

the

AMERICAN ARCHIVIST



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About the Cover

Carolyn Preston's *Jackie* by Josie, Lawrence Norfolk's *Lemprière's Dictionary*, and Martha Cooley's *The Archivist* (the Italian version of which is shown) all incorporate archives and records into fiction. Arlene Schmuland's article explores the archival image in fiction, examining more than one hundred novels for the stereotypes, misinformation, and insights they provide their readers about archives and the importance of records.

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Pondering the Archival Image Thing

Readers of this issue of the *American Archivist* will be treated to Arlene Schmuland's study of the image of archives and archivists in fiction and provided with a handy bibliography of novels in which archives and archivists have a major or, more often, minor role. The topic of the archival image seems to be an endlessly fascinating one for archivists, and the ways in which these images are conveyed to audiences through books, movies, and television have particular appeal. Any subscriber to the Archives and Archivists listserv in recent years can testify to that fact, for the topic is one of the list's favorite (and more benign) subjects.

What are the reasons behind this apparent obsession, and what does this concern say about archivists and the archival profession? What is it about the archival image thing, as former President George Bush might say? Certainly we are not alone in our concern about professional image. Our allies in the field of librarianship seem to be equally, if not more, concerned about how their profession is portrayed in the media. By contrast, we might look at the legal profession, whose popular image, at least as judged by opinion polls and an endless number of jokes, is hardly a stellar one. No doubt there is concern about this image problem within some quarters of the American Bar Association, but it certainly doesn't appear to have much effect on the profession as a whole. Nor does it seem to keep college students from wanting to become lawyers.

For archivists, at least, the anxiety over professional image reflects our uncertain status as an emerging profession. Archival work is an unseen mystery to most people, and so we feverishly look for evidence that the non-archival world is finally "getting it," that people really do understand the significance of records and the concomitant importance of those who care for records. Such an instinct is natural and, in and of itself, not an unhealthy one. These popular portrayals of archivists offer an opportunity for us to gently spread the real word about archives. Nobody can argue with the need to continually educate our various publics about archivists and what they contribute to society. Even lawyers, whose work is more readily understood by the general public, need to engage in such activities to correct misperceptions of what it is that lawyers really do and explain why they behave in sometimes mystifying ways.

When the obsession with image becomes more problematic, however, is when it results in whining, like Rodney Dangerfield, that we never get any

respect. Several years ago *American Libraries* regularly ran a feature that presented particularly egregious slurs on the image of librarians. It always struck me as a rather pathetic effort that could, in fact, be offered as Exhibit A in support of the argument that librarians were indeed deserving of such disrespect. When confronted with abysmal ignorance about archives and archival work, our stance should be to take pity on the ignorance, and endeavor to set the record straight as best we can, all the while exuding professional confidence. Will we be successful every time? Probably not. But we can gradually and cumulatively raise the perception of the profession, within our own institutions and within society at large.

As one browses the annotated bibliography that accompanies Schmuland's article, it is striking to note how much of the fiction in which archives play a part is genre fiction, particularly science fiction, fantasy, spy novels, and mysteries. (This is something of a disappointment to me, a reader whose tastes decidedly are *not* inclined toward genre fiction. For example, I'd love to see the archival profession treated fully in a solidly realistic novel in the way that James Gould Cozzens portrayed several different professions in a series of novels published from the 1930s into the 1950s.) Personal preferences aside, the reasons for the predominance of archival matters in such genre fiction are interesting to ponder. It can be explained in part, perhaps, by the fact that archives make good props, things that can be stolen, hidden, or lusted after. There is undeniably great potential for romance to be attached to archival records, a characteristic not captured in the standard definitions of archives as "documents created or received and accumulated by a person or organization in the course of the conduct of affairs..." But I think the prominent role given to archives in some of this fiction may also be attributed to a recognition of the great value of archives. In our normal daily life, this value is not readily apparent. Archival records play a supporting role, part of the intellectual infrastructure of society. In the world of science fiction or fantasy, however, our normal life is turned upside down, permitting the real fundamental elements of society to loom larger. In these imaginary worlds, essential things like archives become sources of strength and points of conflict. Thus these fictional works recognize the centrality of archival records for the organization and conduct of human society. These works give archives a place of honor, and so it is little wonder that discussions of archives in fiction on the Archives list-serv tend to abound in references to these kinds of works.

In thinking about the appeal of reading about the archival image in fiction, it is worth remembering also that archivists are a literate profession. Therefore we are more likely to be drawn to reading about ourselves than most other professions. (The same point could obviously be made about librarians.) Academics are also great readers, and the academic novel is another genre that seems to proliferate each year, in part no doubt because of the number of fiction writers with academic appointments or who maintain close ties to colleges

and universities. Maybe if the great American archival novel is to be written, the one that will set the world straight about archivists and archival work, it will emerge from academia. There are a lot of college and university archivists out there. Are there any would-be novelists among them?

—Philip B. Eppard