People of the Stacks: ‘The Archivist’ Character in Fiction

Sharon Wolff
Northwestern State University

DOI: https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.27.17
People of the Stacks:
‘The Archivist’ Character in Fiction

Sharon Wolff
Cammie G. Henry Research Center, Northwestern State University

Archives and archival professionals suffer from what may be termed as an “image problem” due to their general lack of exposure to the public. With their efforts being tucked away in various repositories, their fictional representatives become an important way to give people an idea of what they do. With the help of an article by Arlene Schmuland, two works of fiction, People of the Book by Geraldine Brooks from 2008 and The Archivist by Martha Cooley from 1998, are used to compare fictional archivists and the ways their differences may indicate a change in how their real-life counterparts are seen by the general public.

In the archival field, there is something close to an obsession with how we are seen by the public. This is born out of an acute awareness that the public generally does not know we exist, or if they know, they have little understanding of what we do. Like our colleagues in libraries and museums, those of us who work in archives do our best to provide free and open information to anyone who asks for it. Most of us, with the exception of those who work in private company archives, serve the public interest. But it is extremely difficult to serve the public if they do not know where to go for the information they want, or if they do not even know that a resource exists to help them get that information in the first place.

The problem is that unlike libraries and museums, archives are places that are often used exclusively for research, and they do not have the benefit that libraries do of being a frequent presence in high schools. Archives and archivists are a concept that are almost never introduced to people in everyday life. As John Grabowski (1992) says, “Archivists, blessed or damned, if you will, with a professional moniker of great popular obscurity, have...a greater problem in creating an awareness of their importance among the public than...our colleagues in allied historical fields” (465). Archives are something that exist in the peripheral of the average person’s view, if at all. Unfortunately, they often exist similarly in the views of presidents of universities and companies that have archives. David Gracy (1984) is not...
exaggerating when he points out that “The misconception by our publics and by those with the power to allocate resources to our repositories strikes at the heart of our existence and ability to function. With diminished resources, every activity of archives suffers” (8). Without the support of people in power, our funding is not prioritized and our existence is threatened. Without the interest of the public, our entire purpose is underwritten and our existence is moot.

With such a limited exposure to society, every image of archivists, fictional or otherwise, is magnified in importance, and our fictional image already matters quite a bit. According to Raymond Mar (2004), “...our interactions with fictional narratives should not be viewed as frivolous; stories have the power to change our beliefs about the real world. Researchers have repeatedly found that reader attitudes shift to become more congruent with the ideas expressed in a narrative after exposure to fiction” (1414). People within the archival profession like Gracy and Grabowski have been advocating for decades for increased outreach by archivists in an effort to make us more visible. However, as much good as outreach will undoubtedly do, a large amount of control over our image belongs to the media creators of the world. Jonathan Gottschall (2012) points out that “The emotions of fiction are highly contagious, and so are the ideas...In fact, fiction seems to be more effective at changing beliefs than nonfiction, which is designed to persuade through argument and evidence” (150). With that in mind, it behooves us to be aware of how we are represented, especially as a fictional depiction of an archivist is often the only thing people have to refer to. The question becomes, what does an archivist look like in fiction?

According to Arlene Schmuland (1999), who examines this topic extensively in an article of hers, the overall picture is less than flattering. Schmuland looks at books with archival representation across every genre, from the fantasy world of Centaur Aisle by Piers Anthony, to a romance in Sweet Starfire by Jayne Ann Krentz, to the mystery in Provenance by Frank McDonald (54-65). Common physical traits associated with archivists that Schmuland comes up with are that they wear glasses, are middling to advanced in age, take little care in their outfits or dress conservatively, and are physically unimposing. As she summarizes, “a more precise description might be that of a middle-aged, visually impaired person in badly chosen clothing with almost no social life” (Schmuland 1999, 36). A look at the psychological profile that Schmuland pieced together comes off slightly better: “an archivist is usually a person with intelligence, efficiency, and a strong sense of duty and devotion to work. However, they also have traits like introversion, general condescension, and the belief that they are a gatekeeper deigning to allow others access to precious knowledge” (37).

Besides novels, anyone who has attended one of Leith Johnson’s (2017) “Archives in the Movies” presentations at a yearly Society of American Archivists meeting knows that these stereotypes hold true on film as well as on the page: the imposing, in fact downright threatening, archivist in Citizen Kane (Welles 1941), the emotionless, disengaged archivist is Cloud Atlas (Wachowski 2012), and humorous yet dismissively disinterested archivist in Night at the Museum: Secret of the Tomb (Levy 2014). The good news is there may be hope for both movies and books. Schmuland states that “Novelists are including archives and archivists in their writings more and more every passing year. Stereotypes are...strengthened through repetition, and new images are added to them” (52).

While there have been several published works that include archival aspects in the nearly twenty years since Schmuland’s prediction, one in particular stands out: People of the
Book by Geraldine Brooks from 2008. Though People of the Book does not have an archivist as a main character, the reader is briefly introduced to one that breaks a myriad of character stereotypes into pieces. This stands in contrast to The Archivist by Martha Cooley, which was published in 1998 and was mentioned in Schmuland’s article as a new release. When comparisons are drawn between The Archivist and People of the Book, it is easy to see the difference in their respective depictions of fictional archivists. Indeed, if People of the Book is any indication of future trends, there may yet be hope for the archivist character in fiction.

When Schmuland’s article first appeared in print, The Archivist had been out for a year. The story is set just under fifteen years prior to the book in 1985 and follows Matthias Lane, who is an archivist at a prestigious university. One of the collections under his care is a bulk of letters donated by Emily Hale containing correspondence between her and T.S. Eliot. The collection is closed to researchers until 2020 at the request of the donor, contrary to Eliot’s wishes, which were for Hale to destroy the letters. Lane’s wife, who, like him, was an avid reader of poetry, had been dead for 20 years after her suicide in a mental institution that he put her in. As the story progresses, the reader learns that Lane’s wife left a journal for her psychiatrist to read after her death that was to be burned when he finished going through it. Due to legal obligations, the institution cannot destroy a patient’s property and the journal ends up with Lane, who still does not dispose of it. Eventually, after reading his wife’s journal and gaining a better understanding of her thoughts, he removes the letters from the archive and burns them, fulfilling the poet’s original intent that no one except Emily Hale read them.

In her article, Schmuland notes the symbolism of burning the letters, “While that action is not typical of archivists in fiction...Lane is acting as a gatekeeper, controlling access to a collection” (42). This is significant because, according to Schmuland, Lane is an “archivist who displays many of the psychological traits associated with archivists in fiction” (26). Essentially, Lane fits the stereotype of an archivist’s mentality to a ‘t’. Though he loved his wife, he is content with being alone and is not bothered by solitude. He is enamored with his chosen field, expressing a profound interest in the pursuit of knowledge and dedicating his life to the care and keeping of written information. He is openly dismissive of people he calls “pseudo-scholars,” but claims that he does not “hoard the treasure” because he will “allow the collection to be read and used by anyone who passes [his] inspection” (Cooley 1998, 6). Throughout the book he refers to himself as a “guardian” of the archive, a “warden of the obscure,” and a “keeper of countless objects of desire” (6). These are all traits that add together to create a perfect stereotype image of an archivist, according to Schmuland’s findings. To the casual reader, despite being fictional, Lane is an archivist, and his burning of the letters at the end of the book represents actions that a real archivist might take. This is a problem.

Thematically speaking, of course, the ending is a beautiful moment. Lane experiences a kind of catharsis, an atonement for how he treated his wife before her death. His burning of the letters is his way of doing for Eliot, a poet that both he and his wife shared admiration for, what he could not do for his wife. For the archival profession, the ending is deeply troubling. In fact, the implications of Lane’s fictional actions are downright disastrous. It represents a harmful stereotype, the archivist as a jealous gatekeeper, taken to an extreme conclusion. By burning Eliot’s letters in a desire to honor the poet’s wishes, he betrays the intent of the donor and his duty to posterity. While Eliot may have been the creator of
the letters, Emily Hale was the recipient and subsequent donor of them; it should not be Eliot’s desires Lane seeks to fulfill but Hale’s, not to mention the untold numbers of future researchers whose sources went up in smoke with the letters. Lane himself mentions how the destruction of the letters goes against the school of archival thought: “An archivist serves the reader’s desire...My own training...had taught me to privilege the reader’s curiosity over all other considerations” (Cooley 1998, 322). By having her character do this, Cooley paints archivists not only as people who are solitary guardians of information, but as people who can and will take advantage of their privileged access for personal reasons. In short, The Archivist perpetuates tired stereotypes while adding dangerous fuel to the fire.

Fortunately, People of the Book stands in sharp contrast. The story follows an Australian conservator, Hannah Heath, after she works on a five hundred-year-old illuminated Jewish text called the Sarajevo Haggadah. While she does her work, she finds objects or stains within the pages of the book, and the narrative switches between Heath attempting to work out the origin of them and the people in the past responsible for the events that cause the item to become a part of the book’s story. Though the main character is a conservator, not an archivist, she does come across one while conducting her research. It is this encounter that makes the book stand out as a beacon of hope for fictional archivists.

At this point in the story, Heath is attempting to track down clasps that she believes were originally attached to the book. She has determined that the binding was done in Vienna and sets up a meeting with Frau Zwieg, the chief archivist, to go through some archival documents that may help her with her task. What follows is the moment that Heath first meets Zweig at the Vienna Museum:

...the chief archivist...was not at all what I expected. In her late twenties, she was dressed in high black boots, a teensy plaid skirt, and a tight, electric blue jersey that emphasized an enviable figure. Her dark hair was cropped in a jagged bob and streaked in various shades of red and yellow. There was a silver stud in the side of her...nose. (Brooks 2008, 101)

To put it another way, she is young, attractive, fashionably dressed, and either wears contacts or does not have vision problems. Zweig later further confounds stereotypes by taking Heath out on the town the night before she flies out of Vienna. Perhaps most importantly, Frau Zweig—the chief archivist—is a woman. Schmuland notes that “The women are more likely to be clerical-level workers than the men. If the archivist is in an administrative or supervisory role...the archivist is more likely to be a man” (35). By putting Zweig in a top managerial position, Brooks not only flouts a longstanding character tradition, but also subverts a more widespread ‘understanding’ rooted in deep-seated sexism.

For as much as People of the Book does for the heritage field with its character, it does unfortunately perpetuate some classic, and harmful, stereotypes surrounding archives themselves. For example, after Heath is left alone in the museum’s basement storage room with the box she wants to look at, she has to blow dust off of the first folder she picks up from the box. Not only does this action belie the fact that a dusty archive is an ill-kept one, it defies the laws of physics to have a dusty folder inside a box that not two sentences ago was sealed shut. Alas, the image of filthy records moldering away in a dank basement continues to prevail in this text. Schmuland herself observes that “Dust is the single most pervasive motif
associated with archives, even outside of fiction” (42). There are also several mentions of working by sunlight or having large windows in a workspace to facilitate visibility, which is actually the opposite of stereotyped images of archives, but incorrect information nonetheless. Any archivist worth their salt will attest to the destructive nature of UV radiation present in natural sunlight and the danger that prolonged exposure to it will put materials in.

Workspace imagery aside, People of the Book and The Archivist represent two different ends of a spectrum of archivist characters. However, both works have something in common: they are based in fact. The Eliot/Hale letters are in a real collection housed in the Princeton University archives that is, in fact, currently closed to researchers until 2020. The Sarajevo Haggadah is also a real illuminated text with a long history of brushes with destruction. Each of the authors have based their work in truth which, for one, means they have to invent a lot less. It has the added benefit of giving their work credence. This same credibility is what makes the books and their archivist characters significant. Because the texts are works of realistic fiction and the focus of archival interest is real, readers are more likely to accept the respective archivists as ‘real’ as well. That is, seeing how the authors have put so much research into the rest of the book, why would the same not be true for these characters? Add this to the complete dearth of archivists in fiction to begin with and the origins of many misconceptions become obvious.

There is a bright side, of course. While People of the Book is only one example, it may represent a trend towards a more well-rounded depiction of archivists and archives in media. Proper handling of archival artifacts is stressed when the main characters of Dan Brown’s Angels and Demons (2000) visit the Vatican Secret Archives, as well as when the main characters encounter the Declaration of Independence in National Treasure (Turtletaub 2004). The archivists and historians in an episode of The Crown (Lowthorpe 2017), who are responsible for publishing previously classified records from WWII, demonstrate significant moral backbone and dedication to public access to the information they uncover, despite the embarrassment to the British royal family. ‘Archivist’ was even added as a character class and characters were referred to as “...exceptional support characters...” (Wyatt 2005, 82) in the Heroes of Horror supplement to the 3.5 edition of the Dungeons and Dragons role-playing game. With luck, creators of fiction of all kinds will continue to give archivist characters traits that mark them as individuals rather than stereotypes, and a true ‘archivist image’ will develop in fiction.

Bibliography


Sharon Wolff graduated with her MSIS from the University at Albany, SUNY, in May of 2016. After finishing her degree, she spent a year building her experience with internships, short-term projects, and career development activities. She began working as the Assistant Archivist at Northwestern State University in September of 2017. Contact: wolffs@nsula.edu.