



## Who Says Libraries Are Just About Books?

[16 April 2008]

by [Lara Killian](#)

PopMatters Associate Books Editor

### 13-19 April 2008 is National Library Week

"First sponsored in 1958, National Library Week is a national observance sponsored by the American Library Association (ALA) and libraries across the country each April. It is a time to celebrate the contributions of our nation's libraries and librarians and to promote library use and support." - [American Library Association.org](http://AmericanLibraryAssociation.org)

Scott Douglas is a 20-something librarian in southern California. His memoir, *Quiet, Please: Dispatches from a Public Librarian* will be released 15 April 2008 by [Da Capo Press](#), to coincide with National Library Week in the US. Douglas is a regular contributor to the *McSweeney's* website, as well as maintaining his own blog, [Speak Quietly](#) regarding life as a public librarian. Recently Douglas took a break from his working honeymoon to take questions about his book for *PopMatters*.

*Quiet, Please* author Scott Douglas speaks out about the future of libraries, being played by Oprah in the movie version, and his recent library-themed wedding.

### The opening line of *Quiet, Please* is about masturbation in public. Were there any other contenders for grabbing the reader's attention?

The only other opening was about librarians not being able to read, but this was changed in the second draft. I wanted something that said right away that libraries weren't just about books.

### What do you have to say to your readers who are either currently enrolled in or plan to undertake a Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) or similar degree, now that you've destroyed their dreams of studying the true art of librarianship?

Like most degrees you get from it what you put in. The part of college I got the most from was a work-study I did for a University library; I always encourage all library students to do the same. The program won't be a complete waste; people take you more seriously when you say you have a master's in something, and that's important when you're a librarian.

I think the whole experience would have been much more rewarding had I wanted to pursue a career in academic libraries where many of the theories I learned would have been put into practice. Really the best thing I can say is spend time working in a library before you spend two years in school.

### You just married a library assistant, and according to *Library Journal*, the wedding invitations had a library theme. This is an issue that *Quiet, Please* did not address at length: are libraries a good place to pick up chicks?

The second to last chapter of the book does talk about this, but not to the extent some people may have wanted. By and large, branch libraries are full of soccer moms, underage girls, and elderly women—so it's not exactly a chick haven. With more libraries offering free wi-fi this is kind of changing, because more college students are coming in with laptops for Internet access. Most of the romance I've seen in the past at the library is inter-office type romance.

### You were recently interviewed for a New York City affiliate of *National Public Radio*. When

**asked, you mentioned that wedding favors included a couple of favorite books rather than dinner mints or a take-home centerpiece. Any other fun details you want to share (to spark the inspiration of wannabe-hipster-librarians of marriageable age)?**

The centerpieces were used books folded to give an accordion type shape; it's easier to show than describe. Each table was named after a writer, and had a photo of and a book by that writer. Every person got a library card with the name of the writer and the writer's picture; on the back of the library card were a few facts about the writer along with our favorite book by them. There were also literary themed crossword puzzles we made and little library pencils to write in the answers.

We both agreed to have any reference of my book stripped from the wedding, because it was our day, not the book's day; but my wife Diana's step dad had just finished reading the book, and surprised us by having a group of guys throw paper airplanes, because the book had mentioned that's something we did on our first date; so I guess that was sort of literary themed.

**The role of a librarian often seems to be a sedentary one, and you do mention spending a lot of time sitting at the reference desk. There are exactly three paragraphs in the book where you describe an attempt to get some exercise, more to discourage angry patrons from attacking you than in order to stay healthy, but do you have any other thoughts about keeping fit in your chosen profession?**

You'd be surprised at how much exercise you get from just getting up and down from your chair every other minute to help a patron. As far as real exercise, I joined a gym with my wife but we usually only go once or twice a week; we favor walks and eating healthy over machines. That seems the general consensus of other librarians—eat right and workout at the gym if you can.

**You are clearly interested in the changing nature of libraries—how do you envision the ideal library in 20 years?**

It's hard to say. I really am impressed by some of the new e-readers coming out. It would be nice if librarians could find away to somehow incorporate this. Something like when you walk through the doors of the library your reader is loaded with the library's digital collection. The emphasis on books will definitely continue to decrease. Libraries will increasingly look for alternative ways to bring in revenue like partnerships with cafes.

The real future is whatever the public demands. It would be great to offer the library that librarians want, but come budget time the city will give all its money to other things if the public doesn't feel the need for the librarian's kind of library. Several libraries have already been closed because they wanted to do things the way they have always done them.

I think large metro libraries will keep allocations to digital research, but branches will be stuck with Google reference. Kids don't understand digital reference and unless librarians and teachers work together to teach it, kids will continue to go to Google for homework help.

I think the reference desk will disappear in favor of roaming librarians who walk around looking more like an Old Navy employee than a librarian—fully equipped with a portable Internet tablet or PDA to search for books right in the aisle; I don't know that I like that image, but I do like the idea of coming right to the patron instead of waiting for the patron to come to us.

More responsibilities will be placed on clerks and pages, and librarians will have less of a presence. They still will be there but not in today's numbers—they will be more like the people who come out when no one else can solve the problem; this will hurt customer service, but it will save money, and sadly that's one thing libraries are increasingly trying to do.

Offering public service is about the only thing I think will stay the same. As libraries decrease, people will begin to treat (libraries) as iconoclastic places and they need librarians to catalog it.

1/15/2009

Who Says Libraries Are Just About Bo...

I think there will also be a greater need for personal librarians of the wealthy. Hundreds of years ago the elite would have personal libraries as a way of impressing friends, and I think this trend could make a comeback.

More and more the future of reading will be in blogging-type formats. People want everything in more condensed forms. I don't believe in or endorse all of this, but I see it coming. Epic length books, for now anyway, will decrease; I think we may see the rebirth of the serialized novel if blogging and e-readers continue to remain popular, and it will be interesting to see how libraries handle them.

**You write that there's more to being a librarian than a love of books, and most of your coworkers seem to not care much about them. Are book lover librarians in the minority in your experience? Would you say that a love of books is actually a handicap to a career as a librarian?**

Books are never a handicap, but when you have more space devoted to computers than books, why should you expect [patrons] to read books? Being well read is great, but if you can't use a computer then no one will take you seriously.

Today's library patron is more interested in website recommendations than book recommendations. I hope librarians continue to be well read just as I hope every person is, but for public librarians they have to accept that their role has changed. Some libraries will continue to be about books. I'd love for all libraries to stay book-focused, but that's not what's going to keep the doors open. It does have one advantage; books that at one time were only available at one library and that could only be seen by people with special permission are now being made available to the masses through digital preservation.

**You mentioned a number of distracting influences in the daily library routine. How is your battle against Freecell progressing? Are you still tempted to play every day?**

I don't play as often as I used to. I tend to find something I enjoy and be addicted for a few months until I find something else. My wife and I have been playing Scrabulous on Facebook quite a bit these days. It works out great because now we can be mutually unproductive at work.

**You seem to have a thing for librarians in movies. Have you thought of writing a screenplay about the crazy characters that populate your library in real life? Who would play you?**

I'm always open to trying new things if the right project presents itself. I would want Oprah to play me; the movie could be lousy but women would come out in swarms just because she's attached. I suspect the director would be more in favor of someone like Jim from NBC's *The Office*.

**Your book has a jaded tone – like you've already seen it all in your profession. Ever think of relocating to, say, the East Coast or Mid-West just to see what the crazies are like when you get out of the sun?**

I've heard plenty of stories from East Coast colleagues. I'm also third generation Californian—my genes were not made for cold weather. My wife is definitely up for it—especially after seeing New York for the first time on our honeymoon.

**Do people who read your blog or contributions to *McSweeney's* contact you to say, I know exactly what you mean – I had someone fall asleep on our bathroom floor/ threaten to kill me/ ask me to reheat their casserole dinner so they could continue playing computer games rather than go home to eat? Are their stories funnier than yours? What's the craziest library anecdote you've heard that happened to someone else?**

So many people have written me to say they relate and have a similar story! Not too long ago someone told me a woman came into the library with what appeared to be only toilet paper covering her unmentionables and police had to remove her for indecent exposure.

**What's the last really good book you read?**

1/15/2009

Who Says Libraries Are Just About Bo...

*Velvet Elvis* by Rob Bell. He's like a postmodern C.S. Lewis, and regardless of what you believe about what he's saying, he has a fascinating way of giving old doctrine a fresh new angle.

---

See also the [book review of \*Quiet, Please\*](#)

---

[advertising](#) | [about](#) | [contributors](#) | [submissions](#)

© 1999-2008 PopMatters.com. All rights reserved.

PopMatters.com™ and PopMatters™ are trademarks of PopMatters Media, Inc. and PopMatters Magazine.