



Librarian Spotlight

“Understand and engage the community you’re working with, for any library. Advocacy and relationship-building skills are necessary as well as technological curiosity.”

An interview with Kara Jones



1. What made you decide to become a librarian?

I have always been a big reader. I grew up in a small town in rural Australia and being in the library was a good way to read about and reach somewhere else. Those were the days before the internet was there to distract us.

I finished my bachelor’s degree in English Language and Literature and topped that off with a degree in Library and Information Studies. I have worked in academic libraries around the world ever since.

2. What is the best thing about being a librarian?

I enjoy that there are normal day-to-day operations of the library, but there are also new things to make it interesting. I like the collective approach to meeting new challenges and opportunities. We have a lot of networks and professional groups that discuss and process how changes or new technologies will work, often through the lens of how our students and faculty are affected or supported. Working through Covid was one example, addressing AI as a new tool is another.

3. Tell us about your favourite book.

I don’t have a favourite book, but I will read anything by Harlen Coben, especially the Myron Bolitar stories. I’m also a big fan of Elif Shafak. She writes beautiful novels, and I cannot imagine the research that gives such amazing detail. I’m saving ‘The Island of Missing Trees’ to read on my next holiday.

4. After a hard day, what do you do to relax?

I like to sit outside in the garden (when the weather allows, it is hot most of the year) and have a moment to process the day. I can usually see planes in the distance on their final approach to Dubai International Airport and I get curious about where they’ve come from, so I’ll check out the Flight Radar app. I imagine the relief of people flying in from the US or Australia, after 15 hours in the air, knowing they’re 20 minutes away from being on the ground and stretching their legs.

5. In your opinion, what are the most important skills to have when working as a librarian?

Communication skills to understand and engage the community you’re working with, for any library. Advocacy and relationship-building skills are necessary as well as technological curiosity, which is more of an attribute than a skill but that is also important.

6. What’s your favourite place in your library?

I’m very fortunate to have an office of my own and I really like the space. It has natural light and regular bird visitors on the windowsills. I also like the second-floor study carrels near the windows. On a clear day, you can see the Burj Khalifa (currently the tallest building in the world) in the distance.

7. In your opinion, what is the importance of the library?

My experience is with academic libraries. Their importance lies in the connections they make across campus by providing space and tools, and the connections we facilitate between researchers and their disciplines via the information we curate.

8. Tell us about your chill-out area in your library.

We’ve recently sourced some wingback chairs, extra plants, and moved the new journal display into a more prominent position. I really like this space for taking a break and flicking through a magazine. Our students love some ‘study huts’ that we’ve added. They have acoustic damping fabric so despite being in a noisy central space, it’s quiet and cosy inside.

9. Is there anything you would like to share with other librarians?

Keep looking outside your own job and institution to see how other places and spaces are working. Use social media or professional journals or networks. It helps you stay up-to-date and interested/ing.

10. Could you tell us the most interesting/funniest story that happened to you working as a librarian?

A month or so ago, our university held a reading festival as an engagement activity with local high schools. I gave a welcome to 1,200 students. I guess they were so excited to be out of school and at university. I have never had such an enthusiastic reception to a short talk about the power of reading. Each time I finished a sentence, they clapped and cheered and whistled like it was a rock concert. I felt like a celebrity. Nobody asked for autographs afterward though, and I just went back to the library.

11. Could you give us one book recommendation that everyone should read?

Not really - as Ranganathan’s second law of library science (from 1931) says, ‘Every person his or her book.’ He suggested that everyone has different tastes in the books they read, and librarians should respect that.

12. If you had to describe a library in one word, what would it be?

Just as a library. It’s a concept that people understand and generally have a positive attitude toward. We moved away from using the word library in the 1990s, replacing it with learning commons or information centre, for example, but it’s still the best word to describe the space and intention especially in a university setting.

Thanks to Kara Jones, University Librarian at American University of Sharjah, UAE, and member of IOP Publishing’s Library Advisory Board, for agreeing to take part in our Librarian Spotlight.

