

# BETWEEN A BOOK AND A HARD PLACE



**A**S I STEPPED OUT OF THE Drummondville public library, my arms loaded with books, I bumped into my son's high-school principal. Her face lit up when she recognized me.

"You work at the bookstore, don't you? There's an opening at the Richmond high school for a librarian. It's only a half-hour's drive away. Maybe you should apply!"

Me? I hadn't worked in a library since my son was born, which meant a good fourteen years. During my post-secondary studies in Montreal, I had worked in the children's section of the Westmount Public Library, where I dealt mainly with toddlers and elementary school kids. But working with teenagers only? Sure, I happened to have one of my own, and I met plenty of them at the bookstore. However, mine was very much the quiet type, and those I met at work were the non-threatening, bookworm variety. Besides, even after six years at the bookstore, I still liked my job. Yes, the pay wasn't great and at times it could be overwhelming, during the back-to-school rush, say, or the Christmas season, but I loved being surrounded

**By Pascale Duguay**

by new books, fun games, and an endless assortment of writing supplies.

Could I give it all up for a schoolful of unpredictable and scary teenagers? I'd heard the stories my son would relate of his classmates' exploits. Heck, I'd even been a teenager once. I could just picture them making mincemeat of shy little me.

After thanking the principal for the tip and promising to think about it, I walked home in a daze, going through the pros — but mostly the cons. Then it hit me. What about my sister? With a master's degree in library studies and experience working in various libraries, she was way more qualified than I was. Since her youngest was about to start school, maybe she'd jump at the chance of getting back into the workplace.

Luckily for me, she did exactly that, leaving me free to continue with my predictable and safe life. I patted myself on the back for doing my sister a good turn, and thanked my guardian angel for giving me an easy way out.

Fast forward, two years later during a family dinner.

ILLUSTRATION: ISTOCK.COM/MARZACZ

WORKING FOR A LIVING • WORKING FOR A LIVING

The goal? To see how long it would take to make the book lady crack.

"Pascale, guess what?" My sister beamed. "I applied for a new librarian job, and I got it! My position is open if you want it!"

"Gee . . . er, that's great news." I squirmed in my seat, wishing I could hide under the table.

My mom frowned at me. "You're not about to pass this up again, are you? Stop thinking of others and do something for yourself for once."

My mom had never approved of my low-paying bookseller job and had seen right through my flimsy excuses when I had passed it over to my sister. Although I managed to steer the conversation away from the topic, my reprieve didn't last long. A couple of days later, I learned that my assistant-manager job at the bookstore was about to be abolished because a new structure was being put into place. Although I was offered a new position, there was no guarantee it would work out. It was an experimental thing, with no clear guidelines in place. The pressure would be all on me to make it work. It was either swim or sink.

This time the high-school library job looked a lot more appealing. Somehow, working with a bunch of unpredictable teenagers didn't seem so impossibly scary anymore. They couldn't be all that bad, right? Surely the library would attract only well-behaved, serious kids. Forcing my fears aside, I scheduled an interview. I passed it with flying colours and two weeks later found myself back in my former high-school library.

During those first few days, all of my worst fears turned into reality. To say that I had stepped out of my comfort zone would be a gross understatement. Gone was the scent of freshly printed books. In its place was an old, sneeze-inducing smell created by the inch of dust that covered everything, including the mostly decades-old books. The brightly coloured walls and attractive wooden ceiling were neutralized by the many empty shelves, giving the room an abandoned and neglected feel, while cozy reading nooks were noticeably absent. I could see the areas where my sister had attempted to make changes, but unfortunately she hadn't been there long enough to make much of a dent.

And the scary, unpredictable teenagers? They did not disappoint. Strangely enough, the library had become the meeting spot for the toughest kids in the school. They saw it as a place where they could just hang out and do as they pleased. They and their followers came to see and be seen. Almost no one showed up to read or study. The noise bouncing off the cement walls in this small space was definitely not conducive to such activities. It was loud, rowdy, and totally out of control.

To top it all off, the main attraction turned out to be me. The goal? To see how long it would take to make the book lady crack. Every day, I would go in

thinking I could keep my cool and actually get some work done. But in reality, I spent all my time raising my voice louder and louder trying to be heard over the din and being completely ignored or rudely talked back to. The big laughs and cheers (theirs not mine) would come when I actually managed to kick somebody out. The thing is, I didn't want to kick anyone out. I just wanted everyone to be able to use the library in a respectful way. One boy trying to set his buddy's hair on fire with a lighter and another trying to bash a chair over a troublemaker's head did not figure into my idea of being respectful. After only one week I was pretty sure I had made the wrong decision. But with no job to go back to, I had no choice but to keep at it.

When I asked my sister how she had put up with this, all she would say was, "They're just testing you. They'll grow on you, just wait and see." And how did she stand to breathe in that dust all day long? "For sure it's a little dusty, but at least you're starting off with an office. I had to build it from scratch!"

In the end, it took me three months to create a new home for myself. To be fair, the school year was coming to a close, but still, I felt I was coming to grips with the situation. Slowly, things got better. I



PHOTOGRAPH: JENNIFER BROWN

Pascale Duguay stepped out of her comfort zone to take a job as a high-school librarian. "Don't worry," said her sister about a particular group of teenagers who showed up to do everything but read and study. "They're just testing you."

managed to remove most of the dust and break up the thug mentality. The gang leaders temporarily stopped coming when I finally discovered the dreaded "detention green sheet." I'd show it to them and say, "Do



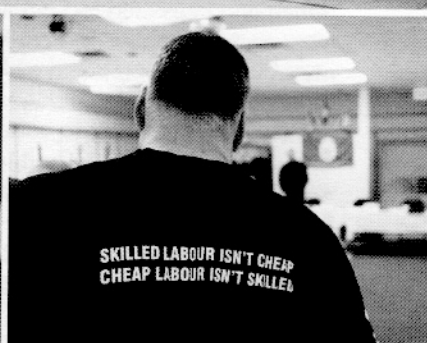
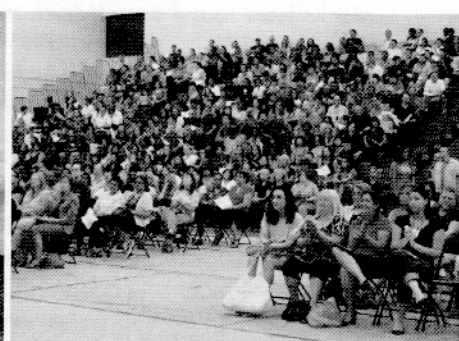
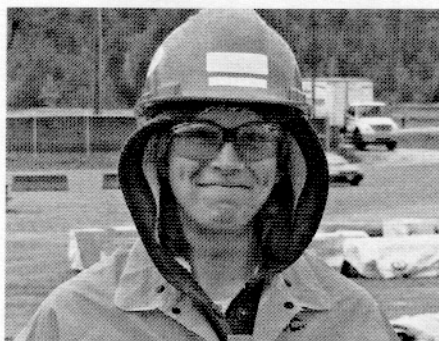
you really want a detention for misbehaving in the library? I mean how lame is that?" And their friends followed suit because what's a gang without a leader? This change encouraged the more peaceable kids to drop by and give the library a new direction. When the gang leaders and their retinue did return, I welcomed them back with a friendly smile and easy-going chatter, but stayed firm in my policy of not accepting rudeness, bullying, and any other negative or disruptive behaviour. By making a point of always being polite, showing interest in their lives, and offering my help, I found they started to do the same for me and each other.

Bit by bit, the library transformed into what I thought a library should be — a safe place for everyone, where we could all have fun while respecting each other's needs, and, of course, where we could discover wonderful, dust-free, new books to read. Six years later, I can say that I'm really happy with what I've managed to achieve. I replaced many of the outdated books, set up display tables for new releases, shifted the books around to make the shelves appear fuller, created special comfy corners just for reading, added a pile of floor cushions to sprawl out on, and turned an unused adjoining room into a makerspace. On Fridays, we have a game day where we can all make as much noise as we please, me included!

And those unpredictable teenagers? They remain

exactly that. One day they're floating on cloud nine, talking a mile a minute and telling me all about their great adventures. The next day, life is the pits. They're sullen, quick to get angry and blame everything and everyone, especially me if I happen to point out they have a late book. They might become so disruptive that I'll have to ask them to come back tomorrow when they're feeling better. But then they'll show up the day after as if nothing bad had ever happened, sometimes even handing me a gift they made in the makerspace or during cooking class. The great thing is that I don't find them scary anymore. We've managed to build a rapport where we know each other's boundaries and for the most part stay within them. Their unpredictability is actually what makes my job enjoyable. These kids have taught me to live life one day at a time, be a better listener, think on my feet, and take greater pleasure from their achievements than mine, whether they pass a test, win a soccer game, get a great part in the school play, or manage to find a book they actually love reading. Because in the end, when they have a fantastic day, so do I.

Pascale Duguay is a high-school librarian, freelance writer, translator (French/English), and founder of *ThePartTime-Writer.com*. She lives in the lively bilingual community of the Quebec Eastern Townships and is a member of the Township Regional Union Support Staff (TRUSS).



The largest confederation of  
independent unions in Canada

Confederation of Canadian Unions  
[www.ccu-csc.ca](http://www.ccu-csc.ca)

