

My Life as an Action Figure

Shushing librarian becomes a literary superhero | BY NANCY PEARL

I went to Mukilteo to be digitized." ■ That's how my friends, who know how much I appreciate great first lines of books, tell me I should begin my autobiography.

In addition to its intrinsic oddness, this sentence also has the benefit of being completely true. It was in this small Washington city, just north of Seattle, that I took the first concrete—or, rather, plastic—steps on my journey to becoming an action figure. Mukilteo is the home of Accoutrements, parent company of Seattle novelty store Archie McPhee and purveyor of such classic products as the devil duckie (rubber duck with horns), handerpants (underpants for the hands, for those not daring enough to go naked beneath their gloves), and the ever-popular yodeling pickle, as well as a variety of action figures, including religious action figures, Annie Oakley and Shakespeare. As you might surmise, Accoutrements is a company that prides itself on its sense of humor, with an emphasis on the irreverent.

One evening in 2002, my husband and I were at a dinner party, and one of our fellow guests was Mark Pahlow, the owner of Accoutrements. During dinner, he mentioned he'd recently seen a news report that a religious action figure had performed miracles in the lives of its owners.

Hearing that (and being the proud librarian that I am), I said earnestly, "Mark, librarians perform miracles in people's lives every day." And someone else piped up, "Yeah, Mark, you should do a librarian action figure."

After we all stopped laughing, another person said, "And Nancy should be the model for it."

Mark allowed, in all (apparent) sincerity, that he would think about it, and then the conversation turned to other topics.

As we were driving home that night, my husband said his four favorite words to me, which are, "Nancy, think this through." And then he went on to ask if I really wanted to be forever known as a 5-inch nonbiodegradable plastic figure, which would be around long after humanity had disappeared from the face of the earth.

I replied, "Don't even think about it, Joe. It'll never happen."

But on April 1, 2003 (the irony is not lost on me), I learned that I was wrong. That was the day that Mark called to tell me that I needed to go to Mukilteo to be digitized. And the rest, as they say, is history.

The Librarian Action Figure (LAF), with its Amazing Shushing Action, arrived to mostly great acclaim. There were, however, a small number of librarians—perhaps immune to irony, disinclined to irreverence or just without much of a sense of humor—who complained that the Amazing Shushing Action was too stereotypical, and the LAF's clothes were too dowdy.

I was actually invited to be on a daytime talk show to debate one of the more prominent of the LAF's critics. I declined.

In my defense, however, I want to state that the sweater and skirt I chose to be digitized in were absolutely beautiful in real life. And women were wearing longer skirts in 2003. And how was I to know that the outfit I chose wouldn't translate well into plastic (biodegradable or not)? And, of course, I'm well aware that librarians don't shush people ... much ... anymore (which is not to say that some people, in libraries and in other places, couldn't use a good shushing sometimes). Plus, the controversy was good for sales.

I'm happy to report, based on the many comments and e-mails I've received, that the vast majority of librarians and people who love libraries adored the LAF, and took it as the humorous homage it was intended to be.

More than 100,000 copies of the original Librarian Action Figure and the deluxe model (which came out a few years later, and has a book truck, a computer, a circulation desk and a new selection of books—all plastic, of course) have sold. I've seen both of them in public libraries, bookstores, schools and universities all over the United States, and in places as far afield as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Estonia and Germany.

People have sent me pictures of the Librarian Action Figure involved in interesting activities across the globe: from shushing visitors at Angkor Wat in Cambodia to gracing a wedding cake, skateboarding on library shelves, walking

on a red carpet to her waiting bus, and freezing at the base camp on Mount Everest.

And my granddaughters have tied the action figure to the string on a balloon and watched her float around their house, which occasioned the memorable phrase, "Ow, Grandma just bumped into my nose."

Nancy Pearl is the author of Book Lust: Recommended Reading for Every Mood, Moment, and Reason and the new Book Lust To Go: Recommended Reading for Travelers, Vagabonds, and Dreamers (Sasquatch Books, October 2010).



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