

Salute to Librarians

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EDITOR THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY:

SIR: Editors know everything. So please tell me who invented the idea of "unbirthday presents." It sounds like *Alice in Wonderland*. Or Robert Louis Stevenson. At any rate it is a good idea. And so, because this is un-National Librarians Week, we hasten to celebrate and raise a paean of gratitude and praise to all librarians, boys and girls, tall and short, stout and slim.

This letter is in three parts: genuflection, hat raising, and lighting a candle, all richly deserved by the profession than whom there is none whicher. We make a genuflection to one of the most missionary-minded collections of people on earth. There is more joy in a librarian's heart over one low-brow infected with the love of reading than there is over four dozen professors with brief cases. Whenever a librarian finds someone looking for a book other than the best-seller just laid that morning, the frenzy of joy bursts forth and the lucky borrower can have the whole stack.

So we genuflect and hold hats high, for the librarian has a whole fleet of magic carpets, which he floats up to your door, all ready to take you to faëry lands forlorn or to Samarkand, Cathay and way stations. Let him—it is usually her—arrange your itinerary across the seas and the centuries and you can really say, "Much have I traveled in the realms of gold."

Not long ago a librarian in Philadelphia had to write his occupation in his income tax report. He wrote, "Traffic Officer." A friend said, "You cheerful liar! When were you a traffic officer?" He said: "All the time. Traffic officers usually prevent collisions. I have been arranging collisions, productive collisions between people and ideas. That's what a book is at its best. A collision. Once in a while I pull off a beaut."

The librarian has to take part of his pay, alas, in spiritual currency. Yet he has his rewards. The most exciting and best reward is that reported by Samuel Gridley Howe, speaking of his education of the little blind, deaf and dumb girl who preceded Helen Keller. Dr. Howe said, "I fished for many months without any bite at all. Then there was a nibble, then a tug, and up came the soul of Laura Bridgman." Good fishing! So the modern Izaak Walton, or Rebecca Walton, the librarian of the Paradise Branch of the Public Library, baits the hook with the right book—a job calling for rare skill—and casts. And then a little nibble, then a tug, and up comes the soul! It's a better sport than trout fishing.

So, in the immortal language of Sophie Tucker, "Give this little girl a great big hand!"

Vociferously,

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