SOME PORTRAYALS OF LIBRARIANS IN FICTION - A DISCUSSION

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ABSTRACT

This article explores portrayals of librarians in selected works of fiction, notably those involving mystery or detection. It begins with a summary of information derived from descriptions of about one hundred and twenty contemporary or recent works, then discusses particular stories involving detection or mystery, with occasional references to other genres such as science fiction, historical fiction, espionage, and romance.

In 1996, we began to compile a bibliography of fiction involving librarians to accompany a graduate course introducing the profession. Entries were obtained through searches of online catalogues and databases, as well as through queries posted over Internet LISTSERVs. About 120 individual works and about a dozen bibliographies were included in the resulting list.

In many instances, librarians and their places of work were presented as intrinsically interesting and appealing. In more than half of the works, librarians played leading or major supporting roles. Following a categorization of the roles of librarians in these works, the article examines images of the profession in the works of Umberto Eco, L.R. Wright, and Charlotte McLeod.

We contend that, even in works which present casual glimpses of the profession, or even in those which stress less desirable images of its members, accurate details of its techniques and working realities are sometimes discernible. We suggest that further research concentrate upon the work done by fictitious librarians and upon their centrality to plots.

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portrayals are almost always affected by the view of the character referring to them); and where the author and their works become conflated and are seen as one and the same. 26 Ibid., p. 23. 27 See my discussion of Shakespeare’s Sonnets, pp. 14 - 16. 28 Franssen and Hoenselaars, ‘Introduction’, p. 24. 29 Ibid., p. 28. These characters are as easily recognizable as the icons on our computer screens.71 In recent years, children’s fiction in particular, has been dominated by updated versions of Romeo and Juliet72, as well as the rewriting of many of Shakespeare’s plays through the eyes of a female protagonist73.