Romance Writers' Use of Archives

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Article begins on next page
Romance Writers’ Use of Archives

Caryn Radick*
**Introduction**

In 2011, discussion on the Society of American Archivists (SAA) Archives & Archivists listserv briefly turned to a Harlequin romance, *Protected by the Prince*, by Annie West.¹ The novel featured an archivist heroine named Tamsin who meets the hero (a prince!) through the course of her work at the royal archives housed in his castle in a country called Ruvingia. The conversation about her story, however, was somewhat overshadowed by a phrase from the back of the book which described Prince Alaric as drawn to Tamsin’s “burgeoning purity.”² However, it led to further exchanges about romance novels that portray archives and archivists. Soon after, an archival web comic depicted the plot of *Protected by the Prince* using photos of cats (“LOLcats”) and an archives blog held a contest asking archivists how they would respond to the situations presented in the book.³ In terms of archival dialogue, the topic of romance novels was

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¹ The discussion appears under the subject “Harlequin’s Archivist Heroine,” Archives and Archivists mailing list, 22 and 23 February 2011, [http://forums.archivists.org/read/?forum=archives](http://forums.archivists.org/read/?forum=archives) (accessed on 2 June 2015); Annie West, *Protected by the Prince*, (New York, 2010). [Also published as *Passion, Purity and the Prince.*]


a diversion.

Having read, enjoyed, and learned about history from popular romance novels, I was intrigued by the reaction and discussion surrounding Protected by the Prince. I have also attended several romance writer meetings as the guest of a romance writer and thought that the writers show an attention to detail that reminded me of librarian and archivist colleagues. Although the conversation about Protected by the Prince suggested that popular romance is seen as set apart from archives, some romance novels discuss and depict historical events. Thinking about this led to larger questions. Are there intersections between archives and romance novels beyond portrayals? How do historical romance writers do research? Do romance writers use archives for their work? If so, what do they think of them?

Another aspect of romance that made these questions more intriguing is the “disparagement” factor. Popular romance is often labeled “trash” due to its subject matter and treatment of sexuality; its readers have been dismissed as uneducated, sad, and lonely. Members of the romance community point out that people feel comfortable criticizing romance novels even when they have never read one. Both writers and readers dislike feeling they have to justify their choice of genre and are quick to defend romance and dispute the labels and assumptions that come with it.4


4 Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan’s Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches Guide to Romance Novels (New York, 2009), gives a comprehensive overview of the romance genre and community. Wendell also maintains the Smart Bitches, Trashy Books blog. Other works about popular romance include Jayne Ann Krentz, ed. Dangerous Men & Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of the Romance, (Philadelphia, 1992), Pamela Regis,
Although popular romance has traditionally been overlooked and disdained, in the last decade it has become the focus of academic conferences and programs, and a scholarly journal. In February 2015 the Library of Congress Center for the Book hosted the “What is Love? Romance Fiction in the Digital Age” symposium and was a project partner in the Popular Romance Project, which sought to examine issues and questions in popular romance. The Project itself was the target of an unsuccessful defunding bill in US Congress, which attempted to bar one of its funders, the National Endowment for the Humanities, from funding it or “any similar project relating to love or romance.”

*A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, (Philadelphia, 2003), and The Journal of Popular Romance Studies described in note 5.


6 More information about the Popular Romance Project is available at [http://popularromanceproject.org/](http://popularromanceproject.org/) (accessed on 6 May 2015). The Library of Congress Center for the Book was a project partner, as was the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media (George Mason University).

Popular romance is controversial and its writers and readers have often felt marginalized and dismissed. Just as scholars have begun to examine popular romance more critically, this article presents an opportunity for archivists to do the same and consider whether we see archives and romance as separate and if so, is it because the former is perceived as “serious” where the latter is seen as “frivolous.” Along with demonstrating that popular romance writers do use archives for their work, this article will show—in the writers’ own words—that they both appreciate using archives and have a keen grasp on how their needs are and are not being met. It will also consider how romance writers offer a perspective on a little-studied group in the archival literature—the “nontraditional” user.

Specifically, this article will address how attitudes about popular romance have been reflected in the library world and will bring the discussion of popular romance into archival territory. After reviewing the treatment of popular romance, writers, and nontraditional users in library and archival literature, it will discuss results of a survey undertaken to learn about romance writers’ use of archives. It will address their responses regarding library and archives use and will include perspectives of librarians and archivists who also write romance. Finally, it will consider the benefits of taking romance writers’ use of archives seriously and will suggest further directions for outreach and research.

What is Romance?

According to the Romance Writers of America (RWA), a romance has two components: a central love story and an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending known in romance circles

as the Happily Ever After or HEA.\(^8\) Popular romance has traditionally depicted heterosexual couples, but, in recent years writers and publishers of LGBTQ romance have also entered the market.\(^9\) Romances are generally classified as series or category—Harlequin romances, for example—or single title, such as a longer historical romance, and are commonly published in paper and eBook versions, many of which are self-published. Romance subgenres reflect readers’ and writers’ tastes and interests and include historical, contemporary, paranormal, and more. Erotica also hit the mainstream with the success of E. L. James’s *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011). According to RWA, in 2013 romance sales earned 1.08 billion dollars.\(^{10}\) It is the second bestselling genre in the United States.\(^{11}\) Finally, romance writers are almost all female and most do not earn a living writing romance.\(^{12}\)

\(^8\) Romance Writers of America, “The Romance Genre,” *Romance Writers of America*, https://www.rwa.org/p/cm/ld/fid=578 (accessed on 1 May 2015),


Literature Review

Library Literature

Traditionally, literature about popular romance within the larger library community has focused on public libraries’ inclusion of such works in their collections and has spoken of the “trash” factor. Earlier writing often discusses the inner conflict a librarian might experience in providing romance novels to patrons. One example from 1980, Rudolf Bold’s condescending “Trash in the Library” suggests that librarians set aside their distaste and give the people (pathetic women, in his view) what they want.13 Librarians later acknowledged the role their colleagues’ judgments played in keeping popular romance out of library collections. Mary K. Chelton made the case for offering romance novels in public libraries, telling librarians to “ditch your stereotypes.”14 Mosley, Charles, and, Havir’s 1995 article on librarians as barriers to romance readers carries an indictment in its title, “The Librarian as Effete Snob: Why Romance?” and in its first line, “What books do the guardians of First Amendment rights pretend don’t exist?”15 It implores librarians to become more familiar with the genre.

Although much had changed in the decades since Bold’s declarations, Cathie Linz—a librarian and romance writer—and John Charles’ 2005 article “Romancing Your Readers: How

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Public Libraries Can Become More Romance-Reader Friendly” includes their laments on librarian judgments and recommendations for how they can become better acquainted with the genre.16 Between 2006 and 2010, Adkins, Esser, Velasquez, and Hill examined public libraries’ collection development of romance, librarians’ attitudes towards it, and how libraries promote romance novels. Their findings indicate that romance has come to be more valued—or at least less overtly judged by librarians—and that most libraries work to provide romance novels for their patrons.17

Following the trend of popular romance scholarship, academic libraries have begun including popular romance in their collections. Alison Scott surveyed holdings of romance novels in

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academic libraries, identifying it as a collecting area need in 1997. More recently, Crystal Goldman addressed collecting romance scholarship in academic libraries, advocating for libraries to work with the International Association of Popular Romance Studies to determine which works should be in collections and suggesting a consortial approach to collecting. Sarah Sheehan and Jennifer Stevens discuss their rationale and experience building a circulating collection of popular romance at George Mason University in order to ensure its availability for study. They advocate for collecting the works themselves, along with scholarship about popular romance.

Archival Literature on Fiction and Writers

Reflecting the Protected by the Prince discussion, archival writing about popular romance has addressed portrayals of archives and archivists. Arlene Schmuland’s “The Archival Image in Fiction: An Analysis and Annotated Biography” includes six romance novels in its list of 128 works featuring archives or archivists. Schmuland notes that author Jayne Anne Krentz includes references to primary source research in her romances and that she writes under two other names,

Jayne Castle and Amanda Quick. Although she lists these identities, Schmuland does not mention that Krentz as Castle is the author of another romance on the list nor that she was a librarian before becoming a full-time writer.\textsuperscript{20} Schmuland later discussed depictions of sexual acts in archives (not always from romance novels) at a session of SAA’s annual meeting in 2009.\textsuperscript{21}

Moving out of the romance genre, discussions involving intersections of fiction, writers, and archives have taken place in archival literature. Some have investigated issues relating to authors’ papers.\textsuperscript{22} A recent examination by Devin Becker and Collier Nogues investigates digital archiving practices of 110 writers, but categorizes genre as non-fiction, fiction, poetry, and drama and does not include further breakdowns of fiction categories.\textsuperscript{23} Another article examines


Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* through an archival lens and suggests that discussions of such perspectives on fiction could enhance archival outreach.  

More in parallel with the topic of archives and popular fiction is the *Eaton Journal of Archival Research in Science Fiction*, a peer reviewed journal that brings together scholarship on science fiction and archives. Popular romance as a collecting area has not been discussed within archival literature, although there are several such collections at academic institutions.

**Archival User Studies**

An examination of romance writers as researchers adds to the body of literature on archival use and user studies. These discussions have generally focused on “traditional” users; academics, historians, educators, and students. Hea Lim Rhee, looking at over thirty years’ worth of archival user studies contends that historians are “almost exclusively” the focus of user group studies and suggests that archivists pay attention to the appearance of new types of users. Although “nontraditional” users have participated in studies, they are often a smaller subset of the overall

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24 Caryn Radick, “‘Complete and in Order’: Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* and the Archival Profession,” *American Archivist* 76, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2013), 502–520.

25 *The Eaton Journal of Archival Research in Science Fiction* is run by the University of California Riverside and affiliated with the Eaton Collection of Science Fiction, Fantasy, Horror, and Utopian Studies, held by Riverside’s Special Collection and University Archives. For their mission statement, see [http://eatonjournal.ucr.edu/mission.html](http://eatonjournal.ucr.edu/mission.html) (accessed on 5 June 2015).

26 The Romance Writers of America collection is held at Bowling Green University in Ohio, which holds romance authors’ papers as well. For a list of libraries with popular romance collections see [http://www.romancewiki.com/Romance_Resources_for_Academics](http://www.romancewiki.com/Romance_Resources_for_Academics), (accessed on 8 June 2015).

sample. One difference for the romance writer study, however, is that it first sought to determine whether members of a group used archives at all and thus also includes non-users.

In 1984, Elsie Freeman noted that archivists had poor, even adversarial, relationships with genealogists and other “avocationists,” and that archivists’ treatment of users revealed a disdain for what they considered more frivolous pursuits. “That one can do research for fun seems not to fall within our categories of acceptable use; thus we distinguish between the serious researcher and all the others.” She also states, “Similarly, we tend to be cool to the user who is not professionally trained to do research. This category probably includes most of our clientele.” 28

Admittedly, Freeman was writing before the Internet opened even more doors for researchers of all backgrounds. This may mean that archivists are accustomed to different types of patron, but not that they receive better treatment.

In 1991 Michael Widener discussed different types of users, noting that archivists lagged in their examinations of nontraditional users. He categorized users as academic, practical, and non-specialist, noting “To this basic scheme one could also add artists who use archives as a source for ideas and inspiration…” 29 Romance writers who—as this article will show—use archives both for fact-finding and inspiration, fit these non-specialist (“the lowest class, in the eyes of many archivists” 30) and artist categories. In 1991 Ian Wilson discussed how more general users,

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28 Elsie Freeman, “In the Eye of the Beholder: Archives Administration from the User’s Point of View,” *American Archivist* 47, no. 2 (Spring 1984), p. 113. Although genealogists remain a unique constituency, I think that they have become more “traditional” in archival settings since Freeman’s writing due in part to the Internet making genealogy easier and better known.


30 Ibid., p. 8.
including writers, were coming into the archives and outlined some of the barriers to archives use such as restricted hours, ability to travel, and difficulty accessing information.\(^{31}\)

Elizabeth Yakel directly engaged different user types, including four “avocational” users, in “Listening to Users.”\(^{32}\) The article opens with a quote from a flustered avocational user, who felt that the archivist was not helpful because he or she was not a serious researcher. Other subjects in this study express both frustration at being unable to get the help they needed and a kind of awe at working with original materials, both sentiments echoed by the romance writers. Yakel states that archivists bear responsibility to establish common ground with users and need to think further on how to educate and interact with them. In Yakel and Torres’s “Archival Intelligence,” three of the twenty-eight users interviewed were avocational. Some of the romance writers’ comments bear similarities to their subjects’ observations, such as how the rules of archives affect their work and issues in searching and knowing if they are looking in all the right places.\(^{33}\) Neither of these articles, however, identify their interviewees by category of user when quoting them, making it difficult to see which statements were made by avocational users.\(^{34}\) More recently, Duff, Yakel, and Torres’s “Archival Reference Knowledge,” focused on the role reference archivists’ play in researcher discovery. This study includes seven “general researchers,” in its sample of twenty-eight government archives users interviewed to determine

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\(^{34}\) There is enough context given in the article to suggest the opening quote referred to earlier in this paragraph is from an avocational user.
the factors that lead to more successful experiences for users. These articles point out that the archivist bears responsibility for ensuring that the user understands how to use the archives and discuss the issues that impact understanding.

In looking at romance writers as archives users, this article addresses several gaps in the literature. It provides a perspective of romance writers as archives users, rather than a library-focused view of romance readers. It also focuses on nontraditional users—albeit ones with a common purpose—where previous studies included nontraditional users as a smaller subset of a larger group made up of more traditional users. Consequently, this study provides further information about what nontraditional users find helpful or frustrating along with providing insight into romance writers’ use of archives. It also adds to the discussion of nontraditional users by considering how archivists’ perceptions of serious versus frivolous for both topics and researchers may affect our interactions with users. Finally, this article considers a different view of the relationship between archivists and authors where the latter are users rather than donors or collection creators.

Methodology

This study was reviewed and approved by the Rutgers University Institutional Review Board and carried out via a Qualtrics web survey. The survey call was circulated with assistance from the Romance Writers of America. It offered twelve multiple choice and open response questions,

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36 I contacted the Romance Writers of America, asking permission to access the writers’ loop (listserv) to circulate an e-mail about the survey. Instead, they ran the e-mail in their biweekly “eNotes” electronic newsletter several times between September and December 2014. With RWA’s permission, I also contacted some RWA chapters
some of which only displayed based on a previous response. Writers were asked how long they had been writing, how many stories they had written, and in what subgenres. The survey provided SAA’s definitions for differences between libraries and archives and asked which they used in their research and whether in person or online. The survey asked how helpful they found these resources, what types of archival institutions they had used, and for comments on their experiences using libraries and archives. Respondents were asked if they had attended a graduate-level library or archives program or had worked in libraries or archives and in what capacity (full time, part time, or as a student or volunteer). Those who indicated library or archives education or work experience were asked if they felt this had influenced their romance writing in any way and if they saw any commonalities between their writing and their training or work. There was space for respondents to describe their general research process and additional comments. 218 respondents started the survey of which 200 provided usable data (although not all respondents answered every question). For this paper, I focused on data from questions 4 through 12, as I found they more directly addressed my questions about research process, how and why writers use archives for their research, and their attitudes about research (see Appendix I for the survey instrument).

I reviewed the survey using QSR NVIVO data analysis software. I coded responses to categorize them by type and formed queries such as how many archives users had attended which circulated the call as well. As I did not have access to the individual e-mail addresses and wished to keep the survey anonymous, the survey was accessible via a link.

37 The final total was 218, but a number dropped out after consenting or did not go beyond the first questions. RWA has approximately 10,000 members, but this also includes librarians and booksellers, publishing industry workers, and people who have not yet written a romance. See https://www.rwa.org/p/cm/ld/fid=504 (accessed 4 November 2015)
graduate-level library or archives programs. The data is a mix of quantitative and qualitative and, given its volume, bears further exploration.

As the survey’s intention was to learn more about romance writers’ use of archives, this article will focus on those responses. It also provides information about library use as libraries are closely allied and associated with archives in the United States even though these institutions have different missions—understanding what users like and dislike about libraries may provide insight into their thoughts about archives along with points of comparison. Respondents were asked about library and archives training and experience in order to distinguish “insider” responses and also as a determiner for receiving the question about commonalities. The degree of experience was also qualified by the type of work (for example, professional librarian or archivist versus student worker or volunteer), but anyone who answered affirmatively to the question was asked the follow-up question. Such respondents will have a double dagger (‡) after any quotes from their responses. Some respondents indicated receiving training in library and archives use while studying another discipline. This was not counted as experience, but rather represents the diversity of backgrounds found in nontraditional users.

The survey was anonymous although authors were given the option to provide an e-mail address for follow up and assured of confidentiality in exchange. Respondents were not asked to identify a gender, but as most romance writers are women, they will be referred to as “she” in this article.

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38 As further questions would have required Institutional Review Board review, I followed up to thank the authors who had provided addresses and to answer any questions they had asked on the survey.
Findings

Responses indicated that romance writers have used archives when researching their books, but that a larger percent have used libraries. Although comments about archives use were generally positive, respondents also recounted negative experiences or problems—difficulty in finding information, not knowing how and where to get started, and a desire for more material to be available online. Several respondents indicated they felt romance was an overlooked genre, but only one indicated she felt judged while doing research.

Respondents’ initial descriptions of their research revealed several trends; using Google, Wikipedia, and YouTube; building a personal reference library; finding people who could give information; and doing more specialized research (examples included bondage domination/discipline sadomasochism [BDSM] clubs and clan historians). Five mentioned Google Books, two listed the Internet Archive and one indicated she uses HathiTrust.

Respondents mentioned libraries and librarians almost five times more than archives and archivists. Several indicated they use different resources depending on the subgenre they are writing in (most respondents write in more than one).

Seventy respondents said they had worked at a library or archives in some capacity. These included 14 respondents who had received a library or archives master’s degree. Not all of the full-time library workers had degrees and not all degree holders had gone on to full-time work in the field.

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39 Libraries and librarians appeared in 54 responses to the general research process question, archives and archivists were mentioned in 12. In both cases, several references did not refer to libraries or archives as places, but to personal collections.

40 10 were classified as volunteers, 30 as students, 11 as part-time, and 19 as full-time.
**Library and Archives Use**

Writers were asked to indicate if they used libraries, archives, or neither, when doing research. Their responses showed that a higher percentage use libraries and/or archives for their research than not. Although 42% of respondents use archives for research, fully 75% use libraries (see Tables 1a and 1b).

**Table 1a. Library and Archives Use by Respondents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>With Library/Archives Experience*</th>
<th>No Library/Archives Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number of Respondents</td>
<td>Percentage of Total Number of Respondents</td>
<td>Number of Respondents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only Use Libraries</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only Use Archives</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use Both Libraries and Archives</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use Neither Libraries nor Archives</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Respondents who indicated they had attended a graduate-level library or archives program or had worked in libraries or archives were counted as experienced.

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41 Five people who answered the use question did not answer the experience question; the numbers for Tables 1a and 1b are adjusted to reflect that.
Table 1b. Total Library and Archives Use by Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Overall (n=200)</th>
<th>With Library/Archives Experience</th>
<th>No Library/Archives Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number of Respondents</td>
<td>Percentage of Total Number of Respondents (n=70)</td>
<td>Percentage of Total Number of Respondents (n=125)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Library Use</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>74.5%</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Archives Use</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respondents with library and archives training or work experience were more often library and archives users, suggesting a higher comfort level with undertaking such research. As discussed later in this article, several such respondents stated that they believed their experiences helped them better understand the resources.

Respondents who used archives indicated they were more likely to use a public library’s local history room, a historical society, or college or university archives than corporate or religious archives. This may simply reflect the accessibility (both in distance and availability) of such archives as libraries, historical societies, and colleges are more likely to be open to the public than religious or corporate archives.
Table 2. Types of Archives Used

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution Type</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
<th>Percentage of Total Number of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public library (local history room)</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical society</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College or university based</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious institution</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other*</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Responses included museums, ancestry.com, organizational archives

Subgenres

The survey asked which subgenres respondents write in: contemporary, erotic, historical, inspirational, paranormal, romantic suspense, young adult, or other. The responses indicate that most write in more than one subgenre; consequently it is a limitation that the survey did not ask whether they used archives for specific subgenres. The expectation would be that historical romance writers rely on archives, but not all 84 respondents who use archives write historicals. This suggests that writers use them for other subgenres as well, but more investigation is needed.

Table 3: Archives Users and Subgenres

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subgenre</th>
<th>Number of Archives Users</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Writing in Subgenre n=84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemporary</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paranormal</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romantic Suspense</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erotic</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspirational</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other*</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young Adult</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Other genres supplied by respondents included new adult, gay romance, and cross-genres such as historical paranormal.

Helpfulness

Respondents who used libraries or archives in their research mostly reported finding libraries and archives very helpful or somewhat helpful (see Table 4). In both cases, two respondents indicated “not helpful.” Only one of the respondents who found archives not helpful expanded further, saying “Finding information to piece together failed for me. I need more guidance getting started.” This and further comments discussed below, suggest that archivists are still not working to finding the common ground Yakel wrote of in "Listening to Users."
Table 4. Helpfulness of Libraries and Archives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Libraries</th>
<th>Archives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number of Respondents</td>
<td>Percentage of Total Number of Respondents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Very Helpful</strong></td>
<td>86 58%</td>
<td>52 62.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Somewhat Helpful</strong></td>
<td>60 40.5%</td>
<td>29 35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Not Helpful</strong></td>
<td>2 1%</td>
<td>2 2.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Among those indicating they found libraries and archives helpful, responses contained both positive and negative feedback. For libraries, comments indicated a general love of libraries and librarians with statements such as “librarians rock!” and “a good librarian is worth his/her weight in gold.”‡

More negative observations about libraries include lack of resources, waiting times for resources, and books being “out of date” or limited in some way.

I’ve found very few things in our public libraries that are helpful. Our public libraries are not adequately funded, and this is reflected in their collections. The university library is quite good, but more difficult to access because of parking issues. For that reason, I buy as much of my research material as possible.‡

One respondent expressed frustration with library staff, saying that the degreed librarians at her library (“gems”) were “replaced with mommies who needed part time jobs and had none of the knowledge of how to use the databases, etc.”

Just as issues like adequate parking impact ability or desire to visit a library, several
respondents indicated that disabilities or finances prevented them from making research trips. Many build their own personal reference collections by purchasing books.

**Responses about Archives**

Turning to archives, respondents did not speak of archivists in as glowing terms as they did librarians. In fact, there are fewer mentions of “archivists” than of “staff” or “employees.” This is similar to an issue Yakel noted in “Listening to Users”—interviewees almost always referred to reference archivists as “reference librarians,” 43 The more generic designations in this study suggests a lack of awareness that archivists do public-facing reference.

Although the users found the archives helpful, they were aware of the limitations of archives use, thrilled when they found a helpful resource, and wished more material could be available online. Some of the more positive responses about archives conveyed a sense of awe at being able to work with old and unique documents, with statements such as, “seeing the actual text is amazing.” Respondents also expressed appreciation for the information that comes from primary sources:

> It is one of my favorite places in the world. As I [sic] writer I can discern more about a situation, a person or a place from reading (for example) an unpublished diary of a young girl growing up in the late 1800's, than from reading an historical account on line.‡

> I've used the [archives] extensively, both online and in person. … I find it seriously cool that I get to touch 18th century documents, but also a little weird and trusting.

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I have used our local historical society archives when writing western historical romances.... They have so much great stuff... old newspapers, old letters or odds and ends that talk about what life was like here in territorial days. It can give a glimpse into everyday life that you can't get from other sources....‡

A primary reason I use archives is because they, more often than not, and more likely than any other source, allow me to familiarize myself with material that is "from the source," if you will. Such as letters, periodicals, and other materials that are time, place, organization specific that provide details and a depth of research opportunities that don't exist in "reportage" sorts of materials. Biographies are great, but always must be viewed through the lens of the author's opinions, what they may have misinterpreted, etc. Letters and journals are immediate and carry the authenticity of time, place, etc. While there may be much that cannot be used, because of my interest in research, I never mind having to sift through more, to find the nuggets of research goodness I am seeking.‡

These responses reflect Yakel’s findings that no matter what the level of expertise of the researchers, the awe and an abiding appreciation for the record were apparent.44 They also suggest that those users familiar with using archives understand the value of primary sources both for their intrinsic worth and for how they help the user in their work. These respondents feel they need this direct engagement with the past in order to bring the details of the stories they wish to tell to life and appreciate having the opportunity to do so.

Respondents also spoke about finding inspiration in using archives for their work, an aspect Widener had discussed in his article:

44 Yakel, “Listening to Users,”122
It can be a fun part of the writing process when I find something that inspires me.

Even when they're not helpful for my specific project, archives almost always present ideas, new avenues to look at, details to enrich my writing, questions to spark a plot or solve a mystery…

Another respondent specifically addressed how archivists are helpful:

I have often worked with archivists from a variety of locations. I find them quite interesting and willing to aid me in finding details related to my topic. I'm particularly amazed at their ability to pull up information on local laws pertaining to the time period.

Respondents also reported negative experiences using archives, such as problems caused by an archives' rules.

I can understand the need for security, but I was not even allowed to bring in a jacket or sweater at the [name] historical archives and I froze to death. I kept having to get up and leave the room in order to warm up. I caught a cold. The employees were very helpful and I found what I was looking for, but it would have been a better experience if the room temperature had matched the security measures.

In “Archival Intelligence” Yakel and Torres note that archives’ rules, mostly regarding retrieval of resources are disruptive to users’ patterns for research, but the “freezing” respondent points to the issue of how reading room practices and policies can impact ability to work and make a visitor feel "unwelcome." This also demonstrates the importance of archives making their rules easy to find, although without knowing if this patron had the opportunity to familiarize herself with that institution’s policies, it is not possible to determine if she might have been able
to prepare herself better for the cold.

As seen in previous user studies, negative perceptions of archives often arose from issues with finding resources,

Despite the awesome amount of information out there, it often seems like I end up hitting the same sites a few times while researching the same kinds of questions. You can't really get enough resources online. There are always more questions.

Everyone TRIES to help..... but the online finding aids are usually pretty inadequate, so I have a tough time framing my question or even knowing if I am in the right archive for what I need.‡

Both respondents indicate the problems with online resources—they do not give enough information to answer their questions and there is no assistance to push them in the right direction. Although it is unclear whether the last respondent goes to archives in person after using online finding aids, she indicates that when she asks for help, she still faces difficulty. These responses suggest that issues that were barriers for Yakel's "Listening" users remain more than fifteen years later.

Another respondent indicated she was not willing to use archives for romance writing due to a bad experience as an independent scholar. “It came to the point where I'd rather give up the fantastic details I might've found in a special book or resource because of the time and process involved, and just go with what I could find on my own. Less time and aggravation.” This remark directly mirrors Yakel’s statements about how encountering difficulties may cause users to form negative associations. “A bad experience with primary sources—either inside or outside
a formal archives or special collections—can frustrate users and make their experience using primary sources unpleasant.”\(^4^5\) Again, although the archival emphasis on preserving materials means that users accustomed to libraries may find archives more complicated to use, archivists need to consider how to prepare users for this.

One comment sums up a number of issues about using archives as a romance writer and says that archivists are not focused on meeting users’ needs. The respondent also implies that she had encountered judgment about her work.

Archivists often don't understand how to help you find what you need and are often wrapped up in the technical aspects of maintaining the archive rather than helping expose that info to a wider audience. Then, there is a distinct bias against romance as well. The idea of the use of their material for one of "those tawdry romances” often offends their academic snobbery to the max unfortunately. They seem to forget that they [sic] glory of history is in understanding people from the past, not just events, and any medium that allows people to enjoy various aspects of history is valid—not just academic uses of that information which no one will ever read. There are Archives I wouldn't ever have had access to if I didn't pull my History credentials......and that is a real shame.

Clearly the respondent did not feel valued as a nontraditional patron and suggests she receives more welcoming treatment when presenting herself as a historian. Her points about wider audiences and the validity of popular romance as a vehicle to talk about history speak to one of

the core values of archivists—that archives be accessible to all types of users. However, her actual experience suggests that such users will be treated less well, which may lead them to form negative associations and turn away from use of archives. She bears out Freeman’s statements that archivists may have a “not worthy” attitude toward anyone using archives for “frivolous” reasons. This respondent suggests that archivists need to broaden their views—that it is a professional failure that they cannot recognize how romance writers’ work can bring an appreciation for history to a wider audience than more "academic" treatments. Her remark about archivists valuing technology over reaching users echoes a concern Freeman expressed that archivists’ “romance with information technologies...has hazards enough. It is already clear that we are well on the way to creating electronic systems that do not supply what users want or, far more important, what they will actually use.” Both Freeman’s statement and the respondent’s observation speak to the concern about whether the technologies archivists use actually help us reach people or draw too much of our attention and resources. Complicating this issue further is that as comments in the next section will show, users want archivists to use technology to make more material available online. But, the responses in this section suggest that while archivists and archives can be recognized as helpful, the issues that previous studies brought to light still exist. There is still the need for archivists to provide better user education—both in the "rules" of archives and for locating materials—and more care to personal interactions.

46 See the Society of American Archivists Core Values for Archivists, particularly Access and Use and Service. Available at http://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics (accessed on 29 May 2015). The Values do acknowledge that institutional mandate may conflict with openness, but that archivists strive to be open and treat users equally.

47 Freeman, “In the Eye,” 112.
More Digitization, Please

Respondents often wished that more material could be made available online, whether because they were restricted in time and ability to travel or would just find it more convenient.

I'd love it if everything was on line! Especially rare documents and books from the past such as diaries, travel accounts, ledgers etc. Also, much better search functions to find these treasures.

My only comment is that time and resource availability sometimes hinder researcher and librarian alike. Would love to see more special-collection materials digitalized (wouldn't we all!).

Archives are less helpful to me because they tend to be so specific. But digitized archives available online are INVALUABLE.

I especially appreciate finding some digitalized collections. [later comment] I think too many people, not just writers, rely only on what they can find on-line. They miss out on unique, primary materials that archives offer. Yet, many archives can not put all, or even many of their collections on-line. However, not everyone has the funds to travel.

… the more holdings that research libraries and archives place online, the more helpful this is to those of us who are disabled or live far away from research libraries and archives.

Aside from simply making the material available, it is clear that more guidance on how to
find it would be useful as well. One respondent indicated that she felt “…more education needs to be done about the online resources that are available because I think that's what most writers will gravitate to.”‡

As this section shows, the issues romance writers encountered in using archives are not new. It is discouraging that problems brought to light by previous user studies dating back to the 1980s are still prevalent. Although technology has opened up access to archives, it has brought other issues that leave users unsure what their next step should be. Archivists need to work further on the issue of not just how to help users navigate individual institutions, both in person and online, but how a user can approach using archives solely online, and what techniques and resources will help them better find the primary sources related to their topics.

**Library/Archives Experience and Romance Writing: Influence and Commonalities**

The tone of the archival discussion of *Protected by the Prince* conveyed a sense that popular romance has little in common with the archival profession. In order to understand if this view was shared by librarian or archivist romance writers, respondents who either graduated from a library or archives program or worked at a library or archives were asked if they felt their prior training influenced or had anything in common with their work as romance writers. Sixty-two of the 70 “librarian/archivist” respondents answered the question. 58% (36) of those respondents said they saw influence and commonalities—although some were more emphatic about the connection—and 42% (26) did not. However, a yes answer strongly correlated with respondents who had a library or archives degree or had worked full-time in a library or archives. Of these 20 full time or degreed respondents, 17 (85%) indicated they saw commonalities. Almost all negative responses came from those who had worked in libraries or archives as students or volunteers. Although many of these responses consisted of “no,” others gave explanations, such
as “Subject matter was completely different, mission and purpose were different, skill sets were different. I do not see any commonalities.”‡

Those who saw influence and commonalities mentioned how they employed research skills and—supporting the remark of the romance writer/historian earlier—engaged their love of history in their writing. The writers often found it fun to be able to use their prior training to enhance their work.

Oh yes….. its [sic] been amazing. I once thought I'd write contemporary romance or mysteries but could never land an agent. Then I switched to Historicals, and my knowledge of research skills lets me integrate lots of cool details and insight into the era (no wallpaper history in my books!) Anyway….I think it is my ability to conduct quality research that has allowed me to write interesting novels a little off the beaten path.‡

Absolutely! Romances are a fun way of talking about the past and filtering history through contemporary interpretations. They are much more complex than they get credit for.‡

I do believe that my training as a librarian and archivist influences me as a romance writer. I research more frequently and more in depth, which isn't necessarily a great thing since it often disrupts the actual writing. In both librarianship/archival work and writing, I think there's a desire to reach people through the power of the written word—a love of books definitely led me to both!‡
Two full-time respondents felt their training did not influence them per se, but noted how it enhanced their ability to do research. “I don't think I would say my work in libraries has influenced me as a romance writer, however, it did teach me to appreciate research, and to do it effectively.”‡

The respondents' words should dispel any perception of popular romance and archives are separate and provide proof that common interests that could be the basis of stronger relationships exists. These respondents’ insights along with others in this study should push us to both question our perceptions and treatments of users as worthy/serious versus unworthy/frivolous and to consider how we might actively seek out these different types of users both as users and supporters of archives.

Further Considerations

The object of this study was to determine if romance writers use archives for their research, how and why they use them, and learn more about their experiences. Although this survey represents a limited sample and is a preliminary investigation, the responses indicate that romance writers and their work are not “separate” from archives. Rather, some are satisfied users, while others felt there were problems and that their needs were not being met, suggesting that issues that had come to light in previous user studies were still occurring and have yet to be successfully addressed. As another object was to determine if people with training or experience as librarians and archivists felt that such work influenced their romance writing pursuits, it is telling that the more highly trained and experienced in librarianship and archives, the more commonalities
seen. This was especially true when it came to ability to find resources and conduct quality research.

In looking at romance writers as a user group, this study sought to consider the impact of archivists treating them and other nontraditional researchers less seriously than traditional users, an issue that has been noted, but remains largely unexamined, in archival literature. Knowing more about romance writers as a group itself and as example of nontraditional users, what changes might we consider in how we practice our profession? Given that romance writers have a collective focus, should outreach efforts be directed to them specifically? Before answering, it is worthwhile to look again at the relationships between romance writers and libraries.

Romance writers have a strong relationship with libraries and librarians. This is exemplified by RWA's discounted membership rate for librarians, its “Librarian of the Year” award, its special “Librarian Day” at its annual conference, and its presence at the American Library Association and Public Library Association annual meetings. These acknowledgments reflect how public librarians work to promote romance. This relationship with libraries is particularly interesting given that as the literature review indicated, libraries had previously treated popular romance not only as frivolous, but as “trash.” However, this attitude changed and a system of mutual support developed, in part due to the efforts of librarian and romance writer, Cathie Linz, who worked to foster better relationships between these groups. Archivists should consider

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48 For the purposes of this survey, although librarians and archivists are not the same, those who attended library school may have taken classes on or gained experience with archives, along with being trained in research methods.

49 Information about all of these can be found via the RWA website.

how a shift in attitude about why people use archives might similarly lead to successful outreach to different constituencies and interactions with individual patrons. For example, several responses to this survey indicated that they saw it as outreach--one respondent contacted me with a reference question and another told me they had never thought of using archives before taking the survey, thanking me for the "suggestion." Several others expressed appreciation that the survey took their work seriously.

Thank you for having this survey which gives credence to the genre of romance fiction. As a group, we are extremely dedicated to writing the best stories that we can, including wonderful backgrounds be they a fantastical urban paranormal, a Regency historical, a police procedural romantic suspense, or a love story in a BDSM club.

Romance writers’ desire to write “the best stories we can,” and their willingness to engage with archival materials to help them do so should be seen as an opportunity, as should the fact there are librarian/archivist romance writers who might help bridge the gaps. Looking at the structure of RWA, for example, members have online chapters reflecting different interests and more than 100 chapters in the United States and several in Canada. RWA and its local chapters offer educational opportunities for members, including workshops on doing research. Reaching out to see if members would be interested in learning more about archival research may bring more users to our doors and websites, and the good experiences these users might have could bring advocates for archives as well. I plan to continue investigating these possibilities along with other intersections between archives and popular romance. Looking beyond the romance genre, we should consider the value of doing outreach for other writers’ groups, or any group whose interest might take an archival turn.
Outside the user experience itself, as archivists we need to consider user studies in the light of our constant discussions how to promote ourselves, our profession, and our institutions and more importantly how to gain allies and advocates for what we do. Given the wish to raise our collective profile—most recently exemplified by SAA’s establishment of a committee to help increase awareness of the value of archivists and archives “among the general public”—archivists might benefit from developing relationships with “nontraditional” groups whose members have demonstrated awareness of the value of archives.⁵¹

Looking from another angle, building relationships with romance writers as users might also create a path for archivists’ efforts to document their community. As scholarship on popular romance increases and more academic libraries work to add popular romance collections, there should be similar efforts to ensure a future understanding of the romance community.⁵² Several RWA chapters list archivists or historians among their officers, indicating they have an interest in preserving their own history, and such people might serve as points of contact.

Conclusion

Romance is a traditionally undervalued and marginalized genre, a topic addressed time and again in the romance community and in the literature cited above. It is also a big business, has maintained a large audience over decades, and has increasingly drawn academic interest. Although there will always be people who see popular romance as frivolous or tawdry, the survey responses show that romance writers are users of archives and can be a passionate

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⁵¹ “Committee on Public Awareness,” Society of American Archivists
http://www2.archivists.org/governance/handbook/section7/groups/Public-Awareness (accessed on 22 May 2015).

⁵² There is also the issue of preserving and documenting their websites, blogs, social media sites, and other activities such as the campaign for more diversity in romance (#WeNeedDiverseRomance).
constituency. As such, they experience many joys and frustrations when attempting to use archives for their work whether for details for background or setting, for inspiration, or other reasons.

The respondents indicated that even though they were sometimes unable to find what they were looking for and on occasion had negative experiences using archives, many enjoy working with primary source material. They expressed needs in particular for better guides to materials, more help understanding where to look, and for more materials to be available online. Several also stated they felt that more education about resources would be useful. Such comments, although insightful, are not new to archivists, as the findings of the previous user studies indicated similar joys, frustration, and needs. Although these statements suggest we have more work to do in both outreach and education, they also point to what we have in common—a love of history and research. We need to learn how to encourage and foster this in different audiences and remember that a negative experience may not just keep a user away from archives, but may cause users to lose (or never gain) appreciation for them.

Given the parameters of romance novels discussed earlier, it should come as no surprise that Protected by the Prince ended with Tamsin the archivist heading towards her happily ever after with Prince Alaric (and presumably hanging up her white gloves). Although the discussion the book generated gave popular romance its moment in the archival world in 2011, we should reframe the discussion and view it as a beginning—an opportunity to take advantage of the links that already exist between archives and popular culture and a chance to consider what other relationships might exist with other types of users. We also need to rethink categorizing researchers as "serious" or "frivolous" and consider how we can cultivate connections to any user interested in using archives. Doing this will not only help us meet the aspirations of our
profession, but will help us build new constituencies of supporters who care about archives.
Appendix I: Romance Writers Survey

1. You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Caryn Radick, an archivist at Special Collections and University Archives at Rutgers University. The purpose of this research is to learn about research methods and use of archives by romance writers.

This research is anonymous. Anonymous means that I will record no information about you that could identify you--I will not record your name, address, phone number, date of birth, etc., (any e-mail address provided for follow up will be kept confidential).

The research team and the Institutional Review Board at Rutgers University are the only parties that will be allowed to see the data, except as may be required by law. If a report of this study is published, or the results are presented at a professional conference, only group results will be stated and any quoted responses will be kept anonymous. All study data will be kept for five years.

There are no foreseeable risks to participation in this study. In addition, you may receive no direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, and you may withdraw at any time during the survey. In addition, you may choose not to answer any questions with which you are not comfortable.

If you have any questions about the study or study procedures, you may contact me at SC/UA Alexander Library, 169 College Ave., New Brunswick, NJ 08901. Email: caryn.radick@gmail.com. Phone 848-932-6152. If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the IRB Administrator at Rutgers University at:
Rutgers University, the State University of New Jersey Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects Office of Research and Sponsored Programs 3 Rutgers Plaza New Brunswick, NJ 08901-8559 Tel: 848-932-0150 Email: humansubjects@orsp.rutgers.edu

You may print this assent form for your records.

If you are 18 years of age or older, understand the statements above, and will consent to participate in the study, click on the "I Agree" button to begin the survey/experiment. If not, please click on the “I Do Not Agree” button to exit the survey.

- I Agree
- I Do Not Agree

2. How many romance stories have you written?

- 0-5
- 6-10
- 11-15
- 16-20
- more than 20

3. How many years have you been writing romance stories?

- 0-5
- 6-10
- 11-15
4. What genre do you write in (click all that apply)?

☐ Contemporary
☐ Erotic
☐ Historical
☐ Inspirational
☐ Paranormal
☐ Romantic suspense
☐ Young adult
☐ Other (Please list below) ____________________

5. How would you describe your research process for your stories?

6. The Society of American Archivists distinguishes libraries as holding print and nonprint materials, such as books, from archives which hold both published and unpublished materials, which are often unique or rare. Visiting an archive often requires following guidelines for access and use of materials. (For more information see http://www2.archivists.org/usingarchives/whatarearchives.) Do you use libraries or archives (either in person or online) when conducting research for romance stories?
7. How would you rate your experience using libraries for research?

- Very helpful
- Somewhat helpful
- Not helpful

7a. Please use the space below if you'd like to add anything about your experience using libraries for research.

8. What type of archives have you visited or used online resources from (check all that apply)?

- Public library (for example, a local history room)
- Historical society
- Based in a college or university
- Based in a religious institution
- Government archives
- Corporate archives
- Other (please describe) ____________________

8a. How would you rate your experience using archives for research?
8b. Please use the space below if you'd like to add anything about your experience using archives for research.

9. Have you received any formal education, (graduate school) for a degree in library / information or archival science?

- Yes, graduated from library / information science school or graduate program in archives
- Yes, attended library / information science school or graduate program in archives, but did not graduate
- Yes, currently attending library / information science school or graduate program in archives
- No

Please indicate degree received.

Please indicate degree pursued.

Please indicate terminal degree of current program.

10. Have you ever worked in a library or archives (including part-time or as a student or volunteer)? Check all that apply.
Yes, full time (please briefly describe types/titles of positions held in the line below)
____________________

Yes, part time (please briefly describe types/titles of positions held in the line below)
____________________

Yes, as a volunteer (please briefly describe types/titles of positions held in the line below)
____________________

Yes, as a student (please briefly describe types/titles of positions held in the line below)
____________________

No

11. Do you feel your training and work as a librarian or archivist has informed or influenced you as a romance writer? Do you see any commonalities in your work in both endeavors?

12. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

13. If you are willing to be contacted for follow up questions, please provide your e-mail address below: