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Information-Seeking Behavior of Novelists in Archives

Cary G. Osborne

ABSTRACT

Archives are a frequently untapped resource for novelists. Accounts of daily life, the lives of individuals, details of specific eras, and other minutiae found in the documents and memorabilia housed in archives can be used to fill out the essential scenes and events of the stories. Such facts and personal details help fiction writers make their stories real to readers and keep misconceptions and factual errors out. This study looks at the limited literature on the subject of authors in archives and presents examples of the types of information housed in particular archives to illustrate the kinds of details that could be useful in writing fiction. This study also demonstrates to archivists ways in which they can help authors to become aware of the value of archives in their research and to help them find the documents that would be most useful, based in part on this author's experience as a novelist, a member of several writers' groups, and panelist at numerous genre conventions attended by writers, editors, publishers, agents, and fans.

In order for archivists to know how to help writers of fiction in their research they must have an understanding of the needs of these writers and how they differ from the needs of more traditional researchers, such as academics, scholars, and genealogists. Most novelists and other fiction writers are quite familiar with researching in libraries and on the Internet, but they sometimes have little or no experience researching in archives or primary sources. They often begin working on a story with only a general idea of what it is to be about, and thus have only a general idea of what information they need or where to find it.

Some articles were found for this study that compared the information-seeking behavior of historians and that of writers of fiction. In her essay on the similarities between the telling of history and the telling of stories, Nancy F. Partner says

> Fiction's persuasive force, its "sense of reality," results from an author's ability to offer the reader a suggestive array of fictional elements that satisfy the requirements of possible reality in the shared world of writer and reader. The historian, using techniques that differ only a little from those of a novelist, has to persuade the reader not only of the possible reality of his array of

> verbal elements, but that those on display in the text are "guaranteed" by their relation (reference, logical inference) to things outside the text and thus the result is a real mimesis.[1]

One question authors of genre fiction hear often is "Where do you get your ideas?" For these authors, ideas are everywhere; but they are just the starting point. The story is in the details, getting the right feel in the story, making it real for the authors themselves and ultimately for the readers. As Margaret Atwood stated in a presentation in 1996, "This fictional world so lovingly delineated by the writer may bear a more obvious or a less obvious relation to the world we actually live in, but bearing no relation to it at all is not an option."[2]

Authors often place their stories in a real place or historical moment or era. Once, a reader whose "guilty pleasure" was Regency romances (which are set in the period between 1811 and 1820) was reading a novel by an author with whom she was unfamiliar. In the story, the main character picked up the phone to make lunch arrangements with her friend. A little research would have told the author that telephones were invented decades after this period. And that reader never picked up a book by that author again.

In another case, an author set his story in an existing town in the Midwest, and had his characters moving from place to place on the actual streets to be found on maps of the city. Usually, this gives a sense of reality and familiarity. However, readers living in the town wrote to the author informing him that on page seventy-five, his character could not have turned left down Water Street in the period in which the story was set because that street was then one-way and he was going the wrong way.

The first example of error (the telephone in the Regency novel) could have been avoided with simple research on the Internet or in a library, or even by reading other novels placed in the Regency Period. In the second example, however, the error might have been avoided by looking up information in archives in that particular city, perhaps official city records or historical collections.

Careful authors do extensive research. Many experienced novelists and other fiction writers are aware of archives as sources of information, while newer writers may not be. Since as a rule, fiction writers are not professional researchers, they often have little knowledge of what information is available and where. They might begin with only a general idea of what information they need or if such information is even available. This is due only to a lack of knowledge concerning the existence and usefulness of archives and perhaps a tendency to believe that the Internet and libraries are the best or only sources. Although many facts are easily available from

1. Nancy F. Partner, "Making Up Lost Time: Writing on the Writing of History," *Speculum* 61 (1986): 97.

2. Margaret Atwood, "In Search of Alias Grace: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction," *The American Historical Review* 103 (1998): 1504.

the Internet, more and more authors realize that finding detailed information usually takes more in-depth research. Also, given the amount of existing misinformation, Internet sites should be relied upon only for the basics. As Daniel Boorstin, former librarian of the Library of Congress said of libraries in a 1979 presentation, "we must … remain places of refuge from the tidal waves of information—and misinformation."[3] The same is true of archives.

One can get a clearer idea of what it was like to be an ordinary person on an ordinary day, in a particular place by reading personal accounts, newspaper reports, or court records. The best resources for details of ordinary life are the many archives located across the country. Whether they are historical archives, congressional archives, or university archives, they hold the information about real people and their lives in times past.

Two things are required in order for authors to discover the wealth of information housed in archives of all kinds. First, authors must be made aware of the collections, where they are located, and what information they have for researchers. Second, archivists need to know that there are differences between academic or scholarly research and the information needs of writers of fiction.

Generally, archives do not advertise in writing magazines and journals nor even literary journals that are read by authors. Even if fiction writers are aware of the existence and purpose of archives, they may feel that they will not be as welcome as scholarly researchers; certainly not the case in most facilities. The well-documented tendency to be intimidated by librarians is even more of a problem in archives, where authors may never have entered, and access to materials is very different.

Literature Review

Little information appears in scholarly literature on information-seeking behavior in archives or among primary sources. Richard H. Lytle claimed that the reason archivists lagged behind librarians in studying user behavior may be their resistance to "social and behavioral science techniques, especially those applied in library and information services."[4] However, with more and more archivists earning graduate degrees in library science and other specialties, this may be changing.

In her analysis of "Archives and Truth in Fred Stenson's novel *The Trade*," Katherine Durnin examined the use of archives, both within the fictional story and in Stenson's own research. Working in the Hudson's Bay Company Archives, the author studied actual records of the fur trade, including reminiscences of participants. As Durnin says, through his research, Stenson "reunites the archival traces of the past

3. Daniel J. Boorstin, "Gresham's Law: Knowledge or Information?" White House Conference on Library and Information Services, U.S. Department of Education: Library of Congress, 1979.

4. Richard H. Lytle, "Intellectual Access to Archives: I. Provenance and Content Indexing in Methods of Subject Retrieval," *Library Quarterly* 43 (1980): 70.

with the lived reality they represent." At the same time, he distinguishes between history and historical fiction when he uses the facts to support "different interpretations" of events and personalities.[5] Doing so, however, requires that the author know the history of the events before he can re-interpret them.

Robert V. Hine, an historian turned novelist, expressed a similar thought when he wrote, "… with the fiction I have the option to be more imaginative and rely less on historical facts. It is ironic, however, that as of now I have spent most of my time researching and inserting more facts rather than in imagining undocumented ones."[6]

Researchers are often intimidated by archivists even more than they are by librarians and hesitate to approach them for information or guidance. Different rules governing the organization of archival collections may be one reason. Finding aids are often no more than general typed lists of content, sometimes at the box level, in older or smaller archives. But getting to know archives is well worth the effort when one considers that they "serve as memory institutions for a culture."[7]

In a study of information-seeking behavior of historians, Wendy M. Duff and Catherine A. Johnson found that the researchers whose information-seeking behaviors were studied overcame their confusion by learning how the finding aids are organized, usually beginning with a printed copy. One of their subjects, "visiting an archive in a city whose history he was not familiar with … tapped into the specialized knowledge of the archivists," who knowing the history, were able to suggest relevant collections to him.[8]

A later study by Margaret Steig Dalton and Laurie Charnigo, found that "sources used most frequently for primary information by ten or more historians were, in descending order, archives, manuscripts and special collections, books, newspapers, government documents."[9]

5. Katherine Durnin, "Archives and Truth in Fred Stenson's The Trade," *Canadian Literature* 178 (2003): 73.

6. Robert V. Hine, "When Historians Turn to Fiction," *The History Teacher* 21 (1988): 218.

7. Anne J. Gilliland-Swetland, *Enduring Paradigm, New Opportunities: The Value of the Archival Perspective in the Digital Environment* (Washington, D.C.: Council on Library and Information Resources, 2000): 5.

8. Wendy M. Duff and Catherine A. Johnson, "Accidentally Found on Purpose: Information-seeking Behavior of Historians in Archives," *Library Quarterly* 72 (2002): 483.

9. Margaret Steig Dalton and Laurie Charnigo, "Historians and Their Information," *College and Research Libraries* 31 (2004): 405.

How Archival Collections Can be Used by Fiction Writers

A variety of archives and other research facilities are spread across the country, each specializing in certain types of documents and memorabilia. For example, the Dick T. Morgan collection is housed in the Congressional Archives of the Carl Albert Center at the University of Oklahoma. Morgan was one of Oklahoma's first U.S. representatives, serving from 1909 to 1920. Among the several boxes in his collection of papers and memorabilia are items that give a wonderful picture of how he and his family lived, both in Oklahoma and in the nation's capital. During the times when he lived alone in Washington, D.C. and his wife remained in Oklahoma, he wrote dozens of letters to her in which he described details of life in the capital. He lived in a residential hotel, wrote his letters home on hotel stationery, and described both the official and social events he attended, along with an occasional ailment.

The archivists know that one of the more interesting bits in the collection is a letter he wrote to his wife, Ora, back in Oklahoma describing the first day the first woman member stepped onto the floor of the House. Jeanette Rankin, who ran as a Progressive, was elected in 1916 and took her seat in 1917. To a historian, the event itself is of interest, but a novelist would be just as interested in the feelings Morgan expressed about witnessing this event: "I know you will want to know something of the Congresswoman .... She seemed to act pretty sensible, without any disposition to make a display of herself."[10] Although the Morgan collection is one of the oldest in that archive, and the finding aid does not yet mention this letter or Rankin by name, the archivists have shared the information with one another or have had direct knowledge of its existence. Through blogs, listservs, articles, and presentations, they spread such information to other archivists, who might refer a researcher to the Morgan collection should that pearl of information be of interest.[11]

This is an example of just one political collection. Congressional archives often contain a wealth of newspaper articles, editorials, and columns written about political, business, and social issues. An historian might dismiss some of these items as uninteresting or unnecessary, but a savvy archivist can steer a novelist toward many items that would be useful in describing the tone of the day. Editorials, political cartoons, straight news articles, even advertisements add to the information regarding attitudes at the time an issue was being debated.

Another example is the New Mexico State University Library, which houses several archives, one of which documents life in New Mexico and in the borderlands of the U.S. and Mexico. This Rio Grande Historical Collection is actually made up of several smaller collections of papers on the history of the river and the land through

10. Dick T. Morgan, to Ora Morgan, April 2, 1917, Folder 1, Box 2, Dick T. Morgan Collection, Carl Albert Congressional Research & Studies Center, University of Oklahoma.

11. As an aside, it is notable that Morgan addressed his wife as "Ode" in the letters, a fact that might only be found in the collection of letters.

which it runs. Also housed there are the University Archives, a large collection of items recording the history of the university (established in 1888) through official documents, university newspapers, and other resources. In 2007, the university received the papers of Senator Pete V. Domenici, who retired after thirty-six years in the U.S. Senate, forming the core of a new Congressional archive (not yet open to researchers). In this example, a writer can visit three archives—historical, university, congressional—and dozens of collections, under one roof.

Another complex of collections can be found in the libraries of Colonial Williamsburg. Although they are named "libraries," several collections of papers are housed there, some, like the William Blathwayt papers, date back to the seventeenth century and cover many decades of the English colonial period in the Americas.

Not all useful information is located in large archives or on university campuses. Small archives can prove invaluable to writers of fiction. This is probably most true in small towns where an archive may be housed in the public library. The holdings in such repositories could include private diaries and journals written by local citizens; photos of the town that document its growth and/or decline; collections of letters between lovers or spouses; and maps and historical documents of the town itself. For instance, the archive/museum in Shawnee, Oklahoma houses a wealth of photos, as well as documents. There writers can learn that in the nineteenth century, Shawnee had more saloons downtown than any other type of business, what they were called, where they were located, and what they looked like.

Archivists know that there are many more examples of information available. They learn through education and experience what questions to ask an academic researcher or a genealogist to guide them to collections and individual papers, not always in their own facility. The needs of fiction writers are often different and the questions asked should reflect that difference. They seek not only facts, but also the mood and feel of a different time, or of a place with which they are unfamiliar. Journals and letters, expressing feelings and showing how people wrote, might be of more use to them than business ledgers. Photographs and newspaper articles will give writers the same information as an academic, but a novelist will use it differently.

How Archivists Can Help

Professional archivists attend conferences each year, meeting with their peers and other professionals, learning how to improve their facilities and gaining knowledge within the field. Such meetings provide opportunities to network in various areas of the profession and discuss their holdings and the problems encountered in the past year or more. Interested archivists could also attend writers' conferences and conventions, professional or fan-based, held all across the country. People involved in all genres host their own conferences, joint conferences, from romance to science fiction, mysteries to westerns. Discussion panels cover all phases of the business of writing and publishing. Archivists could propose panels to discuss what their collections are about, how authors can access different facilities, and what their services include; they could also provide contact information as well as answer

questions. These panels might also include an author who has availed herself of the information contained in archives.

Many universities and colleges have creative writing programs or classes that local archivists could visit to present information on the material that is available right in the students' neighborhood. Articles could be published in writing magazines and journals, giving the same information. Some of these journals are published on a national or international level.

Writers' conferences, genre conventions, and academic writing programs also offer workshops on both writing and getting published. Workshops on doing research in archives would be welcome additions in many venues. If workshops are not possible, setting up a table in the vendors' room could be a workable alternative. Examples of research material and finding aids could be displayed. Information regarding Web sites and how they can be used to determine if the archives contain the needed information and where the information is located within a collection could be invaluable. Brochures with basic information on a repository—where, how, who, and when—could be distributed. And possible research projects could be discussed, usually by appointment.

Getting the word to authors about the information available in archives is very much like advertising and communicating with other prospective patrons. It is also important to assure inexperienced researchers that although researching in archives may be different from researching in libraries or on the Internet, it can be done without stress and with the knowledge that with good preparation, information is not that difficult to find.

Conclusions

Some people believe that fiction is fiction and attention need not be paid to facts from the real world. However, authors know that it can be embarrassing to be caught in a handful of errors in details, especially when the facts are available with a little effort. Accuracy is important even when a different interpretation is to be made of the facts. Setting the mood is also important. In different settings and eras, people view everything differently. Some of this can be found in the papers housed in archives. Authors just need to know where they are.

Archives are wonderful sources for personal information, including expressions of feelings by individuals. Information on people, events, businesses, politics—any aspect of human endeavor and its components—can be utilized by storytellers. But archivists must make authors aware of what is available through their Web sites, advertisements in journals and magazines, and articles detailing their collections, as well as personal contact at conventions, conferences, and a myriad of venues at which authors gather. Those authors who have little or no experience with archives can be shown that information other than hard facts are available that will add depth and realism to their stories.