

Romance Fiction in the Archives

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Published online: May 2018

<http://www.jprstudies.org>

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Keywords: archives, diversity, Layle Giusto, libraries, Nora Roberts, popular romance fiction, Ray and Pat Browne Popular Culture Library, Romance Writers of America, Yolanda Greggs

Note: This piece was drafted in late 2017. The ongoing exploration of diversity and racism in romance writing, publishing, and award-giving attests to the potential importance of archival sources discussed below.

In May 2017, the **Popular Culture Association** (PCA), in coordination with the **Ray and Pat Browne Popular Culture Library** (PCL) at Bowling Green State University hosted its second **Summer Research Institute**. Two dozen scholars spent four glorious days digging in the collections of the PCL and the **Bill Schurk Sound Archives**. My fellow researchers included graduate students, independent scholars, and professors. We delved into troves of comics, zines, board games, postcards, teen magazines, albums—including cover art and liner notes, and much more. I was there to explore the **Romance Writers of America** (RWA) **archives**. My research did not go exactly according to plan, which turned out to be a good thing. In what follows, I explain how I used the archives and what sorts of other projects—in and beyond the study of popular romance—they might support.

I applied to the Institute because I had just finished a book about **Nora Roberts'** long-running pseudonymous *In Death* series. Writing *Human in Death: Morality and Mortality in J.D. Robb's Novels* left me with the kind of questions about her even more numerous romances that can only be answered by writing about them. Hence, a new project (alongside

my “regular” scholarship on Islam and gender). While *Human in Death* limited itself to the novels, for this project, which attends to characters’ creative careers, I wanted to look at Roberts’ discussions of the romance genre and her own writing habits. Here is how I described my research agenda in my application:

While the primary source for my analysis will be the novels themselves, it would enrich the study to explore how Roberts’ own experiences affect how she writes writers, as well as other working artists. Roberts has discussed this topic in a restricted way in occasional interviews for the broader public. I expect that in her addresses to RWA groups, where her audience comprises romance writers, she would devote more attention to this topic. BGSU archives contain audio cassette recordings of eleven RWA sessions in which she participated from 1987-2002 (specifically, 1987, 1990-1993, 1996-1999, 2002). While my primary interest in the collection is in these recordings, I will also take advantage of the library’s collection to consult several relevant scholarly and primary source publications not readily available at other libraries.

Once at BGSU, I began with the RWA conference recordings. Prompted by the Institute organizers, I had requested in advance that the cassettes I’d found by searching the catalog for Roberts’ name be retrieved from the offsite depository. A librarian taught me how to digitize those recordings. The procedure is simple, but takes the full running time of the analog original; since I couldn’t speed it up, I listened along. In the second tape I listened to, from 2002, Roberts said she’d attended every RWA conference since the first, in 1981, except one. This meant that there were ten years where she’d attended but there were no recordings of her speaking. Of course, she might have attended without speaking in a recorded session (it turned out she sometimes had), but I doubted that she’d attended but not been on the program for all of those years. To see what I might be missing, I set the recordings aside and began to dig through the rest of the RWA archives. (I was able to do this because BGSU library staff, for a modest fee, digitized the recordings I designated; for about \$10/hour, this was a bargain.)

My initial interest was in determining whether Roberts had presented at other sessions. By looking through conference programs in the organization’s files (Boxes 36-40), I saw that she had spoken on panels other than those I’d found. They hadn’t turned up in my initial catalog search because they were listed by title alone, without presenter names. Scanning the printed programs for Roberts’ name then looking in the online library catalog under the session titles allowed me to request those cassettes as well. This was an imperfect solution as there were no programs for a few years (e.g., 2003-2005), but in the process of looking for the programs, I got hooked by the rich materials available.

In addition to the conference programs, the archives contain various and sundry things: travel brochures, press clippings, advertisements for books, vendor contracts, press kits, and swag ranging from key rings, pins, pens, and badge holders to a black and purple satin garter. The files are more complete for some years than for others. Once I was through the boxes for the conferences, I turned to the correspondence files (Boxes 13-17, which cover, unevenly, 1984-early 1997). They also contain some conference-related material. For instance, a fax sent by a board member, and mailed to those who didn’t use faxes, mentions

three authors who turned them down for a guest speaking role at the New York conference in 1994.[1] Roberts ended up giving the keynote that year—but I found no mention of any discussions with her in the files.

In fact, Roberts was largely absent from the RWA correspondence archives, mentioned only in passing in a smattering of documents. Her name shows up in the conference files in attendee lists, in programs as a presenter, and in one exceptional instance as the person designated to meet 1983 keynote speaker Belva Plain and be available to her through the meeting should she require assistance.[2]

Roberts features more often in the *Romance Writers' Report* (RWR), to which I turned on my last day at the library. The PCL has a near-complete run of this publication, from its 1981 first issue when the organization was founded. Because of time constraints, I was only able to consult the 1981-86, 1989, and 1996 runs. Roberts shows up semi-regularly in two helpful features from the early to mid-1980s: the RWA member news and the “Booksellers Say” feature, in which bookstore staff comment on reader preferences. She also wrote a few columns. In 1996, there was an article commemorating her hundredth book.[3] Fortunately, the BGSU library makes scanning available freely to its researchers, so I was able to email myself scans of the pages where she appeared rather than having to take extensive notes during my limited research hours.

In attempting to make the best use of the archives for this current project, I skimmed over or skipped past many tantalizing leads and materials. In the remainder of this piece, I lay out in cursory fashion some of the major topics covered in the archives. Many projects might benefit from consulting the collection. In other cases, entire projects might be built around the archival material. This list is partial, idiosyncratic, and woefully incomplete, meant only to offer a starting point for thinking about drawing on the archives.

The RWA archives at BGSU cover the period from RWA's founding in 1980 through 2008, though coverage for some years is absent or patchy. Much of the material is concentrated from the mid-1980s to the late 1990s. Folders bulge with conference planning notes and programs. Cassette recordings for many sessions, including with prominent authors, were offered by RWA as resources for their members and now constitute a vital record for scholars. Five file boxes preserve miscellaneous correspondence among RWA officers and between RWA officers and service providers, lawyers, regional chapter officials, aspiring authors, and the occasional senator. (Other boxes contain archived board minutes and recordings of board meetings; I did not consult them.) BGSU also retains the nearly complete print run of the *Romance Writers' Report*.

Some themes and topics recur regularly in the files of correspondence:

- Correspondence with chapter leaders
- New members
- Perceived elitism among members
- Dues, including increases
- Bylaws and the drafting thereof
- Conference planning, including site selection
- Work plans for Board members
- Bylaws and possible changes thereto
- The Published Authors Network
- Media and public perceptions of romance books and romance writers

- Inquiries from aspiring writers
- Requests for membership lists from those who wish to market to RWA members
- Chapter newsletters
- Agent appointments at conferences
- Those “Achy Breaky Bylaws”[4]

One might use this archive to track technological shifts. From typing to ordinary postal mail, to the occasional use of mail merge, the slow and uneven shift to computers, the arrival of “diskettes,” the reliance on fax technology, the innovative use of answering machines, the change to email, an internet committee, the first website: such matters are a background hum in the files. The 1984 conference file contains an attendee list half an inch thick; the green and white striped paper still retains the side perforations allowing the continuous printout to pass along the dot-matrix printer’s rollers. The newsletter ads for—and writer references to—computers through the 1980s are fascinating. An August 1994 letter publicizes the “first-ever electronic chapter” of *RWA*: online, and hence not regionally-restricted.[5] In a recorded conference session in 2002, Roberts had “just discovered Google,” and waxes enthusiastic about using it for research for her books.[6] That session was recorded on audiocassette; eventually, *RWA* switched to CDs.[7] (Now, sessions are available to members as downloadable MP3 files.)

Between material in the archives and material on the *RWA* website, one might look at award winners and, perhaps even more revealing, award categories. Recent Romancelandia discussion of **(lack of) diversity and representation in book awards** has focused attention on how nominations are done, finalists chosen, and winners selected. The archives contain extensive correspondence related to naming the awards, voting procedures, author eligibility, and whether to include specific subgenres. For example, the defunct inspirational category got resurrected partly because of a letter-writing campaign, as well as the submission of a sufficient number of eligible novels. In 2015, this was one of the categories in which **a romance featuring a Nazi hero and a Jewish heroine** was a finalist.

On a related note, one might look at race in the *RWA* historically, as useful background for thinking through authors’ experiences of **racism at its recent conferences**. Although one of its founders, high-profile editor **Vivien Stephens**, was African American, what is most striking for the period the archives at BGSU cover is the organization’s overwhelming whiteness. Passing allusions to the confederacy and Southern belles (and once, a reference to “our Grand Wizard” in committee correspondence) are notable.[8] The files also preserve an angry letter complaining about the stereotypical conference program cover image for the 1987 gathering in Texas.[9] In complaining about the over-the-top cowboy imagery, the reader—exaggerating to make her point about offensive representations—wonders whether the next year’s program for Atlanta will include a woman in antebellum dress attended by a Black man in livery. Other material would help flesh out the complicated story of race and romance writing in the late twentieth century. A flyer wedged into the 1996 folder on conference planning advertises Layle Giusto’s *Wind Across Kylarmi* which, according to one blurb, should be read by “those who fear romances whose main characters are people of color.”[10] An 1986 issue of *RWR* contains an essay by Yolanda Greggs, an “ethnic romance writer” who identifies herself as “the daughter and wife of black men,” on

how to write Black men as main characters.[11] **Given that the major romance publishers still have a terrible record** when it comes to publishing African American writers, Native writers, and authors of color generally—and to segregating their work when they do—it could be very useful to understand organizational history. (Additionally, the library’s non-archival collection of romance novels, including complete runs of numerous category lines, would support investigations of representation and diversity in publication.)

One especially persistent issue in the RWA archives is the tension between published and unpublished authors. (A brief flirtation with the cutesy “prepublished” fizzled.)[12] The question of how much basic content to present at the conferences for newbies trying to break in versus how much attention to the concerns of multi-published authors arises repeatedly. Various methods are employed, including star ratings for annual conference workshops, much like levels of difficulty for aerobics classes at the local gym. The establishment of a Published Authors Network, with membership pins and a newsletter, was another attempt to balance the needs of novices with those of well-established writers. The ever-present tension plays into the field’s pervasive concern with professionalization, (dis)respect, and the gendered disdain of outsiders for romances and romance writers. Such sentiments motivated one author to write to the board bemoaning the romance groupies who attended the conference: mere fans, not professional authors. In addition to the particulars of surely long-forgotten interpersonal drama, the correspondence files show how diligently and intensely RWA volunteers worked to serve an often disgruntled membership. (Of course, as with online product reviews, the disgruntled are overrepresented in the record.)

One might profitably use the RWA sources to supplement work on male authors, critics, and correspondents. Would pink press kits alienate male reporters? Conference organizers worried one year. An early *RWR* issue offers a discounted rate for a husband attending the conference along with his member-wife. In a subsequent issue, a letter-writer chastises the organization: her *husband* is the author. RWA changed its practice: the next conference offers a “non-writing spouse” rate for a husband or wife accompanying a member.[13]

This should not be taken as evidence of gender-neutrality, however, or comfortably progressive politics. The heteronormativity is astonishing—and serves as a reminder of how much has changed in the US and in the romance field. (I did not come across any materials related to **the 2005 survey asking members whether romance should be defined as hetero-monogamous.**) In March 1994, questioning whether to accept an ad in *RWR* for a risqué publication, a memo writer worries: “If the first issue contains masturbation, will the next contain lesbians?”[14] The concern is not so much for morality as that it might invite “further ridicule” for romance writers. Still, times have definitely changed. The press release announcing the 1993 winner of the newly established Janet Dailey award, for the author whose book best grappled with a significant social issue, referred to “single mothers and other social problems and issues.”[15]

RWA archives could supplement larger histories of sexuality and gender in the US. When the pornography wars raged in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the RWA wrote to senators on behalf of its members, concerned that pending legislation might subject its authors to sanctions or censorship.[16] (Strom Thurmond, John Glenn, and Lloyd Bentsen were non-committal in their replies.) A Florida chapter leader wrote in something of a panic about a fifteen-year old member of their group. They had obtained written permission from both of her parents for her to participate but worried they might be held liable for having

inappropriately explicit conversations in her presence. There was a good deal of back and forth. The board sought legal advice; some advocated a change to the bylaws to allow (or require) the chapter to exclude the underage member without discriminating by setting a minimum membership age of 18.[17]

The archives contain a few items relevant to Janet Dailey's plagiarism of Nora Roberts.[18] Plagiarism also arises on numerous other occasions, both in generalities and in specific cases; it is also a topic at some conferences. Conference programs and recordings would allow a comparison across the decades of how "theft of creative property" was treated.

The conference programs and recordings are also a wonderful source for looking at the rise of new subgenres (when does magic appear regularly? the paranormal?) and could supplement research into the novels. One could compare the ways that conference presenters over the decades address the characterization of heroes and, less often, heroines. Emerging work on masculinity in popular romance could surely benefit from hearing RWA panelists discuss "The Warrior Poet as Hero" (1997) and "Bad Boys of Category" (2002).[19]

Those studying reader response and reaction to contemporary novels—or contemporary reaction to older novels—can consult Amazon reviews, Goodreads, or *Smart Bitches*. The *RWR* "Booksellers Say" gives glimpses of reader response and reaction to early 1980s fiction, about which scholars still have much to say. In the June 1982 issue, for instance, a bookseller reports that "Rosemary Rogers' *Sweet Savage Love* is selling well, but readers are unhappy with the brutality." Another offers that "In the historical area, Rosemary Rogers' *Surrender to Love* is selling, but the comments are very unfavorable." [20]

The list could go on, but the beauty of archival work is that one finds things one didn't even know one was looking for. Any of these directions will only be only a starting point. Happy exploring.

[1] PCL MS142 Box 16.

[2] PCL MS142 Box 36.

[3] Sharon Ihle, "100 Titles! Celebrating Nora Roberts!" *Romance Writers' Report*, March 1996, v. 16, n. 2, pp. 20ff.

[4] For example, in a letter in PCL MS142 Box 14.

[5] PCL MS142 Box 17.

[7] PCL MS142 Box 40 Folder 9.

[8] PCL MS142 Box 39 Folder 1.

[9] PCL MS142 Box 37 Folder 1.

[10] PCL MS142 Box 29 Folder 13.

[11] Yolanda Gregg, "How to Pen the Black Man" *Romance Writers' Report*, May 1996, v. 16, n. 4, p. 23.

[12] PCL MS142 Box 15.

[13] "Conference Report." *Romance Writers Report*, April-May 1984, v. 4 no.2, p. 1.

[14] PCL MS142 Box 17.

[15] PCL MS142 Box 38 Folder 7.

[16] PCL MS142 Box 14.

[17] PCL MS142 Box 15.

[18] For example, PCL MS142 Box 40 Folder 9.

[19] For warrior-poets: PCL MS142 Box 40 Folder 1 (In the conference program (p. 28), the session blurb reads: “Best-selling authors Susan King, Mary Jo Putney and Eileen Charbonneau discuss the blending of alpha and beta heroes to produce warrior-poet heroes.”) For bad boys of category: PCL MS142 Box 40 Folder 6.

[20] “Booksellers Say,” *Romance Writers Report*, v. 2, no. 4, June 1982, pp. 17, 18.