

The library lady

While the local library offers a reassuringly staid haven of community service for some, others find a hotbed of intrigue and existential angst. Helen Rose reports on life from the other side of the counter, the side with the stamps on it.

As a child, I used to love going to the library. I remember the thrill of seeing shelves filled with books towering above me, seeming to scrape the very heavens; the hallowed sense of calm that filled this cathedral of words; how people dropped their voices upon entering, their whispers adding to the holy, church-like atmosphere; and the awe and slight terror of handing over my carefully chosen books to the huge but gentle woman behind the desk, known only as “the Lady” – “Give your books to the Lady, dear”, “No, the Lady has to stamp them first”, “Don’t lick the money, sweetheart, the Lady has to touch that later.” Oh, how I admired the Lady! So calm, so quiet, so infinitely wise, she seemed wholly unearthly and yet somehow, strangely familiar.

These memories came flooding back to me on my first day as an employee of Derbyshire County Council, when I saw a frazzled-looking woman turn to the smallest of her spawn and say, “Lydia, give your card to the Lady.”

She was referring to me.

I’m the Lady.

I was so flustered I could barely stamp straight.

I’ve been working as relief staff for the local library for around six months now and I’ve not only handled my fair share of spitty pennies, I’ve also been snotted on, sneered about, shouted at and referred to as “the young girl on the desk who doesn’t know anything”. The world of book-lending is more sinister and mystifying than you could ever imagine, and significantly more surreal. I finish each day half-expecting Tim Burton to pop out from the local heritage section, or Davina McCall to swoop in and tell me I’m the unwitting star of a new piece of reality TV based on a combination of The Truman Show and Twin Peaks.

The majority of the strangeness comes from the regulars. My personal favourite is Mr Davies, a very sweet little man of around sixty-odd who meets all the requirements of a Good Customer; he’s polite, patient and only ever asks me to do one thing at a time. He also smells nice, a quality I find shamefully lacking in the general public.

Mr Davies comes into the library at six o’clock every weekday evening to use the computer for an hour. When he leaves, he books the same computer at the same time for the next night. He comes in, I say, “Evening, Mr Davies. Computer Six for an hour, is it?” and night after night he replies with genuine surprise, “Oh, goodness, how did you know?”

Because you’ve been on Computer Six for an hour five nights a week for at least twenty four weeks, Mr Davies, I think to myself. Out loud I say, “Oh, just a good guess”. We’ve had this conversation around one hundred and seventy times now. It still amuses me.

Of course, not all of our customers are as satisfying to deal with as Mr Davies. There’s Wheezy Sidebottom who phones up every so often, seemingly with the sole purpose of finding an audience for her clearing the phlegm off her chest. Paul Who Prints comes in just before Mr Davies and spends an hour printing off pictures of fancy dress costumes; werewolves, astronauts, superheroes, he is wholly indiscriminate in his choices. So indiscriminate, in fact, that despite print-outs being twenty-five pence each, I’ve never known him to leave with less than twelve pounds worth of pages under his arm. There’s Bad Dad, whose children seem to think his instructions are some sort of strange bird-call; Panic Attack flaps in every fortnight or so convinced that all her books are overdue, that there are at least six she’s left at home by accident and that we’ve now switched from a ten-pence-a-day fine to demanding a blood sacrifice as payment; and Starey Mary, while equally as well-mannered as the lovely Mr Davies, would unnerve a Navy Seal with her ability to hold eye-contact. I’m beginning to doubt she has eyelids at all, like some kind of book-wielding lizard.

Grimmest of the grim, however, is Shirley, who instils such dread in me that I daren’t even give her a nickname. Shirley is three times the size of me in every direction, speaks only in booms and shrieks, and she knows my name.



Stamping ground: the library lady on duty

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The first time I came across Shirley, I was doing an evening shift – five to seven – and she came roaring in at six forty-five with sixteen Mills & Boon books to return. She then took five minutes choosing sixteen others, found she'd read half of them already and insisted on taking them back and choosing some more. She did this three times before she was satisfied. Then Shirley asked me to put a request in for her for three books that she'd forgotten the names of by Amanda Lee – all Mills & Boon, of course. After searching the database of every library in the county, Googling ferociously and finally checking the Mills & Boon website, Shirley realised it wasn't Amanda Lee at all but Miranda Lee. All three books were on our shelves.

Somewhere in this ordeal, I let slip my name – a folly I have lived to regret many times over. Shirley now announces herself by bellowing out across the desk, "No, I'll talk to Helen, thank you – she's such a helpful girl!" And I must take a deep breath, count to ten slowly and turn my grimace into a grin before spending twenty minutes hunting down *The Italian Millionaire's Love Affair With His Brother's Ex-Wife*.

A weaker will would have broken by now, but I find strength in the knowledge that Shirley is wrong. I'm not a helpful girl.

I'm no kind of girl at all.

I am the Lady.

Helen Rose is *The Leisure Review's* roving cultural correspondent.

[In the interests of community harmony some of the names in this article have been changed.]

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