

Life, Libraries and Literature

By Dr Pam Macintyre

When I was a primary school child my parents had a subscription library and gift shop in the outer Melbourne suburb of Huntingdale (before public libraries became widespread). I recollect admiring the display and order of the books on the bookshelves, many of them substantial hardbacks. But the real pleasure came when the library and gift shop closed and significant numbers of the books came home onto my parents' shelves and were there for a young reader with an appetite. I was inspired by Paul Brickhill's *Reach for the Sky* and *The Great Escape*, Nicholas Monsarrat's *The Cruel Sea* (clearly a post-war child), enthralled by Lloyd C Douglas's *The Shoes of the Fisherman*, Neville Shute's *The Pied Piper*, *How Green was my Valley* by Richard Llewellyn, Mary O'Hara's *My Friend Flicka*, *Thunderhead* and *The Green Grass of Wyoming*, the latter with its frisson of romance exciting to a prepubescent girl. No one said that I could not or should not read any of these books, and returning to them in adulthood, it was clear that the content clearly not aimed at a twelve-year-old girl had washed right over and not bothered me.

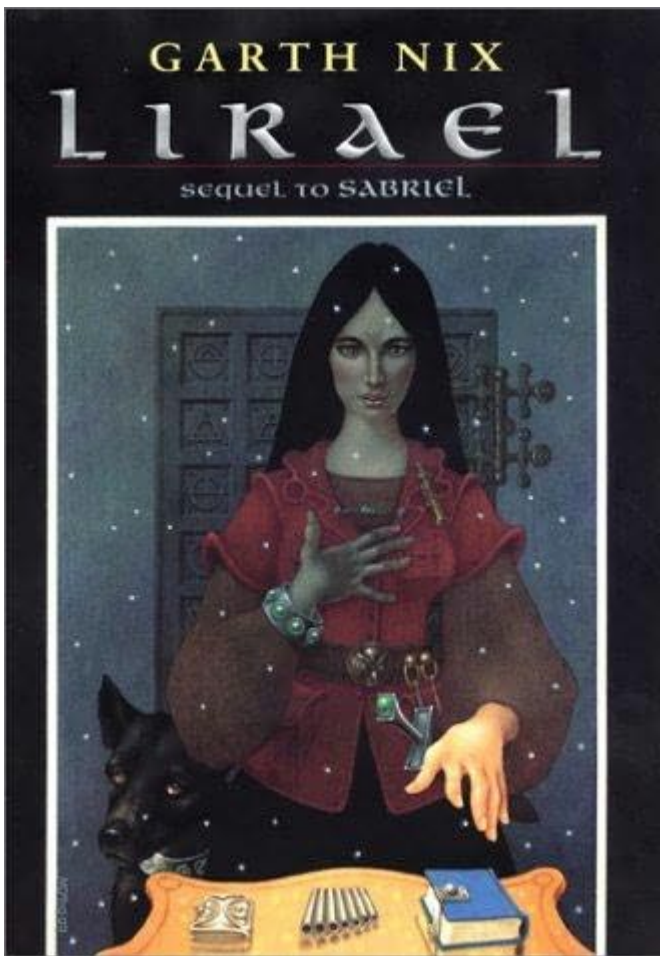
Perhaps these early influences were formative, because Librarianship and the world of children's literature in particular was the profession I chose, or perhaps chose me. And now I find myself becoming a staunch defender of the title of that noble profession, 'Librarian', in a world

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that seems to prefer Information Manager, Resource Manager, Manager, Chief Executive Officer. At a conference in Switzerland a few years ago I was struck by the presence of the scholar librarian as the one at the head of the library, especially of academic libraries. I recalled this when I read that the recent appointment of the Chief Executive Officer of State Library Victoria (not State Librarian) was the former Director of News at the ABC.

But then, as so often in other circumstances, I turned to literature for solace, fiction in particular, and was reminded that others have admired and continue to admire librarians, and that writers have used the profession as inspiration across genres and time periods. A search for 'librarians in fiction' on the web will bring up a large and broad range of titles, recent and not so recent: children's – who can forget the inimitable Margaret Mahy's *The Librarian and the Robbers*; young adult – Judith Clarke's wonderful, eccentric librarian-with-a Masters' degree in the Al Capsella series. All your favourites about libraries and librarians are there, including some of mine such as Carlos Ruiz Zafon's *The Shadow of the Wind*, Alan Bennet's *The Uncommon Reader* (2007) his hilarious story of how the Queen becomes an avid reader after stumbling across the mobile library at Buckingham Palace, and the strange but compelling *The Night Bookmobile* by Audrey Niffenegger. A similar search for Information manager in fiction proves not so fruitful.

Without a doubt for me the pick of novels about libraries and librarians is the wonderfully imagined Great Library of the Clayr in Garth Nix's *Lirael* and its star, Third Assistant Librarian, Lirael. If you haven't read this series in a while revisit it for its imaginative sweep, lyrical writing and powerful world building. Read it also for Lirael who, when she requests to work in the library as a fourteen-year-old is told: "That can be dangerous to a girl of fourteen. Or a woman of forty, for that matter" (p. 45).



And who wouldn't want to work in a library shaped like a nautilus shell, "a continuous tunnel that wound down the mountain in an ever tightening spiral". There is not a computer in sight, only

books and paper from all over the Kingdom. Books of magic and mystery, knowledge both ancient and new, scrolls, maps spells, recipes inventories, stories true tales . . . There are old armouries within it . . . rooms full of odd paraphernalia . . . chambers where dressmakers' dummies stood fully clothed . . . greenhouses tended by sendings . . . rooms of total darkness, swallowing up the light and anyone foolish enough to enter unprepared. (p. 46).

The appeal deepens when we are told "there are dangerous things and dangerous knowledge in the Library" (p. 47).

Lirael is appointed a Third Assistant Librarian, after an interview with the Chief Librarian who has on her desk the expected piles of books and papers but also a long, silver-bladed sword, and who also tells Lirael ominously, "it is better to be a librarian than part of the collection" (p. 50). Lirael leaves her interview "in a daze of happiness . . . She was going to be a librarian!" (p. 50). Not for her the meeting with HR, an assessment of her on line searching skills, or questions about whether she has expertise in RDA. She is taken to the Robing Room,

'a huge room full of all the equipment, weapons, and miscellaneous items the librarians needed, from climbing ropes to boathooks. And dozens and dozens of the special Library waistcoats, all in different sizes and colours (p. 51).

As a Third Assistant Librarian she is given a yellow vest, and it proves to be heavier than it looks. Silk covers a canvas lining. It has a whistle that can be blown by lowering the head "even if something is holding your arms" (p. 51). While Lirael wonders at what might be holding her arms, she is given a part clockwork mouse that fits in her front pocket and will be sent to get help should she need it. Once activated it runs to the Reading Room and sounds the alarm. A belt, scabbard, dagger, and pass key – not plastic, but "a silver" bracelet set with

emeralds, which when properly spelled "will open all the appropriate doors" (p. 53) complete her librarian's uniform.

Lirael begins at the lowliest level of the profession, doing checking, recording and indexing. She must wait to be elevated to a Second Assistant Librarian before she can be part of the collecting of special or dangerous items that often have to be fetched by large parties of armed librarians. She has a small study in which to become familiar with the set texts: *The Librarian's Rules*, *Basic Bibliography*, and *The Large Yellow Books: Simple Spells for Third Assistant Librarians* (p. 55). Lirael is curious and adventurous – a typical librarian – and so sets off to explore the Old Levels of the Great Library, considered dangerous, and which are out-of-bounds to her. Inventive, she devises a method to get past the door secured with seals "bearing the book and sword symbol of the Chief Librarian" (p. 60). As she begins her exploration, accompanied by the Disreputable Dog, also a keen reader, she remembers that it is not uncommon for librarians to lay down their lives either in dangerous research, "simple overwork, or action against previously unknown dangers discovered in the library's collection" (p. 62). That might not be the greatest challenge for the contemporary librarian, or a requirement to put in a job advertisement, but much of what Nix writes about operates metaphorically.

Lirael is a homage to librarians, those in our lives who might not have had to give up breathing in responding to our research or recreational reading needs, but who gave time and persistence to finding that one, elusive item (thank you Richard Overell, then at Monash University library who rang at 9pm to tell me he had located an obscure text required for a PhD, or Jock Murphy, then at the State Library of Victoria, hunting down books and documents for Stella Lees and me for *The Oxford Companion to Australian Children's Literature*). I remember being so impressed by such generous acts: I was just a student at the university, a member of the reading public, not someone deserving of such special service. My undergraduate students are amazed by the similar attention given to them by university and public librarians who enthusiastically and with delight and skill help them to find just the right picture books for grade five students, or suggest just what to read next after *The Fault in our Stars*. They may not have searched the shelves and records with climbing ropes and boat hooks (but we know these are Nix's clever metaphors) but did so tenaciously, persistently and with care and respect for the needy one.

So Librarians everywhere be proud of the title, and also be aware of the symbolic silk waistcoat – yellow, red, blue, white or black – that lies beneath the suit, dress or jeans that signifies your belonging to a much loved and lauded (and perhaps dangerous) profession.

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