

Snapshot: Jim Kelly

“I’d like to reach the point where I really do know everyone in the world.”

Q: *As a kid, did you know what you wanted to be when you grew up?*
A scuba diver, a private detective, a test pilot, a priest, and a herpetologist. Not necessarily in that order.

How did you get interested in library and information science?

After graduating from college, I got a job working as a law clerk for a criminal lawyer in Rochester, N.Y. I spent a lot of time with him because he was engaged in his second childhood and needed someone he could behave irresponsibly with and not feel embarrassed.

During the two years I worked for him, I met and married my first wife. Shortly after, she sized up my personal library—which was large. And my paycheck—which was small. Then she asked if I’d ever considered becoming a librarian. Two months later I started library school.

How would you describe the connection between who you are as a person and the work you’ve chosen to do?

In essence, I have the bipolar personality of a librarian. I relish the intense, hermetic periods I spend doing cataloging. I also relish the freewheeling encounters that can happen to anyone behind the reference desk of a research library.

What was a pivotal experience in your life, something that changed your life?

Spending the senior year of college at the University of Nottingham in England. I was introverted and reticent, but going there, I realized I had to be much more outgoing as a way to take full advantage of the year abroad. To this day, three of my closest friends are three Englishmen I met that year.

What work do you do outside GSLIS?

Our children seem to be our favorite charity, so I work a lot! At the UMass library in Amherst I’m the selector for materials in the humanities, and the primary contact between the library and those departments. I also serve regular shifts at the reference desk and catalog materials in Slavic languages, especially Serbo-Croatian and Dutch. And I moonlight at Frost Library, Amherst College, cataloging their Slavic materials, and at the Massachusetts Center for Renaissance Studies cataloging the rare book collection (about 425 books) and the music CD collection. I teach every so often in the University of Rhode Island library science program, usually their classes held in Amherst. And for the last four years, I’ve co-taught a graduate course in the history of books and printing at UMass Amherst (English Department).

What’s something you’re passionate about?

Bibliography. I’ve been a “field bibliographer” for the *Modern*

Language Association of America’s International Bibliography since 1979—I have now aged into the title of Senior Bibliographer. I’m also section head for General Literature and Related Topics. Since 1987 I’ve been a contributor (*read* bibliographer) for the Modern Humanities Research Association’s *Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature*, and now I’m the American co-editor (along with my Smith College counterpart, Bruce Sajdak).

Who would you like to have been in a former life?

I wouldn’t have minded being King Arthur. But in all likelihood I would have been one of the peasants working in the muck (think *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*). It’s unnerving, but part of me would have quite enjoyed being a serf.

What accomplishment in your life are you most proud of?

Ever since it began, I’ve been an admirer of the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress. When I lived in Washington in the early 1990s, I met John Cole, the founding director. He learned that I’d be moving to Massachusetts, so he suggested that I start a state affiliate of the Center here. After a few years living here, I managed to gather together a small and informal committee which eventually was able to attract the necessary attention and individuals. So, in 1999 the Massachusetts Center for the Book was formally chartered!

What book(s) are you reading right now?

William Gaddis’s *J.R.*; Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* (rereading); Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*; and Norman Mailer’s *Of a Fire on the Moon*.

Do you have a favorite quotation?

“Only connect.” (*Howards End* by E.M. Forster)

Do you have a secret aspiration?

I think I’ve improved on the concept of “six degrees of separation” by closing my range to three. I’d like to reach the point where I really do know everyone in the world.

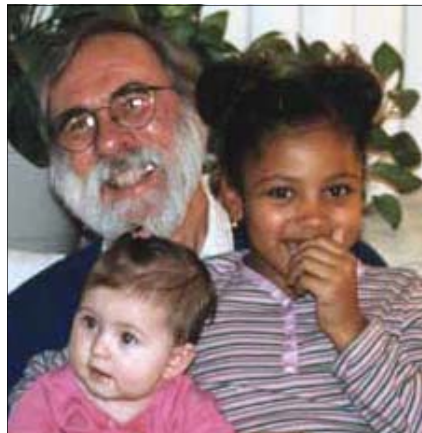
If you could pick one object from your possessions that represents something very important to you, what might that object be?

The gargoyle penholder given me by a friend some years back. I’ll leave the symbolic exegesis to you.

When all is said and done, what would you like people to say about you? “He always said ‘yes’ first and then worked out the how of accomplishing whatever he had promised.”

Also, “He always kept me on his holiday card list, even though I never sent him one.”

Jim Kelly is the humanities bibliographer at the University of Massachusetts Library in Amherst. He also works elsewhere as a bibliographer, cataloger, and teacher. He teaches Literature of the Humanities and Organization of Knowledge and Libraries at GSIS. Jim lives with his wife and an attic full of squirrels in South Deerfield, Massachusetts.



James Kelly with his grand-daughters Alexa and Olivia