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The Information Behaviors of Fiction Writers: A Systematic Approach to an Understudied Information Community

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The Information Behaviors of Fiction Writers: A Systematic Approach to an Understudied Information Community

Abstract

Within the context of creative information communities in general, fiction writers remain a relatively understudied community. This article seeks to rectify that gap by highlighting the information behaviors of fiction writers, including the ways in which they network, as well as the processes they use when writing. In doing so, it reveals that fiction writers of all genres have many experiences in common, such as the "seed incident" that serves as the starting point when writing fiction. In addition, it examines fiction writers' impact on readers, with the implication that everyone—writers and non-writers alike—would benefit from understanding fiction writers' information behaviors. Most importantly, this literature review argues that further research on writers' authorial archives would greatly enhance our understanding of this group's information behaviors. These archives are arguably the single most valuable tool to understanding both fiction writers themselves and the writing process in general.

Keywords

fiction, writers, information behaviors, information communities, authorial archives

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About Author

Lisa Lowdermilk is a copy and content writer, public speaker, and oncology data specialist. She is passionate about writing in all its forms.

Fiction writers thrive on information. Whether it's getting the word out on their latest book or acquiring inspiration for their work-in-progress, fiction writers would cease to exist without information. Complicating their need for information, however, is the fact that the process of writing is different for every writer, and understanding how to tap into one's creative potential remains hazy. However, studying fiction writers' information behaviors can help both aspiring and pre-established authors identify areas of commonality amongst themselves, as well as ways to overcome obstacles and reach their full potential. This review sheds light on fiction writers' information behaviors, the importance of networking amongst writers, the non-verbal "interaction" between readers and text, the ways fiction writers enrich our understanding of the world around us, the debate over plotting versus "pantsing," the similarities between authors, and how authorial archives can enhance our understanding of the writing process. Lastly, this review identifies gaps within this field currently and suggests areas of future study.

Literature Review

The first study examines 10 core documents. Desrochers and Pecoskie (2015) selected these documents with the aim of understanding the information behaviors of writers, as well as guiding readers towards other literature that could lead to additional breakthroughs within this field. This approach is an unusually systematic way of studying such a creative field and contrasts with the more informal interview employed by another fiction writing researcher. Desrochers and Pecoskie (2015) examine the notions of legitimation, consecration, and professionalism. These notions state that writers *generally* need to be published (legitimation), be recognized by other writers and critics for their authorial abilities (consecration), and write full-time, preferably maintaining membership within writing associations while doing so (professionalism) (Desrochers & Pecoskie, 2015).

This school of thought is important for identifying areas of further research, as the fiction writing community is very difficult to study. This difficulty stems from the fact that it's not always easy to define what a "fiction writer" is. Indeed, Desrochers and Pecoskie (2015) note that writers' information-seeking behaviors can be studied within the context of creative groups in general (e.g. musicians, actors, etc.). Naturally, this lack of distinction makes it difficult to draw conclusions on writers specifically. It's also important to note that fiction writers can now arguably achieve professional status through digital means (Twitter, fan fiction websites, etc.) (Desrochers & Pecoskie, 2015). Thus, the aforementioned "professionalism" requirement—while important—may not apply to *all* fiction writers. That is, some writers may not write full-time or maintain membership within writing organizations but still earn income and achieve recognition as writers. Researchers looking for a *broad* overview of fiction writers in general should probably ignore this distinction, while those looking for a more accurate view should keep it in mind but not fixate on it.

The other studies described in this paper present their findings in a less formalized way but offer important insights on common subtopics within the fiction writing community nonetheless. One such subtopic is the idea that networking with other writers is crucial to authorial satisfaction and success. Flanders (2015) describes multiple communities for writers, including The Creative Penn and The Insecure Writers Support Group. Both of these communities are run by best-selling authors and aim to help budding writers network, gather inspiration, and most importantly, maintain hope that their dream is achievable. As Flanders (2015) notes, community is especially important to writers, due to the isolated nature of writing. Strictly speaking, one person could write a novel from start to finish alone. However, anyone who reads the acknowledgements section of a novel knows that many people are typically involved in the writing process, including other writers (e.g. writing groups), agents, editors, publishers, etc., as well as friends and family. Part of the reason we view writing as such a solitary process is because these names rarely (if ever) appear on the cover of a published book. But make no mistake: writing is as much of a team effort as playing soccer or putting out a fire.

Flanders's point about the importance of networks for writers is further explored in Gouthro's (2014) article "Who Gets to be a Writer? Exploring Identity and Learning Issues in Becoming a Fiction Author." This article explains the importance of technology in making connections (Gouthro, 2014). Less than a century ago, the idea that a budding American author could instantly communicate with an Australian author would have seemed like something out of a science fiction novel. Now, however, authors can market their works (even their works-in progress) globally and use digital technology to meet authors they would never have heard of without said technology. And if that's not enough, fans and aspiring writers can ask their beloved authors questions and potentially get a response within minutes.

Despite all of these perks, digital technologies are not without their drawbacks. As Wilkins (2014) notes, the need for authors to use social media to market their books presents a significant obstacle to writing productivity. While there is no easy solution to this problem, keeping a balanced perspective on social media and recognizing both its benefits and drawbacks is key to authorial success.

Another subtopic explored by fiction writing researchers involves the non-verbal "interaction" between readers and fiction texts. Specifically, Spindler (2008) describes how authors may purposefully write texts with open-ended meanings, thereby encouraging readers to read between the lines and draw from their own backgrounds to interpret the text. Although such interactions are far more ambiguous than, say, a face-to-face conversation with a best-selling author, they nonetheless reinforce the idea that writing is a dynamic social process that derives value from its fans as much as it does from its creator. Without readers, a novel—no matter how well-written—is little more than a collection of words.

Taking this interaction between writers and text one step further, Kirklin and Richardson (2001) address the unique issue of how fiction can benefit professionals outside the arts and humanities. Considering that the arts and sciences have so long been viewed as separate—sometimes even competing—

entities, the idea that artists have much to teach scientists is very compelling. Kirklin and Richardson (2001) argue that the arts—including fiction writing—can provide insight into patient suffering and increase physicians' empathy for the people they care for. Although empathy technically cannot be taught, fiction and other arts can shed light on the human condition and the importance of empathizing in a way the sciences cannot. That statement is not meant in any way to diminish the value of the “hard” sciences—rather, it is meant to illustrate that art and science complement one another quite nicely.

The idea that fiction has much to teach readers about the natural world is echoed in Matthew Hollow's (2010) “Writing Science Fiction: A Beginner's Guide for Historians.” In this piece, Hollow (2010)—drawing on evidence from Widdicombe (2009)—argues that writing science fiction is very similar to writing historical fiction in the sense that both draw thought-provoking parallels with the past and future alike. By extension, one might argue that examining the time period and cultural context in which a writer pens a story might reveal insights into the world around us. In other words, fiction and nonfiction may not be such diametrically opposed realms, after all.

A very different but equally important debate within the community of fiction writers is the issue of authors who meticulously outline every scene and writers who write by the seat of their pants. For simplicity's sake, the outliners will henceforth be referred to as the “plotters,” while the spontaneous writers will be referred to by the colloquial term “pantsers.” John Grisham, a notorious plotter, outlines his novels before starting them, noting that the more thorough his outlines are, the easier it is for him to write (as cited in Igarashi, 2015). Considering what a daunting venture novel writing is, Grisham's approach appears to be the recipe for success. After all, academic writers who meticulously outline their research papers tend to produce clearer, more profound research than those who spontaneously “wing” their thesis, main points, etc.

However, writers like Haruki Murakami—who take great joy in freewriting and discovering the story as they go—produce novels just as insightful and mesmerizing as their outlining counterparts. Murakami explains his approach with his novel *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*: “If you plan everything, you'd be kidding your subconscious. So, I don't plan anything” (as cited in Harding, 1994). Murakami's approach calls to mind the struggling author who relies on flights of inspiration to finish a novel. Indeed, one would think that this approach would make for an unreliable writing schedule and result in few novels being produced over time. However, the prolific Murakami has authored dozens of works, including novels, short stories, and essays, defying the assumption that only plotters can be prolific. Thus, both plotters and “pantsers” have equally valid approaches to writing. Experimentation is the best way to determine if plotting or “pantsing” is more effective for an individual writer.

Despite differences in how they plan their novels, authors describe several similar incidents within the writing process in Doyle's (1998) interview with five writers. Now, as Doyle (1998) herself notes in this interview, these five writers' experiences may not be representative of the writing population as a whole.

However, it's relatively safe to say that Doyle's (1998) findings can likely be generalized to a larger population, as the "seed incident," (i.e., an event in the author's life that is sufficiently unusual to merit writing about) and other characteristics described in this study are common to all writers. Since so much of what goes on during the writing process is nebulous and difficult to study quantitatively (as one might study, say, a revolutionary cancer drug), interviews are a necessary methodology when studying the fiction writing community.

Studies like Doyle's (1998) interview have led other researchers—including Hobbs (2006)—to investigate relatively unexplored areas of the fiction writing process, including writers' literary archives. This study discusses characteristics of writers' archives, including notes, drafts, and other products reflecting the written work in its unfinished form. It also provides intriguing insights into how writers' works evolve over time, how they stay organized (one writer uses color-coding), and more (Hobbs, 2006). Unfortunately, due to the incomplete and—subjectively speaking—flawed nature of these archives, many writers are understandably reluctant to share them with others. "As one prominent Canadian writer recently commented... 'I am rather reluctant to have [my unedited work] displayed, as those pages can resemble an exam paper in which one received a D-'" (as cited in Hobbs, 2006, p. 110). Such reluctance to share these literary archives naturally creates a gap in information on the pre-writing processes within the fiction writing community—a gap that can only be addressed with further study.

Fortunately, some authors *are* willing to share their authorial archives. Brandon Sanderson, Dan Wells, Howard Tayler, and Mary Robinette Kowal (2016) cohost an excellent podcast called *Writing Excuses*, which offers advice to budding speculative fiction writers. One of the most notable features of this podcast is the authors' willingness to expose flaws within their writing. In episode 4.31, the prolific Sanderson shares a novel he wrote as a teenager with the intent of exposing what he did wrong. Specifically, Sanderson notes that he used too many adverbs, as well as an ineffective dialogue tag. His fellow podcasters interject and identify potential solutions to strengthen his writing. This idea of using the authors' work as a learning tool (and identifying what the authors do *right* as well) continues in later seasons, with an in-depth examination of Kowal's novel *Ghost Talkers* in episode 11.44.

Indeed, this idea was so well-received, the authors even released *Shadows Beneath: The Writing Excuses Anthology*. In addition to the excellent stories within this anthology, the authors also included their brainstorming, first drafts, edits, essays describing the writing process, transcripts of writing workshop sessions, and more (Sanderson, Kowal, Wells, & Tayler, 2014, Welcome to *The Writing Excuses Anthology*). In other words, this anthology is a work by writers *for* writers. Just as importantly, it is one of few works that shows just how messy the process of writing a book truly is.

Compare and Contrast

As for how the scholarly and professional works compare, the scholarly works (i.e., the study of 10 core documents, as well as the works of Spindler, Flanders, etc.) tend to be broader in scope and present more generalized findings within the fiction community, whereas the professional works (e.g., Murakami explaining his approach to writing, the *Writing Excuses* podcast, etc.) tend to offer advice from writers seeking to help other writers. (Spindler, 2008; Widdicombe, 2009; Hollow, 2010) illustrate how fiction provides insight into the world around us. Conversely, Sanderson, Kowal, Wells, and Tayler (2016) typically focus more specifically on fiction itself and how writers can improve their craft in their podcast *Writing Excuses*. In writer jargon, the scholarly works *tell* the reader about the findings within the fiction writing community, whereas the professional works *show* the reader these findings through their authors' firsthand experiences. Both works consistently illustrate the importance of networking with other writers. Overall, the two types of sources complement one another nicely and provide much insight into the nebulous field of fiction writing.

Conclusion

The fiction writing community in general is a relatively understudied information community. As Desrochers and Pecoskie (2014) note, LIS studies have typically focused on other creative communities, with surprisingly little research being conducted on fiction writers. Thus, it's important to verify that studies done on other creative individuals can indeed be generalized to fiction writers before drawing conclusions. Although research has been done on various aspects of the fiction writing community—including information needs, networking, subtext, plotting, and more—much work remains to be done on literary archives, including what Hobbs (2006) dubs the “psychology of archives” (p. 116)—or the relationship between authors themselves (i.e., the frame of mind from which they're writing, cultural context, occupation, and other influencing factors)—and the texts they produce. With authorial permission, examining writers' archives could reveal an enormous amount of information about written works, including authorial intention, unique struggles encountered throughout the writing process, and so much more. Authors like the aforementioned *Writing Excuses* crew do an excellent job of diminishing this gap, but the practice of authors sharing their archives must become more commonplace for more generalized insight to be gained. Because awareness of fiction writing and the work that goes into it could help budding and established fiction authors alike, more widespread adaptation of this trend is ideal.

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