

***I Seem To Have Forgotten The Elephants* © Dorothy Freed, 1994**

BECOMING A LIBRARIAN

When I finished my music degree at the end of 1957 I did not plan to use it for a future career. Most of my colleagues were going into teaching. We were all now trained to cope with running choirs, orchestras and bands, possibly even composing special music for them, and certainly arranging instrumental parts. The idea did not appeal to me at the time. With no theoretical teacher training, I then had no idea I could teach anyone anything, and dreaded the thought of trying to teach music in any form to the unmusical. So I continued my work as Secretary of the three Biology Departments at Victoria University.

One day Joan Stephens, a Professor of English who had taught me English I during my music degree course, called me into her office as I passed by.

"Dorothy!" she cried. "Have you ever thought of becoming a librarian?"

"No!" I laughed. "Why should I? I don't know anything about it."

"Well, I do," she replied, "because I'm on the recruiting panel for the New Zealand Library School's national course for postgraduates. It's a one-year course, held at the N.Z. Library School here in Wellington. You are a post-graduate now, and I think you'd make a good librarian even if you don't. Sit down while I make a phone call"

She rang the Director of Library School and told him, without more ado, that she was sending me down immediately as a promising potential candidate for the course.

Astounded, I found myself walking down The Terrace to see an unknown man about an unlikely profession.

"Ah, Mrs. Freed!" said Hector Macaskill. "So you have a degree in music! Well, we are starting to need specialist degrees in the library world here these days. We are getting a bit tired of ordinary B.As. There are going to have to be professional librarians in the country one of these days. Does that idea appeal?"

I gaped a bit. "I suppose so," I said.

"Or would you rather do something different?"

"What, for instance?" In those days my knowledge of library work was limited to marking books, placing them in shelves in numbered order and handing them out to people over a desk, properly stamped and recorded. Not much of a career, I thought.

"Oh, well, you could catalogue books if that appealed, or specialize in periodicals, or maybe reference work, Or maybe drive a book van through the bush down on the West Coast."

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"What?" I cried. "Drive a book van?"

"Yes. of course. There a lots of interesting things a trained librarian can do. You could select books for prisoners in jail or lighthouse keepers on rocky islands, or children in schools. You could compile bibliographies. There's no end to it."

"Good heaven!" I replied. "You've talked me into applying, at least. But will I not be too old for the course? I'll be 40 next year."

"Just in time." laughed Hector Macaskill. "Just right for starting a new career!"

And so it happened. I was selected. And so was my friend Shirley, another "veteran", who had a good degree in botany. Biologists, too, it seemed were going to be needed in future. So Shirley and I were the two oldies in the following year class of sixteen at the New Zealand Library School.

Students were then paid a cost-of-living bursary to do the course. I would be dropping in income for the year, but the family thought they could survive with a smaller contribution from me for housekeeping for a year. After all, Bill had done the same thing earlier when he spent a year as a student at Auckland University anglicising his own architectural degree, without which he could not practise as a registered architect in New Zealand.

It was wonderful having "school" holidays and enjoying the three hours of lectures each morning, lectures in such a variety of subjects, given by so many different teachers including many University professors. They gave us five day pressure-cooker courses in individual subjects. In the afternoons we did our subsequent assignments, roaming around all the major libraries in Wellington to do so, as well as familiarising ourselves with the fantastic stock of the National Library itself — which was then called the Central Division of the National Library Service.

The course was held in an ancient old wooden house in Thorndon. As a "branch" of Central Division, it was one of the fourteen different places in which the stock, services and staff of that little-appreciated organisation had to operate. Next door to our old house was an equally ancient church hall wherein the National Orchestra, as it was then called, rehearsed. Much of our research was accompanied by echoes of Sibelius's symphonies or Beethoven concertos coming through the walls, which I enjoyed. I sometimes sneaked in for an hour and sat with them, rapt. Little did I dream that our Jane, still at school, would be playing with them three years later.

I also collected my first bout of sciatica in that old house that winter. The heating in our draughty lecture-room came down from above, leaving us all frozen from the waist down. It was followed by another attack. The third (and last) came along in Austria five years later, helping to ruin what was expected to be a fantastic six weeks of camping holiday in Europe with young friends. But of that, more anon.

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The assignments were really quite difficult and demanding, but always interesting. Shirley and I joined forces with a male colleague who was also older than the others (by a few years, at least), and each of us secretly farmed ourselves out to our private collective. Our individual compilations when handed in did not, to our surprise, necessarily give us anything like equal marks. However, we felt doing a third of it only had saved each of us a lot of unnecessary work. Nobody else in our class would have dared to do anything so wicked. Our teachers may well have suspected, but said nothing.

One day we were all in despair about what we considered a very unfair assignment. It was a comparison between small specialist libraries - such as those operated by the then numerous government departments throughout New Zealand. The problem was how to identify these many libraries. We had no way of knowing how many more there were than those each of us had identified and located.

Shirley knew the Director of Library School well, and sometimes used to visit him to say hello before lectures began in the mornings. I noticed she always came back with a smile on her face. I decided to visit him too, and find out whether he could put a smile on my face the day appointed for the handing in of this assignment. I visited him (it was no longer Hector Macaskill), was received kindly and asked why I was there. I told him about wanting a smile put on my face. Why did I need that? Because I was in despair over that bloody assignment.

"But you've got the new Directory, haven't you?" he asked.

"What Directory?"

"This one here."

And he pulled from his shelf a brand new, straight-off-the-press directory of special libraries in New Zealand.

"You've all been given one of these by Mr. Tanzer,"

"No we haven't," I said. "None of us has seen this Directory."

"What the hell is Tanzer doing", cried an angry Director.

Mr. Tanzer was a misanthrope. A Hungarian refugee, he was intelligent and well educated but virtually unemployable in his new country of adoption. The National Library Service employed a number of such misfits in those days. His job was to look after the Library School students for literary matters, and we should each have expected to see a copy of this Directory on our desks as soon as he received them for us.

The Director lent me his copy for an hour. I dashed over the road with the treasure, showed the others in our room and we all copied out facts madly and did what we could at top speed to "update" our already-written assignments. There was

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no time to show the students in the second room.

Our subsequent marks reflected our room's superior knowledge, and our supervisor remarked on the extraordinary fact that some students seemed not to have discovered the existence of that Directory — without which the assignment could not really be done.

The next day I walked into Mr. Tanzer's office. There was a pile of sixteen of those Directories on his desk.

"Why did we not receive these, Mr. Tanzer?" I asked innocently.

"Because nobody asked me for them!" was his unbelievable reply.

What a bastard!

One assignment that caused much pain to many was called an Architectural assignment. We had a week of afternoons to complete it. In an effort to teach us the importance of the Librarian's report to the Architect on what was needed for this hypothetical library, we were expected to actually design the building, and were given huge sheets of cartridge paper and drawing boards to do it. How silly can you get! That's the architect's job as I, the wife of an architect, well knew, But it had to be done.

Some of us could draw, some could not.

I could — a bit, But I didn't even try. I asked Bill to do it for me, and he did. I also asked him to do Shirley's, and he did. Our third partner-in-crime, Brian, did not need Bill's help as he had some architectural input into his own degree. Of course we three came top of the class. the others miles behind.

Our four south-east Asian colleagues (then known as Colombo Plan students) had been befriended by me, partly on Bill's behalf because he was always fascinated by foreigners in New Zealand, and they had been invited home to dinner. During this Architectural assignment I asked Bill to help them, too. because I had discovered them all burning the midnight oil at Library School doing madly elaborate plans with pain and immense trouble,. Bill dropped in one lunchhour and found them hard at work. He came out shaking his head.

"Nobody can help them." he said. "They've done layouts of everything — every individual item of furniture, and it's all absolutely hopeless. Talk about South-east Asian conditions They've crowded dozens of tables and chairs into space for about six, nobody could possibly move there! And they've quite forgotten basic things like lavatories, fire escapes, a tea-room, and so on."

These boys wanted to return our hospitality but had no way of doing so in any house other than our own. So one Sunday Benny, from Brunei, asked if they could all come up and he would cook an ethnic meal for us all. I was not to get in any food,

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he would bring the lot.

We had a good meal that night. But I was embarrassed. Benny arrived bearing chickens and countless curries and rice and cabbage plus other vegetables, and asked me for one thing only. Peanut butter.

"Yes, of course!" I cried, going to the cupboard. I handed him a peanut jar half full.

Benny's face fell. "Haven't you got any more?" he asked wistfully.

"I'm afraid not!" I replied, astonished that this was insufficient.

It was Sunday and no shops were then open on Sundays, not even dairies. Benny had to manage with his half jar of peanut butter.

It seemed he had really needed about two full jars. They seem to pile it into the cabbage, etc. in Malaysia. So although the meal tasted delicious to us, it failed miserably with poor Benny.

We had so much food in our house, Mela being a good housekeeper. And to think he only needed that one simple thing — and we couldn't supply it. I was sad about that.

During the course of that year each student had to do two independent assignments of their own choosing requiring considerable research — actual mini-theses. I was asked to do one on some aspect of music in libraries, The other was to be a bibliography, and I was promised future publication by the Oceanographic Institute if I would do one on some aspect of New Zealand marine life. This was a great incentive — publish or bust, as they say in America — so I did mine on the state of knowledge of New Zealand marine fauna up to the year 1900 — a historical project. I worked at it at the National Museum over the entire first term holiday break. it was indeed finally published, gave me quite some mana in the world of the biological sciences at the time, and is still being used.

For my other assignment I decided to do a survey on how easy or difficult it was for choirs and orchestras in New Zealand to borrow the music they needed, this being a type of material not usually available then through public or even University libraries, on interloan. I sent out questionnaires to about twenty choirs and orchestras I had managed to locate throughout the country, and wrote up my survey from their answers. New Zealand Library School decided to publish this, various high-powered librarians took up the problems my report exposed, and in the course of time that document of mine had many, many positive results and repercussions throughout the country.

The final outcome of my year at Library School was that I managed to distinguish myself on two fronts at least. And more by good luck than good

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management. I fluked an "in charge" job as my first professional position. This was only a temporary one, at Wellington Teachers' College library. but it led to another real in-charge job in a large government department library. And from then on I always followed myself the advice I gave newly graduated Students from Library School (though they never seemed to take it). Always go for an in-charge something. Either try for boss of a small outfit, or boss of a section in a large library, In other words, I never took a job where I could not make my own decisions and act on them. This, in the long run, meant status — and mana.

Status and mana mean money, and getting your own way. All you need then for a good life is a little cheek. And of that I have plenty!

Going to Library School was the best thing I ever did for myself. I might have wanted, in my heart of hearts, to just compose music. But nobody gets paid enough for that. In those days if a trained musician didn't want to teach, another profession was needed to pay the rent. Mine became librarianship, and it paid well.

I devoted the rest of my professional life to merging my two basic professional skills — librarianship and music. Journalistic and typing skills also became handmaidens of some importance in my main objective. Eventually, without ever actually becoming a music librarian, I became known as New Zealand's music libraries lady.