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The Business of Time Travel: A Case Study Examining the Processing of the Connie Willis Papers at the University of Northern Colorado

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ABSTRACT

The work in progress article explores the donation, arrangement and description of the papers of the internationally renowned science fiction novelist and short story writer, Connie Willis, to the University of Northern Colorado. The project is ongoing at UNC, but the article provides a case study exploring the both the value of science fiction collections and the challenges presented in processing them.

Connie Willis, the internationally-renowned science fiction novelist and short story writer, is an alumnus of University of Northern Colorado (UNC); in fact, she still lives within walking distance of the campus. Since the Archival Services Department (ASD) is tasked with acquiring and preserving the papers of significant alumni, it was natural that library faculty approach Willis about obtaining her collection. Willis began writing in the late 1970s and has been writing steadily ever since. She has won an unprecedented seven Nebula, eleven Hugo, and thirteen Locus awards. In 2012, Willis was presented with the Damon Knight Memorial Grand Master Award by the Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers of America, joining the likes of Robert Heinlein, Isaac Asimov and Ray Bradbury. In February 2010 her collection, spanning four decades, arrived at ASD in a wide assortment of large plastic tubs holding handwritten manuscripts, speeches, essays, correspondence, galley proofs, and published works. In addition to these paper-based materials, the collection included other formats such as VHS tapes, audio cassette tapes, photographs, awards, and a variety of artifacts given to Willis by fans. The initial acquisition was over 150 cubic feet and has grown to approximately 225 cubic feet.

The collection's arrangement and description are unique for a multitude of reasons. The collection represents a personal archive of a living author in the midst of her career, therefore there are on-going accruals and privacy issues to contend with along with its promotion as a primary resource. Additionally, due to both the nature of the materials themselves and the nature of their original order, arrangement and description of the collection has presented several challenges.

Imposing Order

The arrangement and descriptive process was broken down into several phases due to the materials' original order. As with many archivists, the article "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing" by Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner influenced the decisions that were made for proceeding with processing the collection.¹ Developing a box-level inventory for the collection to allow quick access was one of the primary goals of the project.

The original containers were divided into broad categories by Willis, with containers being labeled generally by the name of the novel, short story or other written work contained within. Not all of the contents within the containers matched their labels, and certain containers were labeled "unknown." Organization within each container was non-existent. Papers were thrown fairly haphazardly within each plastic tub, so initial drafts could be mixed with research notes and the final galley proofs. While the materials were rehoused into temporary archival boxes, an archivist took time to sort them in more detail.

It was determined that for both preservation concerns and access of the materials, the papers needed to be pulled from the tubs and placed into temporary archival boxes labeled according to the original container. Very little of the material was foldered when it arrived, and only in special cases were items added to folders during this initial organization. The only materials foldered were records that clearly belonged together, such as typed drafts with clearly marked page numbers or galley proofs from the publisher. However, in general, the papers were transferred to new containers without foldering with the understanding that this was the first step in a multi-step arrangement process. At the end of this step, all of the papers were moved from their temporary housing into clearly labeled archival boxes. A basic finding aid was created with series based primarily on the various published works, including additional series focused on such things as publicity, correspondence and speeches. Both the correspondence and speech series are particularly important within the confines of science fiction collections. These series provide some of the clearest documentation of Willis' interaction with both fans and the larger world of science fiction conventions. The close relationship between science fiction fans and its authors is fundamental within the science fiction community. As noted by David

1. Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner, "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing," *American Archivist* 68, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2005): 208-263.

Hartwell, “The SF writer is aware of a palpable and immediate audience. She meets them at conventions, they write her letters, send her fanzines that mention her and her work, responding in a fashion and in significant numbers unknown in any other field of literature.”² These relationships must be clearly demonstrated within the finding aid. The simple, original finding aid was created using EAD and designed to provide fairly basic access to the entire collection. It was mounted both on the Archival Services’ local implementation of the Archon archival content management system and on the regional Rocky Mountain Online Archive. It has since been migrated onto ArchiveSpace.

While the original finding aid provides a basic level of accessibility, it does not provide access to the papers within each series, which remained disorganized in their boxes. As Greene and Meissner wrote, “The perceived importance and research value of the collection materials should dictate ultimate decisions about the intensity and level at which such tasks will be performed.”³ Because of Willis’ importance to the science fiction community and her relationship to University of Northern Colorado, it was decided that the basic level of arrangement and description was not adequate. It was not a typical collection, at least for UNC, that could rely on series-only arrangement. Researchers wanting to explore Willis’ work would be overwhelmed by the lack of organization within the large, broad series. A new arrangement and description project was undertaken to provide better accessibility for the papers. For the next phase of the project, a processing archivist was hired to focus on the slow task of arranging the items within the series and developing a much more detailed finding aid. The primary goal of the new phase of arrangement was to improve access and usability of the collection.

It was quickly determined that the original arrangement needed to be expanded by additional levels of arrangement and description. The series were modified into subgroups and slightly altered. The papers were divided into five broad subgroups: 1) Published Works 2) Unpublished Works 3) Publicity and Correspondence 4) Research, and 5) Artifacts. Within the first two subgroups, the papers were further divided into numerous series, generally centering on a single literary work. For example, all documents related to the writing of the novel *Doomsday Book* were arranged together following the story from its inception to its publication. Willis undertakes copious amounts of research for each of her publications, and this research is all gathered together at the beginning of the appropriate subseries. The research notes illuminate the origins and development of the story ideas. After all of the research is gathered, the various handwritten drafts were organized. Willis writes and rewrites each chapter several times. Within *Doomsday Book*, the first chapter was rewritten 27 separate times. Each of these rewrites was organized within the subseries, allowing the researcher to see the growth and development of the novel.

2. David Hartwell, quoted in “Fanzine Research: Some Sercon Musings” by Rob Latham, *Science Fiction Studies* 31, no. 3: 487.

3. Greene and Meissner, “More Product, Less Process,” 243.

The final draft sent to the publisher was placed after the chapter rewrites, followed by the galley proofs sent to Willis. The process of organizing these individual writings into a more linear fashion is obviously time consuming. Organizing each series into the respective subseries is proving to take several months for a half-time processing archivist.

Growing Collection

Since the initial acquisition in 2010, Willis continues to add material to the collection, including working papers, proofs and book galleys, along with speeches, published manuscripts from her personal library, and an award or two. The most recent accruals even include drafts and galleys of a yet to be published work. As Pam Hackbart-Dean and Sammie L. Morris discussed in their article "Case Studies in Managing Collections that Grow," the physical and intellectual control of a growing collection can be perplexing for archivists.⁴ Hackbart-Dean and Morris present four distinct avenues for processing such collections:

1. Physically and intellectually integrate additions as they are made to existing collections;
2. Intellectually integrate additions to the existing collection's finding aid, without physically integrating the additions in the same containers as the original collection;
3. Treat each addition as a separate collection with separate accession numbers, finding aids, and physical housing;
4. Add descriptions of the additions in appendices to the existing collection's finding aid without physically integrating the additions into the original collection.⁵

UNC's Archival Services Department has primarily used a combination of the first two approaches in an attempt to maintain intellectual control. The first option has been, and will continue to be, implemented for Willis' published works. The published books were initially separated from the collection to be individually cataloged by the library's Technical Services Department. UNC Libraries' catalog records contain information identifying the published works from the Connie Willis Papers as the "Connie Willis collection" in the record's 740 or "alternate title" field. All published accruals will be processed in this manner as well. Once the finding aid is completed, the various catalog records will link back to the finding aid; the finding aid will provide information about locating the published works using the Innovative

4. Pam Hackbart-Dean and Sammie L. Morris, "Case Studies in Managing Collections that Grow," *Archival Issues* 28, no. 2 (2003-2004): 105.

5. *Ibid.*, 106.

Interfaces ILS. All published books part of the Connie Willis Papers have been shelved according to their Library of Congress classification; intermittent shifting has been required when adding accruals. This is necessary for ease of access and has not been labor intensive. Presently, there is 69 linear feet of published books within the Connie Willis Papers.

As for the remainder of the collection, a combination of total integration and intellectual only integration has been used and will be used. The original accrual was fairly chaotic; it has only been through slow and detailed processing that we've gradually attained physical and intellectual control of it. When accruals arrive, the papers generally represent Willis' latest work, with the addition of a speech, a gift from a fan, or something similar. These few additions have been small and are either easily added into the appropriate series within the larger collection or result in the creation of a new series. When accessions arrive that pertain to an already processed portion of the collection, ASD does not take the time to physically integrate the new materials but houses them separately and intellectually integrates them into the finding aid. The method preserves accessibility for researchers, but also prevents ASD archivists from spending an inordinate amount of time physically integrating the accession into already arranged boxes. The slight difficulty for the archivist is that a series might potentially be broken up between several shelving locations, requiring additional time to pull the materials.

Personal and Private

As with many literary collections, Willis' collection contains papers, published works and artifacts that are both professional and personal in nature. In her article regarding the value of an individual's collection, Catherine Hobbs specifically notes that authors' collections not only hold materials that pertain to their craft but also thoughts on "love affairs, parenting, travel, work, and all other aspects of individuals' inner lives."⁶ The Willis collection is a prime example of this phenomena. Grocery lists, movie schedules, Christmas cards, and vacation photos have all been discovered within the collection. In addition, it contains an abundance of restaurant menus and church programs used by Willis to write down story ideas. All of these shards of information give a researcher a better understanding of her character and her thoughts on many issues, what restaurants she frequents, and if not her religious beliefs, at least what church she attends.

Willis is a frank and engaging speaker who is often in high demand. She speaks at scores of science fiction conventions, including serving as master of ceremonies for the Hugo Awards, classrooms of all types, public and academic library functions, college graduations, award ceremonies, symposiums, workshops, and book clubs. Over 45 separate speeches have been processed already, with additional speeches

6. Catherine Hobbs, "The Character of Personal Archives: Reflections on the Value of Records of Individuals," *Archivaria* 52, (Fall 2001): 127, 133.

being added with new accruals. This body of work provides a wealth of information regarding her beliefs on various matters from string theory to the Kardashians. The series stretches back to the 1970s, providing ample evidence of the transformation of Willis's opinions and interests throughout the years.

As with many literary collections, the Connie Willis Papers contains a considerable quantity of correspondence. Not only are there letters, notes and Christmas cards from accomplished authors such as Michael Cassutt, James Patrick Kelly and Nancy Kress, but there are also personally inscribed books for the "Dean of Science Fiction" Jack Williamson and George R. R. Martin. These items provide valuable insight into both of the writers' views and their personal relationship.⁷ The science fiction community is fairly insular, and many of the writers work closely with one another. The research value of these materials dictates item-level description and arrangement for two reasons: to insure both access to and security of the item.⁸ Greene and Meissner wrote of this association in their watershed article "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing". They articulated the direct correlation between the perceived value of materials and the extent of processing they warrant.⁹ The more valuable the collection, the more appropriate it is to thoroughly process it. ASD asserts that Willis represents a significant American writer since she is the *most* decorated science fiction author of all time. As mentioned previously, the collection arrived without order and the papers were in chaos. The original order was un navigable. If processed minimally, many of the items previously mentioned might not have been discovered by archivists and left unnoticed in an unordered box. They could have easily been left unsecured and hidden for years without giving researchers the chance to use the materials.

Furthermore, privacy concerns also dictated the need to process the materials thoroughly. Sara S. Hodson speaks to privacy concerns in the article "In Secret Kept, In Silence Sealed: Privacy in the Papers of Authors and Celebrities". Privacy is an important concern for archivists dealing with modern literary collections because the materials potentially hold papers regarding living people. Correspondence can contain sensitive information that was certainly not intended for mass circulation. Other formats and media can also contain just as much personal information.¹⁰ Regardless of where the potentially private information is found, it is a professional obligation of archivists to protect privacy as set out by the Society of American Archivist's *Core Values of Archivists*:

7. Jeannette Mercer Sabre and Susan Hamburger, "A Case for Item-level Indexing: The Kenneth Burke Papers at the Pennsylvania State University," *Journal of Archival Organization* 6, no 1-2 (2008):24-46.

8. Ibid.

9. Greene and Meissner, "More Product, Less Process," 243.

10. Sara S. Hodson, "In the Secret Kept, In Silence Sealed: Privacy in the Papers of Authors and Celebrities," *American Archivist* 67, (Fall/Winter 2004): 194-211.

Archivists recognize that privacy is sanctioned by law. They establish procedures and policies to protect the interests of the donors, individuals, groups, and institutions whose public and private lives and activities are recorded in their holdings. As appropriate, archivists place access restrictions on collections to ensure that privacy and confidentiality are maintained, particularly for individuals and groups who have no voice or role in collections' creation, retention, or public use.¹¹

The majority of the collection is appropriate for public research but a few sensitive items were found that warranted further investigation. For example, another science fiction writer and friend of Willis was experiencing a difficult time, wherein his friends orchestrated a garage sale to support him financially. Willis took notes during the meetings leading up to the garage sale and they contained details of the situation. The Head of ASD and the processing archivist worked closely with Willis to determine the best course of action to handle the materials. It was determined that these specific materials will remain in the collection, but they will remain sealed for a number of years.

Just as safeguarding privacy is a professional tenet, providing and promoting access to the collections has always been a governing principle of the archival profession. Indeed, in this era of budgetary cutbacks, it behooves archives to promote their collections for self-preservation. Archives need to prove that their holdings not only support the mission of their parent organization but also that it is of vital importance. It is particularly true for academic institutions, as Harris and Weller note:

Greater competition for resources within the academy means that special collections departments must take measures to show their value within the parent institution and beyond. If special collections are to be customer-service driven and user-centered, there must also be aggressive advertising of the extent of these collections and how users can be served.¹²

ASD heavily promoted the Connie Willis Papers when it was first acquired. Fortuitously, Willis' novel *Blackout* was scheduled to be launched at roughly the same time as the University received the papers. In order to publicize the acquisition to the widest audience, several outreach activities were undertaken. ASD worked closely with both UNC's public relations office and Willis' publisher to maximize publicity regarding the donation, taking particular advantage of the timing. UNC's main library hosted the celebration of the acquisition, and was incorporated into Willis' national book tour promoting *Blackout*. UNC's University President, Dean of the Libraries,

11. "Code Values of Archivist," Society of American Archivists, last modified May 2011, <http://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics> (accessed October 2016).

12. Valerie A. Harris and Ann C. Weller, "Use of Special Collections as an Opportunity for Outreach in the Academic Library," *Journal of Library Administration* 52, no. 3-4 (2012): 294-303.

and Head of Archives as well as Willis all spoke at the event. UNC's bookstores provided copies of Willis' new novel for sale at the event, and after all of the speakers were finished, Willis signed copies of her book for members of the audience. Food was naturally provided, as it seems to have the strange effect of encouraging university students to attend events.

UNC Libraries prepared several exhibits to be unveiled at the celebration. ASD exhibited materials from the newly-acquired collection, including early draft pages from some of Willis' novels, Hugo and Nebula award trophies, and other artifacts relating to her time-travel series, along with the publisher-supplied publicity materials for *Blackout*. The exhibit ran for several weeks during the semester in the central gallery of the main library building, a high traffic area on campus. ASD also collaborated with other library faculty to create related exhibits within the library. Copies of Willis' published works were pulled from the shelves to be placed on display, encouraging patrons to check out the materials. The event at the main library culminated in the formal acceptance of the Papers by University of Northern Colorado. UNC's public relations contacted the news media to announce both the inaugural celebration and the acquisition of the collection. ASD staff wrote press releases describing the collection for the publications of regional/national archival and library professional associations. Willis also spoke about her donation at other venues, including interviews with the regional press.

One of the most important ways that is still used to promote the collection is through instruction. Departments across campus are given a "show and tell" of what can be found in the archives. ASD faculty involved in classroom teaching use examples from the Connie Willis Papers to illustrate not only Willis' writings, but her writing process as well. Willis writes and rewrites each portion of her book numerous times. The first chapter of the *Doomsday Book* went through 24 separate drafts. Each of these drafts is arranged sequentially within the subseries, showing the growth and development of the novel. It proves to be a valuable lesson to undergraduate students, demonstrating the absolute necessity of editing and rewriting in the writing process.

Importance of Science Fiction

Science fiction is a vast genre with somewhat fuzzy borders. It is a literary genre that can be difficult to define precisely, as M. Keith Booker and Anne-Marie Thomas note in their introduction to the *Handbook of Science Fiction*.

Most readers of science fiction spend little time or energy worrying about a definition of the genre or attempting to determine whether any given text is science fiction or not. ... Scholars and critics tend, however, to be more cautious (and finicky) about categorization, so that many studies of science fiction as a genre begin with lengthy meditations on the definition of

science fiction, often in order to distinguish it from other forms of “speculative fiction”, such as fantasy or horror.¹³

Booker and Thomas review a variety of definitions proposed by academics, but provide a fairly simple and straightforward definition: “Science fiction might be defined as fiction set in an imagined world that is different from our own in ways that are rationally explicable (often because of scientific advances) and that tend to produce cognitive estrangement in the reader.”¹⁴

Willis is one of the most respected names in science fiction today. Respectability within science fiction does not necessarily translate into mainstream literary recognition. The genre has long struggled for recognition beyond its own borders; it has lacked “literary respectability.”¹⁵ As Willis wrote in a speech, “Science fiction is frequently considered to be juvenile literature. Frequently when I tell people what I write, they say, ‘Oh, my little boy might be interested in that.’ Other people consider it pulp literature. Or no literature at all.”¹⁶ Many have lamented the genre’s outsider status, but Willis embraces it. “Science fiction has been trying very hard to justify itself—it’s sort of the ‘nouveau riche’ of literature, and tries too hard to prove that we do ‘belong in the neighborhood.’ Like Molly Brown, we tend to be a little loud and garish but very open and kindhearted.”¹⁷

Science fiction’s lack of “literary respectability” has potentially affected its acquisition by manuscript repositories and archives. During the negotiation period for UNC’s acquisition of the Connie Willis Papers, Willis expressed her concern over an apparent dearth of institutions collecting the papers of other science fiction authors. Willis was afraid that, as has happened with other little-documented groups, the story of the genre’s writers would be largely lost to the archival record. There are a growing number of institutions collecting science fiction, as Rob Latham notes: “In recent years, library and museum archives in the field have sought to diversify their holdings in order to track the remarkable variety in SF in contemporary media and popular culture.”¹⁸ As seen in the Latham article and the extensive list of research

13. M. Keith Booker and Anne-Marie Thomas, *The Science Fiction Handbook* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 3.
14. Booker and Thomas, *The Science Fiction Handbook*, 4.
15. Gordon van Gelder, “Respectability,” in *Nebula Awards Showcase №#*, edited by Gregory Benford, (San Diego, CA: Harvest Original/Harcourt, 2000), 122-126.
16. Connie Willis, “Aliens, Ideas, and Irrelevance: The Importance of Science Fiction,” (speech presented at the 1997 UPC Science Fiction Award, Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya).
17. “Building Platforms Over the Abyss: A Conversation with Connie Willis,” hosted by Earl Ingersoll and Nancy Kress (State University of New York College at Brockport, 1986).
18. Rob Latham, “SFS Showcase: Library Collections and Archives of SF and Related Materials,” *Science Fiction Studies* 37, no. 2 (July 2010): 161-190.

libraries created by Hal Hall for the AboutSF website, many of the institutions collecting science fiction focus primarily on published works.¹⁹ It is more difficult to find other types of records, particularly authors' papers and those documenting the larger fan community. Fans of the science fiction genre are incredibly important and active within the community.

Science fiction fans (or fandom) are an essential part of the story of science fiction. "Fandom has a particularly strong influence in the history of science fiction, from the communities of readers who supported early pulp magazines in which science fiction stories appeared in the 1920s and 1930s, to the more recent phenomenon of fan-dominated conventions..."²⁰ These conventions are central experiences for members of the science fiction community and directly affect the work of many science fiction authors. "An SF writer, to gain the support of fans, is expected to appear at conventions ... and interact personally with the fans."²¹ Willis expressed concern for the preservation of fan-created material, particularly fanzines and materials associated with science fiction conventions. As with other areas of the genre, there are a growing number of institutions interested in collecting this aspect of the community.²² Although more is being written about the content of archival collections containing science fiction, little, if any, has been written specifically about the acquisition, appraisal, arrangement and description of science fiction papers. The Connie Willis Papers provide an excellent opportunity to explore various aspects of archival practice in relation to a major science fiction author's papers.

Concluding Thoughts

There is still considerable work to be done with the Connie Willis Papers. Obviously, processing at this level of detail is a very time-intensive process. It is clear that an institution must determine which collections should be processed this fully. Only those determined to be one of an institution's most prized collections can be approached with this level of care. The archives faculty and staff must carefully weigh the value of such detailed processing against the cost in both time and resources. As noted earlier, UNC's Archival Services Department has judged Willis' work to be valuable enough to warrant this detailed approach. The case for this level of processing was presented to UNC's administration, which led to an institutional commitment to processing the papers by hiring a half-time processing archivist for

19. Hal Hall, "Research Library Collections of SF," <http://www.aboutsf.com/node/72> (accessed October 2016).

20. Booker and Thomas, *The Science Fiction Handbook*.

21. David Hartwell, *Age of Wonders: Exploring the World of Science Fiction* (Columbus, OH: McGraw-Hill, 1985).

22. Rob Latham, "Fanzine Research: Some Sercon Musings," *Science Fiction Studies* 31, no. 3: 487-497.

the project. In addition to the major time commitment, another area being explored is the incorporation of the papers into the instructional mission of UNC.

The Connie Willis Papers provide such a rich source of information regarding the writing process; they are incredibly valuable for students at all levels from K-12 through graduate school. Efforts need to be explored for the best way to integrate the materials into the instruction of university faculty. With UNC's focus on education, integrating the materials into K-12 education is also essential. Students could use the materials to understand the transformation of an unpolished idea into a finished story. Willis is a consummate rewriter and she spends considerable effort drafting and redrafting her work. The collections provide an amazing example of the complexity of the writing process.

Finally, within the processing project, it will be essential to highlight the complex relationship between science fiction fans and authors. Special care will be given to arranging and describing fan correspondence and documents highlighting the world of the conventions.