Profile: Janis McKenzie  
Head, Reference Division, WAC Bennett Library, Simon Fraser University

How long have you been working in libraries?

A long time! More than 20 years, if you include part-time and on-call work. As a librarian, a little over 13 years. As a library supervisor/manager, around 8.

What was your first job?

First volunteer job: Staffing a community school office in the evenings. (Benefits included access to the school PA and a trampoline.) First paid job: Office temp. (Dismal and disheartening work which inspired me to go back to school.)

Describe your first library job.

Working in the basement stacks at the old Vancouver Public Library on Burrard Street. The job was mainly fetching books and bringing them up to the various subject divisions (when requests came in on the telewriter--or telautograph?--machine); finding them meant weaving in and out of very dark and musty stacks, flicking lights on and off aisle by aisle, sometimes on suspended walkways. And at downtimes we stamped and sliced newspaper clippings to the sound of the oldies radio station. It was a strangely enchanting subterranean world, quite an inspiring place to be for a young writing student. And also completely unrelated to pretty much any library job now.
If you weren't a librarian/library worker, what would you be and why?

Perhaps a writer, editor, publisher, radio producer or host, or doing some other kind of performance -- I've worked in all these fields at least to some degree. (After years of singing in bands I've also accumulated enough vintage dresses to open a small shop, but that's another story.) Librarianship allows a person to put a diverse set of interests and skills to use, and I've found it matches up with my natural love of learning a little bit about a lot of things, and quite a lot about a selected few.

What do you like best about your current job?

I love my job. One of the best things about a management position is hiring -- it is thrilling to be able to recruit bright committed people and to watch them succeed. And I feel very fortunate to be surrounded by smart, energetic, inspired, engaged professionals, in an environment where librarians can really bring creativity and innovation to what they do. And of course the students!

Describe your favourite conference experience.

This could be a long answer, because there have been a lot, but here's one that goes back a little: On the way to the BCLA Conference in Whistler in 2002, when I was working at the Vancouver Public Library, I came across two SFU librarians on the same bus. We had some great conversations, laughed a lot, and later on headed to the pub together. This really influenced my later decision to come to SFU, and taught me that no matter how good the conference sessions themselves are, it's also important to make room for what happens before, between, and after. Brainstorming and getting to know colleagues in the hallways, in the carpool, or over lunch or a drink, that's where a lot of the inspiration and idea-generating goes on.

What do you do for fun?

Write, sing, play guitar, play around with GarageBand, read, listen to my young daughter, dream, pay attention to the little things.

Name one person you admire, and explain why you admire them.

I can't name just one person. However the people I admire share qualities like intelligence, fairness, commitment, curiosity, idealism, passion, and kindness.

If you could say one thing to someone who is interested in a career in libraries, what would it be?

Stay engaged, excited, and committed to learning. Things are changing and they will go on changing -- that is the best part.
If you were stranded at the airport, what would you want to have with you to read, and why?

Beyond the electronic options, I'd choose a good thick Penguin Classic. *War and Peace* got me through my trip to the UK for my library school practicum -- and some extra travel too.