



Conversation with Litwin author, Sommer Browning by Harris Bauer

Citation: Bauer, Harris. "Conversation with Litwin author, Sommer Browning." *Bridging Fields*, no. 1 (2023-2024). <https://doi.org/10.33682/6ckn-71g1>.

This interview was conducted as part of the Author Interview Series with Library Students, published on the Litwin Books blog, where prospective information professionals meet with authors to discuss the research process and engage in a deep dive on important topics of the field from concept to publication.

Poet-Librarians in the Library of Babel (Library Juice Press, 2018) is a collection of essays and poetry that explores perspectives, positions, and methodologies by librarians who are *also* poets. The ways that language is employed within librarianship today is vast. Five years since its initial publication, *Poet-Librarians* remains an example of the importance that creativity holds in how we approach education, communication, engagement, and research.

Edited by Sommer Browning and Shannon Tharp, two Poet-Librarians, the collection serves as a resource for the many creative multi-taskers who make their way into this field. I spoke with Sommer in March of 2023 about the book and how it came to be. Sommer is a poet, performer, artist, and librarian, serving as the Associate Director of Collection Management and Discovery Services at the Auraria Library.

This interview was conducted by Harris Bauer, a dual degree student in the Archives & Public History Program at New York University and Library & Information Science at Long Island University.

Harris Bauer: Let's talk about *Poet Librarians in the Library of Babel*. I wanted to jump in by asking how the book came to be. You edited it with Shannon Tharp and I was curious about that process, and how your thoughts started to percolate around this collection of writing.

Sommer Browning: Shannon and I knew each other simultaneously through poetry land and library land. She was working in Wyoming, at the University of Wyoming, and we became friends. We both are on the tenure track, and we both are interested in library and academic writing, and furthering library literature, as well as this huge creative life that we have, which has always sort of been pushed to the side. So, we began talking about how we could merge them. I had known about a few articles on poet librarians, and I knew a handful of them. We pitched the idea to Library Juice and they seemed to go for it. We started our pitch to authors just asking: Does poetry come into your librarianship? Does librarianship come into your poetry? Do you want to write about that? Do you want to write about

something else? Do you want to write anything about your creative life and your professional life merging, or not? We weren't sure of the answer. We said it could be a lyric essay, or an academic thing... and in response, we got a wide range of contributions.

We also presented at ER&L [Electronic Resource and Libraries]. There were only 12 people there, but they all were like this is a niche that no one talks about—the creative life and how it interacts with your professional life. I think there's a lot more that can be done, especially as academia moves into interdisciplinary studies in a bigger way. But, for now, it fills a weird niche.

Harris: Going back to the contributors, I was struck by what I thought I was going to receive from the book and, in reality, how applicable many of the essays were. There is a great mixture of self-reflection as well as quite practical, application-based approaches to how the interdisciplinary, creative mind might approach librarianship. Did you and Shannon have a list of authors? How did you go about this submission process?

Sommer: We had a proposal. We also asked certain people that we knew directly. We had a preliminary list of folks, but we fell into this trap, although we should have known better not to... In my experience, when I've sent out calls for things in the past the vast majority of submissions I get are from white men. So, even though we had our list of potential contributors, with lots of people working all over the country in different parts of librarianship from all sorts of backgrounds, the people that had ample time to actually write essays and said yes to us were white, cis-men. About halfway through when we were receiving these [submissions], we realized we shouldn't have done it that way. We should have approached who we really wanted in the book first, got that down, and then backfilled it with other voices. We both [Shannon and I] have edited poetry journals. We know where submissions tend to come from, and we still did it inside out. But, in the end, it worked out all right.

Harris: Did it require some cutting?

Sommer: No, I don't think we cut anybody. But, when we talked to people, sometimes they were already busy submitting elsewhere. There aren't so many people of color who are poets *and* librarians. That's already a very narrow category, and those people are working their asses off—they're taxed already. Yet again, the whiteness of librarianship, rearing its head.

Harris: This has me thinking about the roles in librarianship that might afford a bit more time for writing or extracurricular output versus libraries that are, perhaps, less frequently staffed and require more physical time by their librarians, which could prohibit someone from finding the time to write. I was really happy to see that the book held a wealth of different types of libraries, with various positions reflected as well.

Sommer: Yeah, we really wanted it to reflect that [diverse group of voices].

Harris: Shannon has a piece that speaks about what she does in libraries, but I was curious if you could speak a little bit about what brought you to libraries as a poet, as well as someone with such a rich multidisciplinary practice in general, your work goes far beyond just poetry.

Sommer: I had a job shelving books in college at the public library, as well as work-study and waitressing jobs, but the library was wonderful. It aligned with my values of trying to level the playing field as far as access to knowledge and trying to bridge that digital divide, and it was a community space, it had teen programs, and all were welcome in my public library there in Virginia. It was a pleasant place to work,

and so when I asked myself what am I going to do with my life, I thought: you can go to library school. I started going to library school at Catholic University in Washington, D.C., and at the same time, I was also writing a lot and building a creative life. After six months of library school, I was like, I hate this, all I want to do is be a poet. So I applied for an MFA. I dropped out of library school and I got my MFA at the University of Arizona. But, always in the back of my mind, I was asking myself what are you going to do after this? I don't like teaching. I knew I didn't want to do the adjunct life. I knew I wanted something that was a little more stable. And, I loved cataloging. I moved to New York [after I graduated], enrolled at Long Island University, took one class at a time very slowly, and got a cataloging job. I mean, it was New York, so I had to have two jobs. I worked at General Theological Seminary in their library, and then I moved over to NYU Libraries. I worked at Bobst Library, finally got my degree, and then I got a professional, MLS-required library job at SUNY Maritime. My creative life has always been in the margins. It's just the work ethic that I have—to make sure that I have money coming in, and to be practical, to be stable. Now, at this juncture in my life, I'm starting to revolt against that a little bit. But it's served me well until now.

Harris: I have a similar feeling about balance and prioritizing certain modes of 'professional' work over creative work. In the introduction, I think you mention that librarianship often feels like a vocation, rather than an occupation, right? The work of being a poet-librarian isn't meant to replace poetry. It becomes a secondary practice, and the two feed off one another. The statement made me think about how writers and artists, of all different mediums, often find themselves in teaching positions as additions to their creative practices. I was curious if you had any thoughts about what makes a poet seek out a position working within a library, over a professorship in a creative writing program, for instance.

Sommer: A couple things... I think at the beginning, maybe when a poet is romanticizing library work, they think about being around knowledge, being around books, learning. Lots of poets are curious people and they love language and they love learning and, maybe without knowing exactly what you're getting into, working within a library seems to align with those interests. Once you get your library job, you might think "Oh gosh, this is kind of a 9 to 5 job. There is not much learning happening. I'm just paying invoices." But, I also think that there's a practical element, too. You see your buddies working their asses off, in adjunct positions getting nowhere, being frustrated, getting taken advantage of, and you're like I don't want to do that. I want something where I can still attend university events, where I can still go to lectures and be in that realm, see those people—but, get paid a wage and have a contract.

Philosophically, there's something about libraries. It's definitely a place where I have, and maybe lots of poets—lots of readers, lots of writers—have just fallen in love with deep concepts and beauty. I think that's a little bit of that vocational awe concept: that librarians are the bringers of knowledge to the world. You can feel that in libraries. I felt that as a baby poet, just looking through the 811s in my public library. The library was where I learned poetry, and fell in love with things.

Harris: From my understanding, very few of the contributors, or maybe none are actually subject librarians that focus on poetry or literature.

Sommer: Yeah, that's interesting.

Harris: It was really interesting to me. Maybe it's my position in graduate school, and thinking so much about specialization and subject-focus (because we're constantly reminded to think about a direction or where we're fitting in) that I feel a personal obsession with this line of thought all the time. But, I was relieved to see how many people are maintaining their poetic practices, bringing that creativity to their positions, and those positions don't necessarily have to do with poetics or poetry, or even literature and

writing.

Sommer: Yeah. I guess there's this tendency [for poets] to fall in love with the object of the book, too. I ran a chapbook press. It was all handmade chapbooks, so we'd have binding parties, and you know, because you've done that with Ugly Duckling Presse. Poets have this reverence for the book. But then, once you get into the librarianship, you're like "Wow I haven't touched a book in years!" We're subscribing to journals and electronic resources and things.

Harris: There is a distinction between the contributions in the book that come from folks who work in archives or special collections versus those working in public libraries, or in smaller specialty libraries. The Patrick Williams essay reminded me of what I had fantasized a poet working in the archives might do, that we'd be digging all the time and thinking about fragments, and have endless time to study it all! But then, I read Yago Cura's essay about working in the South Central Public Library, and I was completely re-inspired. It's a revelation about how much you can do in libraries, and what the reality of this work can be...

Sommer: He is just the coolest and all his projects are worth looking into.

Harris: Yeah. This conversation makes me think about something I noticed and was curious if you noticed this as well... I was looking at the index after reading through all the essays and had found that there are certain historical poet-librarians that are referenced more than once. Of course, Audre Lorde is one of those people, as well as Marianne Moore. But then there were certain poets (who aren't librarians) that were referenced by multiple contributors in the book. Wallace Stevens is one example; had you or Shannon noticed that at all?

Sommer: No, and wasn't he an insurance salesman? That might be a very interesting paper. Why would he be the favorite of poet-librarians? I'm not sure.

Harris: Wallace Stevens always makes me think about the process of writing poetry. I've thought about that process as a sort of hunter-gatherer relationship with language and imagery. Maybe, as we sort through information and how best to foster resources, one might approach librarianship in a similar way.

Sommer: Yeah. Librarians now, we're thinking a lot about algorithms and A.I. and how that's going to shape the research-project process. Artists are contending with that as well. There's something about algorithms that are language-based, that learn from how language is used and the order of words... I'm supposed to be writing a review on this book about the history of how we got to this modern algorithm, it's so dense I can barely get through it at all. But, there's a lot of things in there that stimulate my poetic vision, or just insight and curiosity. It makes me think about how much language affects our thoughts and our consciousness, and then of course affects the whole world and how we learn, and how we behave... and how our machines work and how capitalism works.

Harris: Each contributor has a poem as well as their essay on librarianship and method. I wanted to ask if people were meant to submit poems from the start, or how that part of the book came to be?

Sommer: That came after. We put out the call, and while we were getting chapters in we decided there should also be a poem from each person to reflect both sides of their lives. I'm really glad we did that.

Harris: It definitely tethers the hybridity referenced in the title, *Poet-Librarians*. One last question I had was whether you know about a visible community of poet-librarians. Is there an internal dialogue?

Sommer: No. I don't think so. You might befriend other poet librarians because you have so much to talk about with them. But, there's not a group or community that I know of. You might go out and find them, but if you go back to your world, and then return to look again, they're different. Some of us are not librarians anymore, for instance. There seems to be a lot of moving on in all sorts of ways. I don't know if it's just the sign of the times right now, that everyone's looking for new careers or new angles. I mean, even the poets that I know, they're like "Well, I just write essays now." It seems like a transitional time.

INTERVIEWS FROM THE FIELD