

Librarian as Fair Witness: A Comparison of Heinlein's Futuristic Occupation and Today's Evolving Information Professional

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There has been a continuing discussion in library literature on the library as place and on the image of librarians in popular media, but there is little information on the librarian as person. The discussion on librarianship as a profession tends to focus on technology and not so much the people, other than the people skills needed in reference or teaching skills needed for instruction. The worth of the individual librarian tends to get lost in the shuffle. Before we disappear into the machine, it is useful to look at other future scenarios and similar occupations, either reality based or fiction. In this particular case, it is interesting to compare librarians to those in an occupation created by a renowned science fiction author.

Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*, his most famous and most controversial novel, is a science fiction classic. The science fiction community recognized it with a Hugo Award, and the book was the first science fiction title to be on the *New York Times* bestseller list (Stover, 1987, p. 45). Heinlein outlined the novel in 1949 and finished the first draft in 1955 but on the advice of his wife set it aside. It was not published until 1961. The manuscript was edited heavily and an uncut version was published in 1991. Heinlein scholar Russell Blackford has written that the uncut version does not offer anything that dramatically changes the story, though more background is offered in a few places. This author found that to be an accurate statement. References to the novel in this article are to the standard edition; information contained only in the 1991 uncut edition is so marked. While the book takes place in the future, Robert Plank noted that the plot would have progressed without the futuristic gadgetry, and theorized the same about the social and political innovations in the book. However, he did point out the Fair Witness profession as noteworthy (Heinlein, 1961, p. 83). Patterson and Thornton referred to Fair Witnesses as "one of the most strange and fraught of all Heinlein's creations" (Heinlein, 1961, p. 137).

According to the online *Heinlein Concordance* a Fair Witness is a "Person rigorously trained to observe, remember, and report without prejudice, distortion, lapses in memory, or personal involvement" (Cowan, 2007, "Fair Witness", p.-X page numbers for all quotes). The quintessential description of what a Fair Witness does or is can be found on p. 100 of the standard *Stranger* edition:

Anne was on the springboard; she turned her head. Jubal called out, "That house on the hilltop – can you see what color they've painted it?"
Anne looked, then answered. "It's white on this side."

Jubal went on to Jill, “You see? It doesn’t occur to Anne to infer that the other side is white, too. All the King’s horses couldn’t force her to commit herself . . . unless she went there and looked – and even then she wouldn’t assume that it stayed white after she left.”

Another example is given on p. 114:

“Hell’s bells, you wouldn’t testify that the sun had risen if the day was cloudy.”
“How could I? Somebody might be supplying artificial light above the cloud layer.”

Fair Witnesses work on a strictly empirical basis resolutely refusing to make assumptions or to allow their thoughts to fill in the blanks in reasoning or visual images. They strive to see what is there without the filters of expectation or social convention.

Fair Witnesses appear in only one of Heinlein’s works, the aforementioned *Stranger in a Strange Land*, and there is no information on the origin of the profession in published works on Heinlein or in his letters. Fair Witnesses are not examined in the literary criticism of the novel.

In fact, in a review of several standard academic databases, such as the *MLA International Bibliography*, *Library Literature*, and the *Humanities Index*, the only article found on the characters is “Transversality and the Role of the Library as Fair Witness,” by Ross Atkinson, published in the 2005 *Library Quarterly*. Atkinson focused on the impartiality of Fair Witnesses as a model for libraries as a trusted third party, or, as he states, “safeguarding the validity of the text” (p. 172). Even here, though, the librarian is merely a part of the library, an object within a building. He states “In the novel, therefore, there are designated individuals whose professional role in society is to be trustworthy” (p. 178). However, the crux of his article is that the library, the institution, is the Fair Witness. “The library as fair witness would itself aim to make no qualitative judgment about the value or utility of any object but would rather supply access to a range of discrete information sources that permit the user to draw such conclusions” p. 179).

While Atkinson focuses on the role of the library itself, the institution, the physical place, as a Fair Witness, perhaps it would also be appropriate to look at the role of the librarian as person, and librarianship as a profession, as analogous to the profession of Fair Witness. At the time Heinlein was writing *Stranger* the common definition of a profession, as reflected in two standard social science reference works (Parsons, 1968; and Waddington, 1996) was an occupation that requires some level of education or certification, with an association relating to that profession, a code of ethics prepared for and by practitioners, and altruistic service or a sense of social responsibility. If we accept that definition, then we can compare those aspects of librarianship and Fair Witness.

Fair Witnesses are a recognized profession, or a guild as they are referred to in the book, and at least one training school or college, the Rhine Foundation, is mentioned. They are

taught memorization. A professional publication, *Witness Quarterly*, is also mentioned. Fair Witnesses have a professional uniform, a white robe. When robed they are not considered invisible but are not introduced or spoken to while observing in a professional capacity. Nor are people likely to jostle them or intrude upon their space. Some are certified to present evidence in the High Court. Their services are for hire and a well-respected Fair Witness can command a high salary.

When unrobed and in street clothes they can, unless otherwise constrained, provide opinions on topics relating to professional queries to their employer or others if allowed by contract. Many of these features correspond to aspects of librarianship. Librarians study towards and receive graduate degrees in library science or some variation thereof (information science, for example), the profession has one standard association, the American Library Association, with a hierarchy of task and subject oriented sub-associations, and the field has a number of professional journals.

We may compare the two by analyzing, in addition to basic job functions, their ethics and the types of people drawn to both professions.

The American Library Association's Code of Ethics (ALA, 2008) reads:

- I. We provide the highest level of service to all library users through appropriate and usefully organized resources; equitable service policies; equitable access; and accurate, unbiased, and courteous responses to all requests.
- II. We uphold the principles of intellectual freedom and resist all efforts to censor library resources.
- III. We protect each library user's right to privacy and confidentiality with respect to information sought or received and resources consulted, borrowed, acquired or transmitted.
- IV. We respect intellectual property rights and advocate balance between the interests of information users and rights holders.
- V. We treat co-workers and other colleagues with respect, fairness, and good faith, and advocate conditions of employment that safeguard the rights and welfare of all employees of our institutions.
- VI. We do not advance private interests at the expense of library users, colleagues, or our employing institutions.
- VII. We distinguish between our personal convictions and professional duties and do not allow our personal beliefs to interfere with fair representation of the aims of our institutions or the provision of access to their information resources.
- VIII. We strive for excellence in the profession by maintaining and enhancing our own knowledge and skills, by encouraging the professional development of co-workers, and by fostering the aspirations of potential members of the profession.

While many professions include confidentiality in their ethical guidelines, such as doctors, lawyers, and financial professionals, there are additional rules for librarians that dovetail with the Fair Witnesses.

Looking at the first and third of the eight tenants in the Code of Ethics, that service will be equitable, accurate, and unbiased, and that a user's right to privacy and confidentiality will be protected, we find passages that show the same ethical requirements of Fair Witnesses. In the passage below, wherein Jubal Harshaw explains to Gillian Boardman what a Fair Witness is, note that information is provided in an unbiased manner, and that those observations can be made public or kept private:

“Anne is a Fair Witness?”

“Graduate, unlimited license, admitted to testify before the High Court.

Sometime ask her why she gave up public practice. But don't plan anything else that day – the wench will recite the whole truth and nothing but the truth, which takes time. Back to Mr. Cavendish – Ben retained him for open witnessing, full disclosure, without enjoining privacy. So when Cavendish was questioned, he answered, in boring detail. The interesting part is what he does not say. He never states that the man they saw was not the Man from Mars ... but not one word indicates that Cavendish accepted the exhibit as being the Man from Mars. If you knew Cavendish, this would be conclusive. If Cavendish had seen Mike, he would have reported with such exactness that you and I would know that he had seen Mike. For example, Cavendish reports the shape of this exhibit's ears ... and it does not match Mike's ears. Q.E.D.; they were shown a phony. Cavendish knows it, though he is professionally restrained from giving opinions.” (Heinlein, 1961, p. 100)

Points two and four of the ALA Code of Ethics refer intellectual freedom and protection of intellectual property. When someone asks Jubal Harshaw if he is presenting the real man from Mars or a fake, Harshaw replies “Would I swindle you with a Fair Witness at my elbow?” (Heinlein, 1961, p. 174). Even though the Fair Witness in question is in Harshaw's employ, he is saying her occupational integrity would not allow her to go along with a deception. While the man from Mars is not intellectual property per se, presenting someone who was not him as the real thing would be, in a sense, intellectual forgery, and a Fair Witness would not be a party to it. Both professions are expected to be fair and balanced, regardless of who is paying the bills.

The sixth and seventh points in the ALA Code of Ethics, similar to the first and third, reflect a belief in objectivity and differentiate between personal convictions and professional duties, which align with the information presented in this conversation from *Stranger* between James Oliver Cavendish, a Fair Witness, and Ben Caxton, the man who has hired him.

“Mr. Cavendish, did you see anything that convinced you this bloke was the Man from Mars?”

Cavendish answered, “It is not my function to form opinions. I see, I hear – that is all.”

“Sorry.”

“Are you through with me in my professional capacity?”

“Huh? Oh, sure. Thanks, Mr. Cavendish.”

“Thank you, sir. An interesting assignment.” The old gentleman took off the cloak that set him apart from mere mortals. He relaxed and his features mellowed.

“If I have been able to bring along a crew member of the *Champion*,” Caxton persisted, “I could have tied it down.”

“I must admit,” remarked Cavendish, “that I was surprised at one thing you did not do.”

“Huh? What did I miss?”

“Calluses.”

“Calluses?”

“Surely. A man’s history can be read from his calluses. I once did a monograph on them for the *Witness Quarterly*. This young man from Mars, since he has never worn our sort of shoes and has lived in gravity about one third of ours, should display foot calluses consonant with his former environment.”

“Damn! Mr. Cavendish, why didn’t you suggest it?”

“Sir?” The old man drew himself up and his nostrils dilated. I am a Fair Witness, sir. Not a participant.”

“Sorry.” Caxton frowned. “Let’s go back. We’ll look at his feet – or I’ll bust the place down!”

“You will have to find another Witness ... in view of my indiscretion in discussing it.” (Heinlein, 1961, pp. 49-50)

There are also at least two references to Fair Witnesses behaving differently while robed and on duty. In addition to the note above that Cavendish relaxes after taking off his cloak, in Heinlein, 1961, p. 150 we find this passage:

Anne was standing nearby, dressed in the long white garment she had had with her all day. Smith could not fully grok her mood; he felt in her the cold unyielding discipline of an Old One. It started him, as Anne was always soft and gentle and warmly friendly.

On the 8th point of the Code of Ethics, training and professionalism we find this on p. 44:

While any Fair Witness would do, the prestige of Cavendish was such that a lawyer was hardly necessary – the old gentleman had testified many times before the High Court and it was said that the wills locked up in his head represented billions. Cavendish received his training in total recall from the great Dr. Samuel Renshaw and his hypnotic instruction as a fellow of the Rhine Foundation. His fee for a day was more than Ben made in a week, but Ben expected to charge it to the Post syndicate – the best was none too good for this job.

There is the aforementioned reference to a professional publication, *The Witness Quarterly* (Heinlein, 1961, p. 49). In the 1991 edition, Fair Witness Cavendish says his professional association would suspend him for unethical behavior (Heinlein, 1991, p. 71), implying that Fair Witnesses also had a code of professional ethics.

Thus, like Fair Witnesses, librarians, while on the job, should not let their own personal opinions on things interfere with their work. While Atkinson (2005) applies this quality to libraries, a building including its contents and staff, Heinlein applies it to individuals, trained professionals, but operating solely or as part of a firm. As alluded to in one description of Anne, some Fair Witnesses worked on the public payroll, particularly in courts.

There are of course some differences. Librarians, especially those who work with the public, are expected to be open and approachable, though there are still some remnants of a stereotype of them being stern and intimidating. Fair Witnesses had near total recall and some scientific ability, as noted in these passages:

So either a Fair Witness misremembered a cab's number or somebody tampered with the record." He added, "Maybe a jury would decide that even a Fair Witness could misread a number, especially if he had not been asked to remember it – but I don't believe it – not when the Witness is James Oliver Cavendish. He would either be certain – or his report would never mention it." (Heinlein, 1961, p. 101)

And later, on p. 269:

Jubal would have bet his life that if Anne were to witness the Second Coming, she would memorize date, time, personae, events, and barometric pressure without batting her calm blue eyes.

Fair Witnesses share a number of qualities with librarians. Both are analytical. Both are required to be objective, at least while on duty. Both strive for accuracy. While the *Heinlein Concordance* doesn't mention this, Fair Witnesses, like librarians, serve in a confidential capacity, unless that is waived by the client. Unlike librarians, Fair Witnesses serve some of the functions we think of as being associated with lawyers, such as remembering (to be recited later) wills; something that would probably now be done digitally.

However, the two professions may share a social function – that of preserving shared knowledge and culture. As Patterson & Thornton say:

The Fair Witness as a highly respected social institution functions to impose the human dimension on bourgeois-secular culture and by "continuous recreation" of important commercial facts – wills and contracts are specifically mentioned – bring what Mircea Eliade calls "a timeless present" – the timelessness of the spiritual eternal – back into human affairs (Patterson & Thornton, 2001, p. 137).

Fair Witnesses are, to some degree, living libraries and archives. As libraries and librarians become more involved in creation and maintenance of digital projects, they also become more enmeshed in the continuous recreation of a timeless present.

Looking at some of the personality characteristics of Fair Witnesses, and comparing them to those of librarians, we see similarities. As has been mentioned, Fair Witnesses, when robbed, were not introduced or acknowledged, nor did they speak outside of professional duties; they kept themselves apart, and appear to work individually with clients as opposed to working in groups. This is not the behavior of extremely social people. In *Discovering Librarians* (Scherdin, 1994), the notes on librarians as compared to the general population show that while 65% of the general population are extroverts and 35% introverts, it is almost exactly opposite for librarians, 63% introverts and 37% extroverts (Scherdin, 1994, p. 132). Further, the Myers Briggs Type Indicators (MBTI) divides personalities into 16 combinations of four personality trait continuums. Librarians predominantly fall into categories that are not as representative of the general population. For example 17% of librarians tested were placed in the ISTJ category (as opposed to 7% of the general population), and 12% were INTJ (as opposed to 3%). That puts almost one third of the librarians into those two categories, which represent only a tenth of the popular at large. Librarians are not represented in any of the other 14 MBTI categories in a number larger than 10%. (Scherdin, 1994, 133). ISTJs are described in part as “practical, orderly, matter-of-fact, logical, realistic, and dependable” (Scherdin, 1994, p. 129) and INTJs as “skeptical, critical, independent, determined, sometimes stubborn” (Scherdin, 1994, p. 130). Williamson, Pemberton & Loundsbury (2005) in writing on the personality traits of librarians noted that “Both types shared the characteristics of being logical, productive, and reflective” (p. 127). These are also qualities that might be used to describe Fair Witnesses, at least while they were robbed.

It should be noted that Heinlein himself did not make any connection between the two professions, and in fact, though he would speak to librarians’ groups at a time when he would not to other groups unless they paid his travel and an honorarium (Heinlein, 1989, p. 90), his relationship with librarians was not always cordial. His wife wrote that another of his novels, *Red Planet*, had to be edited to suit the sensibilities of librarians, who were described as “mostly elderly ladies” (Heinlein, 1989, p. 57). In 1954, Learned T. Bulman requested changes be made in *The Star Beast* or it would be given a bad review in *Library Journal* (Heinlein, 1989, p. 70).

Yet, as information resources become decoupled from physical buildings and move into the ether, librarians must leave the building as well. Providing reference service over a variety of electronic formats moves traditional services into a new environment, but other than the incorporation of technology, there have been few dramatic shifts in the profession, and very few librarians are in private practice. Certainly very few, if any, are hired by individuals to do short-term contract duty. Information brokers are one exception, although very few people work in that field. The Association of Independent Information Professionals represents only 500 business owners world-wide. However, should there be a shift in that direction, Heinlein’s Fair Witnesses may provide an interesting inspiration. At some point librarians may work, not in libraries, but in firms, like attorneys, or in private practice, hired to do short-term or long-term contract work, as James Oliver Cavendish did, or to act as a librarian for one person over a long period of time, as Anne did for Jubal Harshaw. The expertise and objectivity of Fair Witnesses, melded with the friendliness and approachability characteristic of the best librarians, and

including the accuracy, ethics, and high standards of both professions, might create some very intriguing job possibilities.

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