

On Stephen King, and the “What” and “Why” of *American Archivist*

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The mix of articles in this issue cuts a broad swath through several topics current in our literature, and trying to decide how to bring it all together in an editor's column was giving me fits. An issue that moves from community archives to contingent workers, to promotion and tenure, to congressional collections, to access systems, to engagement—well, it's not easy for me to wrap my editorial head around, let alone for you to thread your way through as a reader. It's a great problem to have, but I needed to make sense of it. Terry Baxter's 2023 SAA Presidential Address, which describes radical empathy and love as transformational to our work, struck a chord with me. Baxter uses poetry, essay, and art to refocus our approach to archival practice. His concepts piqued my interest and inspired me as I worked with him through the editorial process.

And then, I finished reading Stephen King's *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. First of all, it's a great, no-nonsense book for anyone who wants to write—and not just for those who want to write horror fiction (though I know you're out there too)! I don't love horror as a genre, but I do have tremendous respect for Stephen King as a writer. I've read some of his essays and a terrific collection of his short stories, and I wanted to hear what he had to say about the craft of writing.

Now, why am I bothering you with my latest attempt at diminishing the size of my TBR pile? And how does this relate to Baxter's Presidential Address? I've been turning this over since reading both, and I believe we can take away a good measure for our journal. As Baxter asks us to consider the transformational power of love and community in our work, I take a page from Stephen King's words about writing. I believe that if we keep asking ourselves why we're interested in writing about archives and what it is we're interested in writing about, we come up with some very

good answers about what finds its way into our professional literature, and why we should read this literature in the first place.

On Writing surprised me, and I found myself thinking not only about writing and the archival literature writ large, but also about the editorial work that I and the Editorial Board do. I was galvanized, for example, when King wrote: “I have never hesitated to ask myself, either before starting the second draft of a book or while stuck for an idea in the first draft, just what it is I’m writing about, why I’m spending my time when I could be playing my guitar or riding my motorcycle, what got my nose down to the grindstone in the first place and then kept it there.”¹

Another statement that King makes plays directly into this question of why we give our time and effort over to writing: “In the end, [writing is] about enriching the lives of those who will read your work, and enriching your own life, as well. It’s about getting up, getting well, and getting over.”² This speaks directly to Baxter’s rallying cry for a transformation of our work. What is more, I don’t know a better description of what we do as a community of editors and authors. I have been writing about the idea of our literature as an expression of community for a couple of years now. King reminds me that in creating this literature, we enrich the lives of our readers—and enrich our profession at the same time.

Our literature, then, is framed by two questions: What are we writing about, and why are we writing it? Delving further, what draws us to give our voices to these topics—to do research studies, case studies, and project reports? What brought Sony Prosper to write his exceptional Pease Award Essay on community archives? Though it was (by definition) written during an educational program, what got his nose down to the grindstone on this particular topic? What does Natalie Bond want us to take away from her consideration of congressional papers? How is the research at the heart of Stephanie Bredbenner, Alison Fulmer, Rose Oliveira-Abbey, and Meghan Rinn’s article on contingent employment and Elizabeth Scott, Heidi Moyer, Rebecca Hankins, and Rachel Walton’s consideration of tenure for archivists poised to help us move the profession forward? The sheer breadth of the topics in this issue shows us that we are a curious bunch, and we’re not content with the status quo. So much the better. As Baxter’s address reminds us, you can’t transform a community by waiting for things to happen; you have to work at it, collectively and individually.

We’ll get back to this question of what we’re writing. . . In fact, the question of why we’re writing it might be easier to deal with. I would dare to say that King’s final observation is apt—that *American Archivist* authors write to enrich the lives of those of us who read their work, and to enrich their own lives as well. Again, this reflects community, as I’ve so frequently heard in my conversations with authors. Not content with the status quo, authors ask, “Would the journal be interested in an article about X, Y, or Z?” Yes, is my typical response. Individual interests and ideas are the sparks for enrichment.

And the content of the journal does just that—the community of authors in this issue (in all issues) of *American Archivist* enriches us. They provide new information, they make observations, they point out new ways of seeing, and they help us discover ways forward with problems. They create our theory and our practice, and present that to a community of archivists, scholars, students, and interested observers. The journal also enriches the lives of the authors. These articles represent months or even years of work—intensive research, study, and commitment that is personally and professionally satisfying. We write to move ourselves and the profession forward.

So, if we’re a community of colleagues enriching ourselves and others, what is it that we’re interested in writing about? This is where we start to really see the measure of archival literature. Looking at that “what” over time, we have a window into how archives behave in society, and how archivists step up to that challenge. I’m constantly asking authors to consider what has come before—go to the back issues of *American Archivist* and you’ll see that many of the topics that are on the top of our minds today are represented, in earlier (and different) iterations. We’ve moved from a conversation about how or why we create EAD finding aids, to observations about how EAD functions as a professional standard.³ Some searching through the back issues of the journal will reveal that we’ve been discussing employment issues for archivists since the 1940s. Congressional papers were mentioned as sources in the 1940s, and 1978 saw a serious consideration of such collections in several articles. In 1994’s special issue, *2020 Vision*, Margaret Hedstrom introduced a discussion of archival identity and trends at the turn of the century.⁴

This is not to say that we rehash the same topics over and over again—not by a long shot. Rather, as A. O. Scott recently opined in *The New York Times Book Review*, our literature is formed by—and benefits from—reimaginings and appropriations from authors past.⁵ Our “what” is our rear-view mirror, as well as our projector. Our (re)consideration of topics gives us a new take on our theory and practice. It is important—*imperative*—to explore those roots, to see where we have come from, because this understanding allows us not only to change, but to understand why change is critical. In the interest of change, we can’t ignore what’s past—it’s important to continue to engage with the full run of the archival literature in the first place. Understanding what it is we’re writing about allows us to form our community.

American Archivist is our professional canon, but it is one that *we* continue to change over time. Terry Baxter presents a radical re-vision of our professional responsibilities and relationships in his deep consideration of community archives, but even this is a change that has happened over time. We see aspects of “community archives” or “communal archives” in the journal as early as 1940. The context has changed, the vision has changed, and ultimately our imperative has changed. This has not been done by some outside force on the profession. We have brought

about that change—in both the literature and in our practice. And we have done that because of those of you who have written about community and archives—you who have decided that that topic is worth your time and energy. The same is true of all the topics in this journal.

This brings you three challenges:

- If you're writing for the journal, don't stop at considering the "why," but also consider the "what." Where are your thoughts rooted? Why does this matter?
- If you're reading the journal, don't just consider "what" you are trying to find. Think about "why" it's important that it's here in *American Archivist*.
- And finally, if you want to start writing, don't forget to ask yourself both "what" and "why." But perhaps, most importantly, ask yourself how your work enriches both you and your readers. What is it that is getting your nose down to the grindstone?

Our profession, like writing, is about getting up, getting well, and getting over. Step up to the plate, help make a difference, and move us forward—in love, in community, and in solidarity. Thanks to all of you who write, read, and engage with *American Archivist*.

NOTES

¹ Stephen King, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. Scribner: New York, 2000, 207.

² Ibid, 269.

³ A really interesting article, Jennifer G. Eidson and Christina J. Zamon, "EAD Twenty Years Later: A Retrospective of Adoption in the Early Twenty-first Century and the Future of EAD," *American Archivist* 82, no. 2 (2019) is worth reading if you'd like to think about how our profession has addressed this technology over time. This article is now five years old, written in 2019, <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc-82-02-02>.

⁴ Margaret Hedstrom, "Introduction to 2020 Vision," *American Archivist* 57, no. 1 (1994), <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.57.1.q943632227j54h74>.

⁵ A. O. Scott, "'James,' 'Demon Copperhead' and the Triumph of Literary Fan Fiction," *The New York Times Book Review*, April 22, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/22/books/review/james-percival-everett-demon-copperhead-barbara-kingsolver-dickens-twain.html>—take a minute to read it. It's an excellent essay!