

Challenges in the Field: Australian Society of Archivists conference

2004

Renewing the Profession

The final session of the ASA conference for 2004 aims to take a look at the future of our profession from a new, fresh perspective. Our profession encompasses a wide variety of people and places, faces a number of issues and challenges if it wishes to stay visible and relevant. How do we attract fresh ideas to help these challenges, while retaining the knowledge and expertise of our more experienced colleagues

“Building the Perfect Beast”: The Archivist in Popular Culture

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The public's perceptions of the professions is influenced by their depiction in the media. Television, in particular, is awash with medical and legal dramas that deal with both complex technical and ethical issues. As a consequence of this, theatrical vehicles such as “E.R” or “The Practice” elevate the occupational prestige of the doctor and the lawyer even more via the elemental power of storytelling. How is the archivist characterised in popular culture? Do librarians hog the spotlight? This talk will compare and contrast the archivist and librarian as portrayed in the illusory worlds of literature, film and television, with a special emphasis on speculative fiction (or SF). Jokes related to the professional activities of librarians or archivists will also be featured and commented on to determine the public profile of stock characters and situations from a satiric vein. Fictional stereotypes that have been advanced about the nature of the record keeper will be critically dissected in a fun manner. In addition, the use of the narrative form as a medium to persuasively reinforce the professional ethics of the archivist will be outlined.

What follows is a playful meander through issues far and wide pertaining to the archivist, designed to taunt, infuriate and, above all else, make you think. Archivists as a profession are, by implicit definition, a priesthood set apart – the custodians of human memory – yet the general public is for the most part blissfully unaware of this.

Why are some occupations deemed to be more prestigious than others? The social construction of professions is to some extent dictated by how they are represented in popular culture, primarily film and television. (In this paper, films when referenced will be described according to the following convention: Motion pictures will be designated by their title, director and release date, an example being *The Matrix Reloaded* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 2003). Credit details for films referenced in this paper have been confirmed using the Internet Movie Database at www.imdb.com.)

Since the inception of the medium, the content of television has been dominated by dramatic series offering heroic presentations of medical, legal and law-enforcement professionals. American productions such as the *Law and Order* and *CSI* franchises, for example, coupled with television shows like the medical drama *ER*, are ratings powerhouses in viewing markets the world over and thus nurture an inherent global climate as to which occupations are deserving of respect in this day and age: “*Doctors, lawyers and police are cool*” is the understated message in the product on display.

A curious observation is that none of the aforementioned TV programmes skimp on technical detail at an occupational level in plot exposition yet they still retain an air of glamour. Where is the television show that features an archivist – or any knowledge worker, for that matter – in a leading role with dignity and not simply a subservient oddity relegated to the margins? Since Michael Crichton – an ex-physician – is the co-creator of *ER*, this should spur on any archivist who is also a closet scriptwriter to pitch to the networks an analogous, detail-rich television series based on stories from the record-keeping trenches.

Why are public institutions often exalted as prestigious shrines? The National Archives building in Washington, D.C. is a popular tourist attraction, primarily because it exhibits the original “Declaration of Independence” document, elaborately housed and preserved for posterity. Yet how many visitors would contemplate the work of the archivist in developing and maintaining this memorial? Indeed, the motion picture *National Treasure* (Jon Turteltaub, 2004) – a thriller featuring a plot to steal the original Declaration parchment – includes the pivotal character of a female

archivist with supermodel looks and a PhD, varyingly described in supporting publicity as a “*researcher*”, a “*curator*” and “*the hottest conservator the National Archives has ever seen.*”

What is the public perception of the archivist as a professional? Schmuland (1999) addressed this through an analysis of how archivists were portrayed as fictional characters in 128 novels. The profile of the archetypical professional derived from this survey was that of a humourless individual prone to wearing spectacles, dressed in the extreme of either a sloppy or a prim manner with little or no social life due to a combination of their introverted personality and secluded work environment.

In terms of the alleged dour temperament of the archivist, there may be some additional anecdotal evidence to support this conjecture: A random trawl of the internet in search of jokes about archivists would probably result in next to nothing, but this would not be the case for gags about lawyers, say. The public salience of an occupation would appear to be directly proportional to the number of funny stories that the activity can elicit. To paraphrase the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, it may very well be a case of that which we cannot laugh about we must pass over in silence.

The archivist of fiction was often depicted as a gatekeeper of knowledge whose role at times afforded them a false sense of superiority. Painted as creatures of the mind, they are seen as thinkers not doers. The archivist’s devotion to duty has a tendency to be misconstrued as almost obsessive-compulsive in nature. This can be either a bad quirk to foster, especially if such behaviour is perceived as an abnormality, or it could be a public relations coup in disguise: The U.S. television series *Monk* features an obsessive-compulsive detective who uses his supposed “malady” to enhance his natural prowess as a sleuth.

In their popular culture appearances, librarians and archivists were at times deemed to be interchangeable, or one in the same class, in terms of functionality, probably due to a lack of clarity in job specification awareness. Martha Cooley’s novel, “*The Archivist*”, first published in 1998, featured two clichéd yet contradictory images on the cover of two of its editions: A stack of books adorned one, while another highlighted a pair of glasses and some file-cards. Due to such accoutrements on

display, those who judge a book by its cover would surely wonder if it shouldn't have been retitled "*The Librarian*."

In fleshing out the archivist in the worlds of fiction, film and television has either reinforced the stereotype of a fringe custodian of knowledge or gone the route of painting a completely repulsive portrait. In the latter case, the vampire motion picture *Blade* (Stephen Norrington, 1998) featured a grotesquely obese archivist named "Pearl", androgynous in appearance, perpetually naked and literally shackled to a curatorial role. In *Time enough at last* (John Brahm, 1959), an episode of the television series *The Twilight Zone*, a librarian-cum-archivist is depicted in a slightly less freakish manner, but is still burdened with "Coke-bottle" glasses and an obsession with reading.

The archivist as an intransigent bureaucrat lording over a municipal hall of records is featured as a sideline, almost comedy-relief player in *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974). A far more flattering portrayal of the archivist is that of "Giles", the truly heroic librarian-cum-archivist from the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* television series (1997-2002), but he still wears spectacles and has a penchant for academic-style tweed jackets.

Eccentricity reigns supreme among archivists in the realm of science-fiction cinema: In *Rollerball* (Norman Jewison, 1975) an absent-minded librarian/archivist is in charge of a great central computer based in Switzerland that supposedly stores all the information in the world. The archivist, played by Ralph Richardson, is blandly unconcerned though when it is brought to his attention that all the records of the 13th century are irretrievably lost! In the futuristic thriller *Soylent Green* (Richard Fleischer, 1973), actor Edward G. Robinson is a "police book", namely a human archive of information in a narrow domain.

Fastidious record-keepers in a totalitarian regime of the future abound in the film *Brazil* (Terry Gilliam, 1985), a dystopian satire interleaved with surreal images of angelic figures weaving their way through vast panoramas of filing cabinets. The anonymous labours of the archivist are alluded to in the Kafkaesque epilogue to *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Steven Spielberg, 1981) featuring a wide shot of a secret U.S.

government warehouse containing a near infinite array of mysterious boxes, the contents of one being the biblical “Ark of the Covenant.”

The archival moment at the tail end of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* reminds one that contemporary existence has entailed for many a default membership of the “self-storage” society. Shortage of space due to a preponderance of apartment dwellers and a shift to nomadic life-styles for many workers has seen a remarkable growth in recent times of storehouse facilities for the individual. Perhaps we are in the grip of a hoarding epidemic if the burgeoning number of books aimed at offering advice on how to lead an uncluttered life is any sign.

Rather than shedding excess chattels, a “pack-rat” mentality kicks in for some and the search for places to stockpile personal goods begins. But how does the average citizen learn to efficiently file, rather than chaotically pile? This is the new client base that the modern archivist should cater for and in doing so highlight the modern relevance of their profession: Archivists should act as consultants to consumers of self-storage to advise on the difference between an accumulation and a collection.

Every one may have personal “stuff” but a collection has structure and, very often, a value-laden reason for being, whereas an accumulation is usually debris with little deep significance except for the nagging feeling that it could some day be of use.

The canny archivist seeking greater prestige could teach the willing masses how to develop personal knowledge structures for the categorisation of their possessions.

The opportunity exists for the emergence of a cult following in this area akin to the accorded to other current lifestyle advisors.

Collecting is a shared behavioural trait that has emerged in our consumer society (Belk, 2001). Being an exponent of an organised hobby that deals with the classification and maintenance of artefacts that are either consequential or ephemeral in nature, is a collector in fact an amateur archivist? The profession should recognise the similarity and offer public short-courses on archival techniques to communities of collectors with the aim of honing skills needed in particular leisure pursuits. For example, grading, storage and restoration are practices fundamental to comic book

collecting that could form the basis of a dedicated syllabus crafted and delivered by a trained archivist.

A popular, presently evolving hobby in the U.S.A. is scrapbooking, the practice of creating a systematic volume of personal memories assembled from letters, photos, newspaper articles and the like. The Hobby Industry Association estimated in 2003 that this \$2.5 billion (U.S.) market sector would grow 40 to 80 percent between 2003 and 2008. Apart from the hundreds of other such “how-to” books available, the fact that “*Scrapbooking for Dummies*” has been newly published (in September, 2004) is a clear indicator of the hobby’s prominence in the community. But where are the archivists offering well-informed short-courses on the topic or writing self-help books on scrapbooking from their own learned perspective?

How we define or categorise a profession is a language game that we all must become fluent in. For in language itself there is much that is the very foundation of the archivist as a professional. As the writer Ralph Waldo Emerson stated, “*Language is the archives of history.*”

References

Belk, R. W. (2001) *Collecting in a consumer society*. London : Routledge.

Schmuland, A. (1999) “The Archival Image in Fiction: An Analysis and Annotated Bibliography.” *The American Archivist*. 62: 24-73.