

Romances of the Archive in Contemporary British Fiction. SUZANNE KEEN. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001. 288 p. ISBN 0-8020-3589-2.

“Romances of the archive” is an umbrella term to describe literature that encompasses many different genres and sub-genres of fiction. This form includes, for example, detective novels, thrillers, historical epics, historiographic metafiction, and types of speculative fiction such as fantasy, time-slip, and occult novels. As a literary term, romances of the archive is relatively new, first defined and analyzed by Suzanne Keen, the author of this study. Keen is a professor of English at Washington and Lee University and a feminist literary critic whose work primarily addresses genre, culture, and narrative theory. By assembling a group of themes, motifs, and devices common to romances of the archive and exploring them through a deep critical analysis of numerous examples, Keen affirms the proliferation of these fictions – which feature the (positive) reimagining of past imperial glory and English heritage – during a time characterized by postcolonialism and postmodernism.

At the onset, Keen clearly outlines her intentions, the limits on her study, and the experience of her approach to literary criticism during her career. Specifically, she aims to situate her study of British contemporary literature in both time and space by defining a distinct literary period from the Suez and Falkland Islands crises to the present, and by acknowledging not just British authors such as A.S. Byatt and H.P. Lovecraft, but also authors from Commonwealth nations such as Carol Shields and Chinua Achebe. Keen examines novels whose characters attempt to uncover the past and, ultimately, truth in archives and collections of documents. Her study, however, does not preclude texts considered to be postmodern. Chapter summaries are provided and Keen clearly indicates that the specialized vocabulary of literary criticism will be curtailed to a point; however, full definitions will be provided when it does appear. She notes: “... an interest in fiction is all that I require of my readers,”¹ and provides a wonderfully thorough bibliography for anyone interested in British fiction, historiography, and postmodernism. And, although well considered and researched, she offers a disclaimer for her World Wide Web citations, whose Internet links were still operational upon writing this review. While Keen’s study offers ample fodder for the student of literary criticism, this review will attempt to briefly consider her principal arguments and also to pry away the issues that relate to the archival community from the rest of the text and bring them to light.

The definition of the term “archives” for the purpose of Keen’s study is the first and most fundamental matter that relates to the archival community at

¹ Suzanne Keen, *Romances of the Archive in Contemporary British Fiction* (Toronto, 2001), p. 9.

large. While it could be argued that the archival community has debated the precise meaning of “archives” to result in perhaps many institutionally-specific notions of the term, Keen’s definition of archives is broad and encompasses not only documents, but also the places in which these documents are kept, purposefully or not. For Keen, documents are items such as textual records, photographs, and rare books, and these documents are found in physical spaces such as archives, libraries, universities, attics, interred caskets, and even secret compartments in doll furniture. Keen also introduces the Foucauldian notion of the term “archive” to offer a deconstructionist approach, which imagines the archive as the domain of discourse, without physical or institutional facets. However, she examines this notion only to posit her definition of archives on the opposite side. Her definition maintains that archives are tangible places and things, although without formal institutional parameters, and include not only archival material, but also library and museum material as well.

Keen assembles seven base characteristics of romance of the archive novels by drawing from one of the most popular novels of this form: A.S. Byatt’s Booker Prize winning *Possession*. Vanguard genres of literature to which romances of the archive owe the majority of their characteristics are fully discussed to illustrate the evolution of the form. The first characteristic of romances of the archive is that the act of research is a fundamental plot feature and this act results in exciting discoveries and an overly tidy, if formulaic, closure to the plot. The second through fourth characteristics revolve around the novel’s character-researcher. Romances of the archive tend to privilege the marginalized researcher who may be inexperienced and on the outside of academic circles and is propelled by gut instinct and risk-taking. Ultimately, this character is transformed and made virtuous by the act of research. Romances of the archive also feature characters that must endure the hardships posed by archival research to the point of martyrdom. Character-researchers will labour in freezing attics and foul basements, and battle ennui and the tedium of sifting through boxes. Romances of the archive feature the rewards that character-researchers are granted upon solving the mystery at hand, for example academic acknowledgement, prestigious research posts, money, and of course, sex and romance. The fifth characteristic of romances of the archive is that key elements of the plot occur in physical spaces where documents exist, such as estate homes, special collection libraries, and archives. Re-imagining the past by way of historical research from a post-imperial perspective is the sixth characteristic. The seventh characteristic asserts that romances of the archive firmly illustrate (in the majority of cases) that “the truth is out there,” and that it can be unearthed by examining the material traces of the past.

The notion of definitive historical truth is a loaded issue in the current environment of postmodernist thinking, and indeed Keen acknowledges this by examining works of fiction deemed to be postmodern. These postmodern

romances of the archive (of which there are few) feature fugitive facts and murky evidence, where truth (and the records) evasively disappear into thin air just as they are about to be grasped. By including postmodern fiction in her study, she examines its primary goal to question the authority of history and to disenfranchise fixed knowledge and the "One Truth." However, she goes on to claim that the majority of "[r]omances of the archive repeatedly insist that there is a truth and that it can be found in a library or a hidden cache of documents."² The postmodernism debate is one that has been featured in the pages of *Archivaria* in recent years and is being explored in many other disciplines and professional arenas today. The tension between the currency of literary, postmodern theories on the one hand, and the romances of the archive's affirmation that the truth of history can be revealed through records to correct injustice and vindicate the innocent victim on the other, runs continuously through the entire study.

Whether archivists and archival institutions believe that historical truth can be garnered from rigorous archival research or not is not an issue in this study. Instead, Keen evaluates (through literature) how archival materials are put to use within the history versus heritage debate and portrays archivists as neutral players in the manipulation and re-presentation of history for the purpose of a national English heritage in a post-imperial world. When the archivist does emerge from her neutral ground, she is either characterized as an angel saviour of an ignored past that is dismissed to dark corners, or worse, neglected to the point of destruction; or she is a demon member of the occult that hoards and conceals the dark secrets to which the records bear witness, by concocting labyrinthine and remote places in which the materials are stored. Chained catalogues, reading room booby traps, and poisonous drugs are the qualities of perversely inaccessible archives featured in some romance of the archive novels, especially those with roots in gothic fiction. Similarly, records and archival material also succumb to the polarity of the heaven and hell attributions. The records in Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, for example, furnish Good Memory and proper destinies are fulfilled for the benefit of all. However, in much of H.P. Lovecraft's work, the records once discovered and decoded lead to a catastrophic unleashing of the most demonic forces that endanger the very existence of humanity, and in the process the spiralling insanity of the researcher ensues. The only option remaining to the characters in these types of romances of the archive is to destroy the records in order to obliterate the transfer of knowledge and save future generations from utter annihilation. A harbinger of things to come? Let's hope not.

Keen's study succeeds in providing a window through which archivists can look in on the way that literature and the literary community defines and understands our institutions (or lack of institutions), our professionals, and

2 Ibid., p. 27.

also the subject of our work – the archival materials. There appears to be little comprehension of the professional differences that subtly separate the work and roles of librarians, rare book curators, archivists, paper-collecting scholars, and others. Indeed, the objects of study attributed to each profession differ fundamentally also. Keen's book practically stands alone as one of the only studies that analyses the portrayal of archives and archival research in English fiction, and these "archives" are the melting pot of people and places for the purveyance of cryptic documents, ancient books, and historical oddities. This perhaps may point to one of the many warnings that archivists must heed: to communicate to others outside the profession what it is that archivists do and what are the materials that we have a sacred trust to acquire and to keep. The few portrayals of archivists either illicit chuckles of stereotype recognition or a disturbing feeling of unease and fear (the poison-lacing archivist comes to mind).

Keen also succeeds in cultivating an interest in romance of the archive novels in her readers and brings them closer to the intricacies of their plots, characters, motifs and devices – too close perhaps. Unfortunately, although necessarily, Keen's study is swarming with plot spoilers. Readers beware! *Romances of the Archive* shamelessly reveals full plot summaries and unravels mysteries and devious character motivations for numerous novels right before your eyes. At times, several novels are being described at once, which results in a sometimes confusing jumble of characters, settings and plots. However, Keen's study would be entirely incomplete without an explanation of the works themselves, and readers can take solace in the fact that her critique of this form is not absolutely exhaustive.

Romances of the Archive is an extremely thorough and sophisticated analysis of a narrow slice of British contemporary fiction in which authors address the wasteland of imperial British glory by way of research narratives that evoke the nostalgia and romance of bygone eras. She examines numerous works of fiction to argue her concept of the romance of the archive form and provides extensive examples throughout each chapter. Other than the clumsiness of endnotes rather than footnotes, the text is straight-forward and approachable for those not acquainted with the vocabulary of literary criticism. Archivists may find that the most satisfying and inspiring aspect of *Romances of the Archive* is the affirmation that archival research, while at times rigorously difficult, is rewarding, and that records can reveal exciting and thrilling stories of past lives lived that can deeply affect our experience in the here and now.

April Miller
National Archives of Canada