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Who is Sai Baba, what is a Sharpei, how do I get divorced, who wrote the poem read at Hansie's funeral and how do I make a windsock? These are some of the questions posed to librarians... Bellville Public Library's chief librarian, Ilze Swart, shares some of their experiences.

All librarians do is stamp books - right? Partly right. At Bellville Library we stamp almost one million items per year, but that's only a fraction of what we do. The most important part of our work is providing information to all who come into the library: toddlers, learners, students, mothers, job seekers, municipal officials, the retired... we are expected to be all things to all people.

We are also detectives, as we have to find information based on incorrect spelling, faulty pronunciation and a garbled version of what a teacher/radio announcer/television presenter said ('I don't know the author or title, but it has a rose on the cover').

The PALS computer system is invaluable in helping us access information, but it is driven by a person who must know how to spell and search. But we can, for example, access any track on a CD. A borrower can say: 'I want to wash that man right out of my hair', and PALS will tell her that those are lyrics from the musical **South Pacific**.



A day in the life of a librarian...

Some examples of the requests that staff in libraries get every day are:

- what is 'Sharpei', 'pergamano', 'reiki', 'Coelecanth', or the 'Roswell Incident'?
- current local information, for which we keep news clippings: toll roads, stokvels, gangsterism, praise singers, the petrol price and the Laingsburg floods
- South African personalities: Ted Hughes, Jane Alexander, David Goldblatt, Zapiro, Koos Kombuis, James Matthews, Nkosi, Alison and Sai Baba? There are no books about many well-known South Africans so we rely on news clippings
- legal information, for example, Statutes, South African Law Reports, 'do-it-yourself divorce', the new plastic bag laws and the Basic Conditions of Employment Act

- SARS is the acronym for South African Revenue Services, but is also Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome - on which no books are available
- people seek forms such as civil service job applications and 'Dial-a-ride'. It is advertised that libraries keep them but we don't always get informed about this
- learners want to know 'how it works' and 'how to make one', as this is part of the new curriculum. We can easily deal with a solar oven or a water wheel, but some items pose more of a challenge - a bean bag, a windsock, a pop-up card, a wendy house, cheese, a dream-catcher...
- poems, particularly in Afrikaans, are quite a poser, as there is no Afrikaans poetry index. A

poem read at Hansie Cronjé's funeral, *Nooit had so baie jou so lief soos in jou kis nie*, turned out to be from T.T. Cloete's **Allotroop** anthology

- how does a librarian find out on which day of the week 12 April 1866 fell?
- where to get an ISBN number (an International Standard Book Number - available from the National Library in Pretoria).

So! That's what we do for the reading public. A good general knowledge, an enquiring mind and an awareness of current affairs are among the qualities required to deliver this vital service to the community.

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