovative Meditations on Librarianship

Edited by Shannon Tharp & Sommer Browning

2018 | Litwin Books | 204 pages, softcover | ISBN-13: 978-1-63400-028-4 | \$22.00 print

Poet-Librarians in the Library of Babel: Innovative Meditations on Librarianship, an essay collection edited by Shannon Tharp and Sommer Browning, seeks to use humanistic inquiry to make meaning of a changing profession. The book seemingly builds on Erin Dorney's (2014) article [Librarian as Poet/Poet as Librarian](#) in which she interviews poet-librarians. While there is no explicitly stated connection, both the article and the book explore library work and poetry from multiple poet-librarians' points of view. The overarching theme is the power of creativity. Other themes include multiple identities, stereotypes, our associations with books and authorship, access, resistance, exploration, and historical inequities. Poet-Librarians shows librarianship as affective, not just effective. The reader is able to witness the shift from a prescriptive service profession to one that requires librarians to get creative, to wield the agency that comes along with being a creator, and empowers others to embody what it means to be a creator.

The book's format couples essays on librarianship with poems by the same author. Each chapter is a different pair of an essay and poem. This pairing allows us to see meditations on how library work influences the author's inner life and vice versa. Chapters are not grouped together by a theme and stand on their own. Some authors make creative use of the book's structure. Many weave references to library research and literary work into chapters that give context to the themes of the poet-librarian's role in the world and honor to poet-librarians of the past. For example, Edric Mesmer's essay and poem both use a "bibliograph" format in tandem with each other to show how sources add weight and share the history of a work (p. 79–88). The format of the book captures dialogue from teens to partnering organizations that tell a story of community spaces within the library not often captured in attendance counts or satisfaction surveys. Then, the reader gets a glimpse of how the poet captures the human experience through the poem sections of each chapter. Almost all of the authors have published in books, chapbooks, or in literary journals or



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popular culture magazines. All are experienced in the field, giving them authority as poets and librarians.

Chapter author Shannon Tharp points out common associations that poetry is “precious” and “pretentious” (p.154). If a reader makes these associations, it is easy to miss its connections to scholarly communication. Librarians have learned to work creatively out of necessity—stripped budgets, inequitable collections packages, and administrative decisions, as Yago S.Cura discusses in *Hoisting the Disenfranchised Over the Digital Divide in South Central Los Angeles Exposition* (p. 59–74). More recently, we have seen library professionals look to the power of community, connection, empathy, and initiation to mitigate inequities in publishing and access to information (Bozcar et al., 2018; Gilliland et al., 2019). The book explores the poet-librarian’s role in literary, information, and local communities. For example, in Eleftherion’s essay, *Poetry & Public Libraries: An EthoPoetics*, in which the author views poet-librarianship in a small town as adjacent to the role of the griot, the historian and the teacher (p.11). Those doing library work can gain insights into the human condition that could lead to creative solutions and an emphasis on the people who make up our communities. As poet and scholarly communication librarian Aaron McCullough puts it in the chapter *Scholarly Communication, Bureaucracy, Darkness and Desire: Poets in the Age of the Quantified Self*, “Who better than a poet to look for emergencies, excrescences, escape hatches, off-beat songs?”

In McCollough’s chapter, the author makes direct connections between the poet-librarian perspective and scholarly communications work (p.137–148). The essay portion of the chapter critiques how much of scholarly communications work and librarianship is in service to neo-liberal models of “quantifying the self.” “Quantifying the self” refers to how much of scholarly communications and library work revolves around metrics such as collections, research impact, and academic performance metrics. McCollough goes on to call the discourse of impact a fraud, stating it does not capture what it seeks to measure, while skewing research and scholarship’s roots in inquiry (p. 144). He also encourages librarians to proactively speculate about emerging areas in librarianship. McCollough uses directly relevant examples like Elsevier’s acquisition of SSRN (Social Science Research Network) and partnership with the University of Florida. They also draw on themes of examination, creativity, and emergent strategies that are woven throughout the book (Brown, 2017). For example, Michele R. Santamaria notes that working as a librarian removes pressure from needing to earn a living or being highly visible through their craft (p.32). One could draw parallels to the pressure to “publish or perish” that many researchers and scholars feel in academia. Yago S. Cura also speaks to the power dynamics within the digital divide and access to poetry in South Central Los Angeles, positioning the internet as “registry, repository, and oracle” (p.66)—encouraging us to think more deeply about whether our work with open reaches those who are truly the most impacted by and in need of access.

The connection between identities of poet and librarian highlight how a community can amplify the voices of the unheard. In Vilaboy's chapter, *Reflections on "Ojos y Orejas are Eyes and Ears" Bilingual Story Time Program*, the community and its needs inspire a new service and a new space for bilingual story time (p.21–26). As we ask ourselves who is included and excluded from our definitions of community, Jessica Smith's chapter on zines and small publishers reminds us we are seeking to democratize research and scholarship (p.1–9). Or as Smith puts it, "ordinary people distribute things that make it into the library." Additionally, Baez Bendorf manages to make a critical examination of the fetishization and breaking of silence imposed by power dynamics such as marginalization, shame, invisible labor, and oppression sing with great lyricism (pg.167).

The chapters mentioned in this review stood out among meditations about browsing the stacks by unpacking more about the positioning of authors and libraries. The book leans toward bibliophilia and vocational awe in some places.

Certainly, this book is the proper space to explore and wax poetic on serendipity and discovery, but there wasn't always much to take away from it if the reader is looking for professional application. Ideally, content that might build from this book would include a history of poet-librarians, what we can learn from disciplines that champion "the unindexable" as Elia calls it, and how new ways of publishing poetry such as digital scholarship have affected literary communities (p.105–112). It would also be great to see a more visible community space for poet-librarians in the profession.

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BIOGRAPHY

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