

## True Lies: Libraries, Research, and the Facts of Fiction

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As a librarian, I've always been curious about how people use libraries. Now that I'm writing fiction, I've become even more curious about how writers use research to make their fiction work.

When I started writing fiction, I thought the basic idea was to make things up, let my imagination fill in the details; it soon dawned that research was necessary to help me invent a convincing fictional world. Not only does it help provide color and texture, the illusion you're trying to sustain tends to fall apart if you get little things wrong. I've long been interested in how undergraduate students approach research, but lately I have found it interesting to consider how research undergirds creative work and how libraries can help with those creative endeavors. I've also been thinking about what popular fiction, as part of a library's collection, provides beyond pleasure. Not that there's anything wrong with "pleasure reading," but my sense is that popular fiction does more than just entertain its readers.

Libraries have always been ambivalent about popular fiction. In fact, at the beginning of the twentieth century librarians called it "the fiction problem." Librarians at best saw fiction as a lure to draw readers to more improving books. Catherine Sheldrick Ross, a Canadian professor of library science, found evidence of this in library records. The Toronto Public Library's 1906 Annual Report crowed that the chief librarian had decreased the percentage of fiction circulated, arguing "there is an indulgence in the reading of trashy novels which is destructive to the mind."

A few years earlier, in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, the head librarian defended his removal of books by Horatio Alger and others. "It is certainly not the function of the public library to foster the mind-weakening habit of novel-reading among the very classes—the uneducated, busy or idle—whom it is the duty of the public library to lift to a higher plane of thinking." He did make one point I could agree with: "once the habit (of reading novels) is formed, it seems as difficult to throw off as the opium habit."

We obviously no longer make these kinds of judgments about people's reading habits, but we tend to discount or perhaps misunderstand the importance of reading fiction in people's lives. When libraries justify themselves, they tend to talk about how they provide information. We don't tend to think so highly of the motives people have for reading genre fiction in particular—it's recreation, after all, not education—and in academic libraries there's often an implicit distinction made between mere "fiction" and the much more important "literature." It's interesting that a recent *Time* magazine article points out how popular genre fiction is, how much better at telling stories than much literary fiction, and concludes: "The next literary wave will come not from above but from below, from the foil-covered, embossed-lettered paperbacks in the drugstore racks"—to which mystery readers would say "about time you noticed, only what exactly do you mean by 'below'?"

Readers get more out pleasure reading than we credit. In an ambitious study, Ross interviewed over one hundred popular fiction readers about their reading and what it meant to them. She summarized their responses in this way:

Books give me comfort, make me feel better about myself, reassure me that I'm normal and not a freak because characters in books have feelings like mine. Books provide confirmation that others have gone through similar experiences and survived ... They put me in touch with a larger, more spacious world. In summary, books provide a special kind of pleasure that cannot be achieved in any other way.

She argues, convincingly I think, that our models of "information seeking" leave out this important factor, that we encounter and process information even when we're not looking for it. And she suggests readers' advisory service is one of the provisions of information that is unduly neglected these days by libraries—though not by Amazon.com.

What can readers learn from mysteries in particular? On DorothyL, a long-running mystery discussion list, one thread last year was "what I've learned from mysteries." List members cited learning about places, historical periods, professions, disabilities, diverse communities, social issues, and the intangibles of social attitudes and prejudices prevalent in a particular time and place – something a history teacher reported learning when reading Agatha Christie as a primary source. Certainly, learning about the world is a major contributor to the pleasures of reading mysteries, one that writers take seriously. For an article to be published in a special issue of *Acquisitions Librarian (Mysteries: From Creation to Consumption)*, I interviewed several mystery writers about the role of research in their work. Here are a few of their comments.

Michelle Spring, a Cambridge University sociologist turned mystery writer, told me she does research "for passion—to breathe life and tone and colour into an idea. If a theme comes alive for me, if I care deeply about it, I can make it come alive for the reader." She added, "The things that fascinate me as a novelist are similar to the issues that captured my attention as an academic: questions about the relations between men and women ... how privilege or under-privilege shapes people's lives; the uses and abuses of power." She also found an interesting difference. "As an academic I wrote from the position of an expert (I hoped). As a novelist, the social issues I tackled are less ones I'm expert about, and more ones I'm keen to explore ... What's similar, I hope, is tolerance: in both my academic writing and my novels, I feel strongly that my place is not to dictate how readers should feel about an issue but to explore possibilities."

James W. Hall advises his writing students at Florida International University against the old standard rule, write what you know: he suggests "write about what you *want* to know." He seeks out oddities that have dramatic potential and spends months researching them before writing. "Novels that tell a rousing good yarn while also containing a high dose of factual information about some esoteric subject matter have always been my favorite type of book."

Danuta Reah—trained as a linguist—finds that when doing research for fiction, she's "often looking for the fictional world." Sometimes that background barely enters the novel: "For my current book, I spent a lot of time reading about the Stalinist purges of the late 1930s. They form a small part of the narrative, but I needed to know as much as possible to make the people real in my head." Needing to get it right isn't just for the reader, but also for the people and issues she is writing about. She wrote a book that drew on her own father's past and said "the book is fiction, the characters exist only on the pages, but the world they inhabit has an external reality that I have to be faithful to."

Mary Reed and Eric Mayer have written a series of historical novels set in sixth-century Byzantium. Their research is fundamental to developing their stories. "There's an argument to be made for getting the plot and so forth laid

out first, telling the story, then adding color, but we'd like to think that deriving the plot from the research tends to anchor the story more firmly in the historical period." Mary adds, on a practical note, "Another advantage of deriving story ideas from research is that it tends to avoid the problem of finding out, late in the game, that some inconvenient historical truth makes nonsense of your plotline."

I didn't interview Betty Webb, a reporter and author of *Desert Wives*, a mystery about Mormon polygamists published before the Elizabeth Smart kidnapping case hit the news, but I know that she used her journalistic instincts to research her novel. Marilyn Stasio, crime fiction reviewer for the *New York Times Book Review*, said "If Betty Webb had gone undercover and written *Desert Wives* as a piece of investigative journalism, she'd probably be up for a Pulitzer ... the factual details—supported by research cited in an afterword—are eye-popping."

For my mystery, *On Edge*, I started with an idea taken from "real life" —one that came to me while driving through a small town not far from my home, the site of a bizarre investigation into child abuse in the mid-1980s that seemed to implicate a huge number of people doing extraordinarily strange things, with the majority of the state's witnesses children as young as six testifying against their parents. This was one of the first cases of hundreds like it to sweep the country, the more famous McMartin Preschool case preceding it by only a few weeks. Thinking about the case I wondered what long-term effect it had on a small town, and then started wondering "what if—?"

I didn't research that case or others like it until a first draft was complete because I didn't want to draw too directly on a particular event that involved real people who'd been through a painful ordeal—I wanted to explore the experience, not exploit it. Afterwards, I looked into the case and the hundreds like it to see if my portrayal was plausible. Though it didn't lead to many changes in the novel, I got so interested in the various contradictory ways the media covered it, I ended up doing an article about it for *SIMILE*, a journal focused on media and information studies.

The things I wanted to explore in this book concern how we respond to crime, whether our need for meaning makes us see patterns where there are none, whether our desire for justice makes us create monsters out of human beings who are uncomfortably like us. Though I could have studied these issues in an academic mode, I used fiction to do it. And having seen the wildly divergent versions of "the facts" presented in non-fiction sources, I felt even more strongly that fiction can approximate reality in ways other modes of expression sometimes can't.

Loren Estleman addresses this very issue in his novel, *A Smile on the Face of the Tiger*, in which a fictional writer of 1950s pulp paperbacks used a Detroit race riot as inspiration for a story. Amos Walker, a detective investigating the author's disappearance, finds a box that includes materials from his background research: some standard histories of the city, a non-fiction study, and an official report produced by a university professor. Walker muses over the contrast in these texts, and what they convey.

*In flat pedantic language, the educator managed to make the deaths of thirty-five people—twenty-nine of them Negroes—over a thirty-six-hour period sound as dull as the annual mean rainfall in British Honduras. Without footnotes or statistics, Booth [the pulp fiction author] had managed to do far more ... The picture was seared into my memory as if the ghost of Francisco Goya had been summoned forth to paint it in scarlet and indigo; as if I had witnessed the act that had inspired it.*

Crime fiction wrestles with topics that are serious social issues, and does so in a way that offers readers a visceral examination of those issues that can have more impact than a news story or an academic study. Barbara Neely can provide more insights about race and class in her Boston-based Blanche White series than an ethnographic study of the Roxbury neighborhood. George Pelecanos has made far more people aware of the links between poverty and violence in Washington DC through his novels than if he addressed Congress on that issue. Scott Turow was able to have a direct impact on criminal justice when he was appointed to Illinois Governor George Ryan's Commission on Capital Punishment. After receiving the commission's findings, the governor halted executions and many of the reforms the commission recommended are being put into place. Not many novel writers have such an opportunity to influence public policy. But far more citizens have deepened their understanding of the complexities of the system and its failures by reading Turow's novel, *Reversible Errors* that was inspired by what he learned, than by reading the commission's report.

Crime fiction does something paradoxical: it unsettles us, but at the same time offers a sense that things can be resolved, that it's possible out of the messiness of life to arrive at some kind of conclusion. Libraries do the same thing. They're both scary and reassuring. There's no doubt they're frightening—a lengthy analysis appeared in *Library Quarterly* a couple of years ago analyzing the image of libraries and librarians in popular culture using Foucault's concept of the "Discourse of Fear." The authors cite works by Stephen King, Umberto Eco, and even Jerry Seinfeld, who in one television episode is visited by a hardboiled librarian who is busting his chops to retrieve an overdue book. Perhaps even more disturbing than fear of breaking obscure library rules is the vision in Jorge Luis Borges' short story, "The Library of Babel," in which the narrator, trapped in a vast, endless library full of imperfect copies, can never find the book he's looking for. Libraries may seem like calm and orderly places, but the sheer abundance they contain is so vast it's intimidating. Within the shrine of order, there's always the lurking sense that things aren't what they seem.

In Danuta Reah's mystery, *Listen to the Shadows*, a linguistic researcher finds an academic library safe and comforting. She works "in the quiet of the stacks, the endless row of shelves, the pools of light in the darkness restoring her equilibrium." But a small child she brought with her sees a different library. "It was like the story about the monster in the maze ... More shelves, more secret shelves Lucy had run around them, wanting to make a noise, and then she didn't know where she was. Everywhere she looked, there were just shelves ... and in the distance it got dark."

Like mysteries, libraries are a contradiction. We go into them, thinking we'll get answers. Before we're done, we find out the order libraries offer is really a front for giving competing ideas a chance to get together and have a good brawl. You don't find answers, you find more questions. And yet because libraries provide a framework for approaching messy issues, they give us an opportunity to examine and confront them, they unsettle us while at the same time offering reassurance that it is possible to explore and confront and to arrive at some kind of understanding. Mysteries give the satisfaction of closure in their endings, but on the way to The End we learn how complex and nuanced are issues of right and wrong, truth and justice.

James W. Hall has written a marvelous essay about discovering crime fiction—and libraries—simultaneously as a small boy. When he was ten, living in a rural Kentucky town, his mother dropped him off at the public library. He wandered around, feeling uncomfortably out of place, and when the librarian approached, he defensively pulled a book off the shelves and opened it, just to head her off. He found himself breathless with excitement. There was a nude woman on the page, a nude woman lying in the grass. This was both exhilarating and troubling. "By

evening it would be all over town ‘Little Jimmy Hall was caught reading that nude woman book in the library.’” But he kept going back to furtively finish the book. When he was done, the observant but laid-back librarian reassured him that she loved mysteries too and said, as she piled books into his arms, “This isn’t school.” He could read anything he wanted and nobody would give him a test on it. But for a place that wasn’t a school, he learned a lot, reading fiction that wasn’t intentionally educational. The essay ends with this thought, one that bears out the importance of pleasure reading in our lives:

*Though that creaky library no longer exists in my small Kentucky hometown, and though I have fled her narrow streets and scrubby fields forever, the largest part of what I am today and what I know about the world and about the affairs of the human heart springs from that one autumn afternoon when I plucked a book from the shelf and encountered that nude woman in the grass and I began this long journey, year after year, filling myself beyond the brim with the accumulated wealth of books.*

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