

Nancy Pearl: Librarianship's Precious Gem

When one ponders the great figures of our time who represent the best in their field, it is easy to rattle off several without even thinking: Babe Ruth for baseball, Martin Luther King, Jr. for civil rights, Ansel Adams for photography, and Albert Einstein for science. It is interesting to note that the names one immediately associates with “the best and brightest” are all men. It is also interesting that one of the fields that do not immediately come to mind is the one place where all of the above “greats” can be found together—the library. However, in the past ten years or so, a modern female paragon of library science emerged on the scene: Nancy Pearl. Pearl’s enthusiasm for books made her a librarian action figure, both literally and figuratively.

Pearl grew up in Detroit, Michigan, and led an unhappy childhood with her parents who, despite their issues of depression and anger, were avid readers (Minzesheimer, 2007). From a young age, Pearl escaped her family’s dysfunction by spending time at the local branch library. Looking back, Pearl (2007) said, “I was very fortunate to have a cadre of librarians, both at the public library and my elementary and high school libraries, who happily and caringly fed my reading needs” (pp. v). Much like Melvin in Carla Morris’ picture book *The Boy Who Was Raised By Librarians* or Matilda in Roald Dahl’s classic of that name, Pearl grew up in the library and developed an enormous appreciation for books.

By the age of ten, Pearl decided she wanted to be a children’s librarian. Fresh from library school at the University of Michigan, she fulfilled that wish in the Detroit

Public Library system (Pearl, 2007). She undoubtedly passed along her passion for reading to many children in the same library system where her love of reading was nurtured. The opportunity to “pay it forward” is a special one, and Nancy Pearl was fortunate to be able to do that throughout her career.

Pearl worked in library systems in Detroit, Tulsa, and Seattle. About librarianship, she said, “I’ve never since wavered in my belief that being a librarian is one of the best, and noblest, careers that anyone could have” (2003, pp. xi). Pearl (2003) also worked at an independent bookstore in Oklahoma and reviewed books on two public radio stations (pp. xi). However, Nancy is not a typical book critic: “Her gravelly voice, with its uniquely Midwestern combination of flatness and warmth, comes across devoid of the authority associated with reviewers” (Dederer, 2003, pp. E1). She does not speak with the braggadocio of some book reviewers. Rather, she speaks from her heart and her knowledge of books that Virginia librarian and former chair of ALA’s Collection Development Section Neal Wyatt characterized as “bone-deep” (Denn, 2004).

Pearl was recruited from Tulsa to work in Seattle, where she was director of the Seattle Public Library and the Washington Center for the Book until her retirement in 2004 (Denn, 2004). As director of the Washington Center for the Book, she founded the “If All of Seattle Read the Same Book” program in 1998, which drew national recognition and has since been tried in cities and towns all over the world (Verhovek, 2005, A8). Her vast knowledge allows her to advise readers about a myriad of subjects since she is, in her words, a “promiscuous reader” (Pearl, 2005, pp. ix).

Nancy is also noted for her publications, beginning with the textbook-like *Now Read This* and *Now Read This II* published in 1999 and 2002, respectively. In 2003,

Book Lust was published with the appropriate subtitle “Recommended Reading for Every Mood, Moment, and Reason.” *More Book Lust* followed two years later because she realized she had inadvertently left out many books she loved and, because she included her email address in the introduction to *Book Lust*, she received numerous emails from readers reminding her of other books she enjoyed or introducing her to new ones—although it is hard to believe there is a book Nancy Pearl has not read (Pearl, 2005). Pearl galvanized her readers into expanding their literary horizons and helped to answer the question “What do I read next?” for thousands of people. In addition, she freed readers from reading books they did not like with her “rule of fifty.” This rule states that if you are under the age of fifty, give any book you read fifty pages to decide if you want to continue with it. If you are over the age of fifty, subtract your age from 100 and read that many pages of your book before deciding whether to continue or not. Pearl (2003) said, “Believe me, nobody is going to get any points in heaven by slogging their way through a book they aren’t enjoying but think they ought to read” (pp. xii)

Pearl’s most recent book was called *Book Crush* and consisted of recommended reading for kids and teenagers, which went back to her roots as a children’s librarian. The book included graphic novels and books from Pearl’s own formative years, and also suggested ways to get kids reading: 1) Match the child’s interests with a book about the same topic. 2) The entire family should set aside thirty minutes after dinner to sit down and read. 3) Reading should not be used as punishment. 4) Tell the child they do not have to finish every book they start (Minzesheimer, 2007). Pearl made reading over into an enjoyable family activity in order to get (and keep) children engaged in books.

Not only can one buy Pearl's books, but one can purchase Pearl herself. Seattle-based store Archie McPhee sold a "Librarian Action Figure" cast in Pearl's likeness and it outsold all the store's other action figures, including Jesus (Denn, 2004).

Unfortunately, there was some negative reaction to the figure's "shushing" feature, but Mark Pahlow, owner of the parent company of Archie McPhee, said, "Librarians tend to be overlooked and underpaid, but they've had a lot of influence on a lot of people's lives[...] I think this figure has touched a lot of people" (Verhovek, 2005). Clearly, those who disliked the figure were concerned that it portrayed librarians in an unflattering light. However, Pearl's other recognition proves the opposite—that she is, in fact, a boon to librarianship. By putting a face on the profession, she has thrust the library back into mainstream consciousness. Through her work at creating a citywide book group, to publishing books in which anyone can find a good read, to encouraging the rediscovery of out-of-print authors, Nancy Pearl is a champion of the pleasure of reading and a gem of a librarian.

References

Dederer, Claire. (2003, October 9). Quick celebrity after her 'Book Lust' was published.

New York Times, pp. E1. Retrieved October 3, 2008, from *ProQuest* database.

Denn, Rebekah. (2004, August 2). Nancy Pearl trading the quiet confines of the library for a life of leisure. *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. Retrieved October 11, 2008, from http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/books/184312_pearl02.html

Minzesheimer, Bob. (2007, May 8). 'Book Crush' is a labor of love. *USA Today*, pp. 04D. Retrieved October 3, 2008, from *General OneFile* database.

Pearl, Nancy. (2003). *Book Lust: Recommended Reading for Every Mood, Moment, and Reason*. Seattle: Sasquatch Books.

Pearl, Nancy. (2005). *More Book Lust: 1,000 New Reading Recommendations for Every Mood, Moment, and Reason*. Seattle: Sasquatch Books.

Pearl, Nancy. (2007). *Book Crush: For Kids and Teens Recommended Reading for Every Mood, Moment, and Interest..* Seattle: Sasquatch Books.

Verhovek, Sam Howe. (2005, September 13). Model librarian is a bestseller: Nancy Pearl's books extol the joys of reading. But it's her action figure that's flying off shelves. *Los Angeles Times*, pp. A8. Retrieved October 3, 2008, from *ProQuest* database.