

5-1-2008

# Jane Brodsky Fitzpatrick's *Mrs. Magavero: A History Based on the Life of an Academic Librarian*

Ellen McGrath  
emcgrath@buffalo.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/law\\_librarian\\_book\\_reviews](https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/law_librarian_book_reviews)

 Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Ellen McGrath, *Jane Brodsky Fitzpatrick's Mrs. Magavero: A History Based on the Life of an Academic Librarian*, 38 SUNYLA Newsl. 22 (2008).

Available at: [https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/law\\_librarian\\_book\\_reviews/10](https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/law_librarian_book_reviews/10)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Law Librarian Scholarship at Digital Commons @ University at Buffalo School of Law. It has been accepted for inclusion in Law Librarian Book Reviews by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ University at Buffalo School of Law. For more information, please contact [lawscholar@buffalo.edu](mailto:lawscholar@buffalo.edu).

---

## **Book review by Ellen McGrath (University at Buffalo Law Library)**

Ellen McGrath, Review of *Mrs. Magavero: A History Based on the Life of an Academic Librarian* by Jane Brodsky Fitzpatrick. Duluth, Minn.: Library Juice Press, 2007.

The review copy of this title, provided to SUNYLA by Library Juice Press (<http://libraryjuicepress.com/>), made for interesting reading. A slight change to the subtitle would better represent the content of this work though. *A History Based on the Life of a Female Librarian at Maritime College* would be more appropriate, especially since the author states more than once that the Stephen B. Luce Library at SUNY Maritime College is not a "typical" academic library.

This book consists of four major sections: Women in Library History, The Maritime Colleges, Mrs. Magavero (includes photos), and Transcript of Oral History. These are accompanied by a preface, introduction, conclusion, and a 10-page bibliography that runs the gamut from an 1886 article by Melvil Dewey to videocassettes and websites.

The transcript of the oral history interview conducted by Ms. Fitzpatrick with Mrs. Magavero in the Story Corps booth in Grand Central Terminal in New York City on November 3, 2005 is located at the end of the book, but might have been better placed at the beginning. The oral history is very informal, reads a bit awkwardly at times, and comes to a rather abrupt end. Listening to the audio version might have been preferable; however, I could not locate it on the Story Corps website.

Filomena Magavero's career as a librarian at SUNY Maritime College in the Bronx, New York extended from 1949 to 2003. Here is a brief summary of her life prior to that time: she was born in the Bronx in 1922, graduated from Hunter College in 1943, became "disenchanted" with teaching, worked for the Office of Censorship during World War II, received a fifth year Bachelor of Science degree in Library Science from Columbia in 1946, was assistant cataloger at the library of the United States Merchant Marine Academy in King's Point, New York, moved to the head of cataloging position at Hunter College, and ended up as a cataloger at the Maritime College in March 1949, where she proceeded to work for the next 54 years.

Mrs. Magavero was the first professional woman hired at the Maritime College, which is also referred to interchangeably throughout as Fort Schuyler. The main focus of this work is the sexist treatment that Mrs. Magavero received during those 54 years, particularly during the first half of her career. The anecdotes recounted range from the sublime (her job classification and salary inequities, her mistreatment by the male faculty) to the mundane (the transportation challenges associated with her initial interview at Fort Schuyler during a snowstorm, the lack of convenient restroom facilities for women). Mrs. Magavero was hired on a clerical line (though she questioned this at the time) and remained a clerk until reclassified as a professional thirteen years later. She received faculty status along with all SUNY librarians in 1968. During her career at Maritime, she served as a cataloger, government documents librarian, periodicals librarian, and archivist.

In spite of the fact that she felt the male faculty were "mean" to her, Mrs. Magavero said she loved her job and enjoyed working with the cadets. She said she learned to cope by ignoring the male faculty and claimed that she did not resent having to do so. The section that covers the history of the College reveals a great deal: "The male culture at the Maritime was insufferable. Women were traditionally thought of as bad luck on board [ship] and were not welcomed on campus." (p. 43). Another woman was not hired in the library until 1969, making Mrs. Magavero the only female library employee for twenty years. The discriminatory atmosphere on campus finally started to relax in the early to mid 1970s when the first female cadets were admitted to the College. To make matters worse, Mrs. Magavero was never able to interact with other librarians (of any gender) due to the lack of travel money and the physical isolation of Fort Schuyler.

The early sections of the book strive to put Mrs. Magavero's experience into context within the fields of women's history and library history. Regret at the dearth of accounts of the day-to-day experiences of women librarians in the literature is expressed. Women librarians are characterized as a "disadvantaged majority." There are descriptions of the feminist efforts and writings within the library profession, including the Committee on the Status of Women in Librarianship (COSWL) established by the American Library Association (ALA) in 1976. Unfortunately the book's conclusion verifies that gender pay inequities for female librarians still persist today.

I enjoyed reading this book, though I was left with other questions that I would have asked of Mrs. Magavero if given the opportunity:

Do or did you ever consider yourself a feminist?

What other daily situations made you call the male faculty's treatment of you "mean"? Were you and/or your work and opinions directly belittled by them?

What, if anything, would you do differently if you had the chance?

It was gratifying to read in the afterword that Mrs. Magavero was honored with a plaque celebrating her numerous achievements during the SUNYLA Conference held at Maritime in 2007. Hopefully that helped to assuage Mrs. Magavero's expressed worry that she did a "disservice" to the profession by not being more of an activist for women's rights. On the contrary, this "pioneering woman" blazed a trail for us all and we thank her!