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Information professionals have done little to determine the information needs of fiction writers. Assuming that fiction writers have information needs, can their needs be differentiated from other users? This study consists of seven interviews of North Carolina novelists to examine what information sources fiction writers used and where they looked for it. The interview schedule was based upon recommendations given in research guides for writers.

This study suggests that writers' research habits are individualistic. A possible relationship exists between other occupations and writers' use of libraries. Library service to writers elicits few direct complaints, yet writers still do not use libraries as often as they could. The writers in this subject group were not obviously influenced by advice books about research. More research might involve a division of the population into beginning and experienced writers.

Authorship

Research techniques

Surveys – Information needs

RESEARCH NEEDS OF FICTION WRITERS

by
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of the School of Information and Library Science
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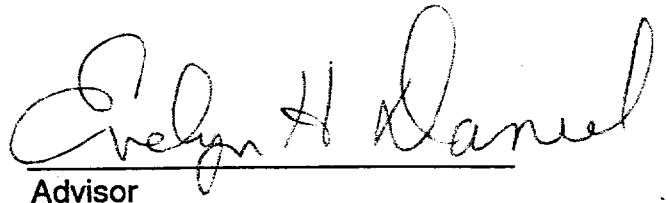

Advisor

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Various manuals, handbooks and guides intended to be used by fiction writers provide advice about how to write and submit a manuscript. Relatively few of these comment on the process of researching to obtain the specific facts necessary to produce a credible piece of fiction. Some books that mention research only provide a short introduction to library use which ends with a recommendation to ask a librarian for help. But do the librarians know how to help fiction writers? Do the writers want the help of the librarians?

Library and information science journals contain many articles describing the process of historical and scholarly research for producing factual articles about past and/or literary people or events. As a special user group, fiction writers are not often discussed in library literature. Little thought has been given to the idea of fiction writers having needs distinct from the needs of other user groups. This user group has yet to be examined in any depth by library professionals.

Assuming that fiction writers have information needs, one must determine if they have particular needs and characteristics that separate them from other library users. To begin, one can assume that fiction writers must do some factual research to write with any credibility. "Veracity is one of the most desirable traits that [a writer's] book can have. Without veracity, [a writer] will have no credibility, and without credibility, [a writer] will have no readers and no publisher" (Stevenson, 1987, 32). Also, the direction of the research needed to complete a book is not always predictable. To obtain the level of plausibility that writers call the suspension of disbelief no obvious factual flaws should exist in a fiction story. If

flaws exist, they may jar the reader out of the illusion the writer has attempted to create.

The immensity of researching for fiction can often be a problem. Research guidebooks offer strategies for finding material. Many of them stress the importance of enlisting the help of a librarian. Horowitz (1984, 1986) and McCormick (1988), both librarians, guide the writer through various sources. In their books, they explain techniques to find information in libraries and point to materials and resources not available in libraries, such as experts and public records. This type of book is invaluable to writers who do not know how to research, but none of these books examine the actual behavior and practices of fiction writers.

If the research behavior and needs of fiction writers are to be understood by library and information professionals, asking the fiction writers how they do research for their fiction writing is recommended. This study was designed as an exploration of fiction writers' research methods by interviewing seven North Carolina novelists. In preparing the study, the assumption was made that the writers' research methods resembled the research techniques explained by Horowitz (1984, 1986) and McCormick (1988).

Literature Review

In the field of general advice books for writing, there were too many books that offered a section or a little advice on writing to note them all here. However, Applebaum's *How to Get Happily Published* (1992) ends with a brief annotated bibliography of writer's resources. Shuman (1992) in *Resources for Writers*, a

more comprehensive bibliography, arranges the titles into many useful categories. Atchity's *A Writer's Time* (1988) includes research in his advice on how writers should divide their working time. Also, the market serials, like *Fiction Writer's Market*, often contain articles on research. Burack's *The Writer's Handbook*, another yearly publication, is entirely comprised of useful short articles interesting to writers of all types. These sometimes include ones on research.

Books or articles specifically about research for fiction were easier to find. The books included Horowitz's *Knowing Where to Look: The Ultimate Guide to Research* (1986), which contained advice to fiction writers, and *A Writer's Guide to Research* (1988); McCormick's *The Fiction Writer's Research Handbook* (1988); and Hoffman's *Research for Writers* (1986). Horowitz and McCormick are librarians. Hoffman has operated a research service for writers for many years. *The American Library Association Guide to Information Access* (1994) also included Plotnik's chapter specifically on writing resources.

Two popular magazines of the writing profession, *The Writer* and *Writer's Digest*, have printed several articles pertaining to research for fiction over the years. Crane (1965, February) specifically targeted his advice for the mystery writer. Gores (1970, February) explored the possible research sources outside the library. Hearon (1978, February) advised on fiction research through anecdotes from personal experience. Briskin (1979, February) wrote about the use of photography in research. Smith (1979, September) detailed his experiences researching outside the library.

Even though information professionals have been looking at user information needs for many years, only Kuhlthau (1991) has had any serious impact on my thinking about this particular user group. Her theory of the stages of a search from the user's perspective resembled some of the research patterns from the writing advice books. She proposes six stages for the information search process: initiation, selection, exploration, formulation, collection, and presentation. Using a variety of objects, she explored the thoughts, feelings and actions common to all six stages and incorporated these into her model.

Another way that library professionals have looked at writers is in soliciting their opinions of library services in various contexts. Stanek (1993, October) focuses on an author's opinion of how the librarians treated authors during visits for book talks. O'Rourke (1994) includes writers in her survey of how users perceive libraries' contributions to cultural change. Chepesiuk (1994) briefly interviewed several writers on their opinions on libraries. Hoffert (1989, November 1) interviewed North Carolina writers about working in the state and how they viewed various programs offered across the state.

Two authors, Anne Rice and James Michener, were interviewed about writing, research, and libraries. Donovan (1990, October 15) asked Rice what libraries she had used in the past and her opinions of them. Rice praised libraries and said they were a source of inspiration. Pitts (1986) asked Michener about writing about research and using research assistants. Michener did most of the research for his thirty books himself.

Some information professionals believe that writers should not do all their research themselves. Carter (1985, October 4) interviewed Renni Browne and Daniel Starer about the research services they had opened to help writers. Browne's The Editorial Department and Starer's Research for Writers offer writers a variety of paid services, including ghostwriting, editing, and factual research in varying degrees of depth. Attempting to assist their local writers, some librarians in Alabama created a writer's resource collection (Library creates special collection for writers, 1991).

Since so little was said in library literature about fiction writers' research habits, the advice books for writers appeared more important. The research guides by Hoffman (1986), Horowitz (1984, 1986), and McCormick (1988) offered source by source descriptions of how to do research. All three authors divided up the types of information in a similar manner, discussing the location of the sources within the sections on each type of source. Without any relevant studies in the library literature, the divisions in these advice books made sense as a starting point in asking writers about their research methods.

Methodology

The participants in this study were published novelists from North Carolina. Publication of one or more novels and residency in North Carolina were the selection criteria. Some of the novelists were contacted through the help of the North Carolina Writers' Network. The others were chosen by recommendation of their peers. Of the approximately ten novelists who were

contacted, seven chose to participate in the study. The initial contact was by telephone followed by a letter with an informed consent form (See Appendix A).

For the interviews, six were in person, and one was conducted by phone. Of the six, five were in the participants' homes or offices. To construct the interview schedule (See Appendix B), I used the basic divisions of information from the McCormick (1988), Hoffman (1986), and Horowitz (1984, 1986) books. The novelists were first asked to think of the kinds of information they used while doing research for their fiction books. Then they were asked about specific kinds of books, other information materials, and experts. The novelists were then asked if they used any "how-to" or "market" books in their research in the last year. These last two groups of books were chosen because the information in these types of books, while not necessary to gather the facts needed for credibility in fiction, is often important in finishing and selling the novel. The "how-to" books are any of the advice for writers books, and the "market" books include the previously mentioned market serials and other books on how to sell fiction writing. After this, the novelists were asked about the writers' organizations with which they were involved. The expectation was that some of these organizations would provide research assistance to their members. Then the novelists were asked to identify and detail any problems they recalled while doing the research for their novels. Finally, they were asked to name the research tool they did not already have that they wanted most.

When all seven interviews were completed, I recorded the individual pieces of information from my interview notes onto cards so that they could be

sorted and viewed separately. To begin, I sorted the answers to see how many participants recalled using the various kinds of sources listed in the protocol. Then I looked for which kinds of sources the participants produced the most commentary. Finally, I sorted to find any major trends the responses indicated. In addition, I compiled a list of individual titles of specific books mentioned by the novelists.

Results

All the novelists interviewed acknowledged having done some research related to their fiction writing in the past 12 months. One hesitated at first, because he had not needed to do research for his last novel, but he remembered that he had already begun research for a future project. No one needed a further explanation of what was meant by research for this study.

When asked what kind of information was needed, responses tended to be divided between the general and the specific. Specific responses were more common. Answers such as "historical" were followed by examples of more specific subjects and sources. Novelist D said that his research was an on-going process. He kept up with various subjects constantly while reserving specific questions for the second draft of any particular novel.

No particular pattern was clear when the novelists were first asked about where they found their information, but over the course of the interviews each was able to indicate his or her preferences. Novelist D said that researching and borrowing books from a library was not appealing because the loan periods were

not long enough. He preferred buying books because then he could keep them as long as he needed. Novelist A also emphasized a preference for using personal copies of research materials but did use special materials, such as maps, in a library.

Novelist F preferred neither to buy nor to borrow but looked first at his local library, then checked with friends and colleagues, before trying to buy the materials. If these strategies did not work, he would return to the library to request the aid of a librarian in finding what he needed. Novelist E had trouble finding anything at the local library, and so simply ordered the required books. He said that he prefers reading books rather than articles or encyclopedia entries, because he seeks the feel of the information, not just the facts. Even though Novelist G stated that she bought a lot of books, she later said that she mostly used library books, and, on one occasion, received some help from a local used book store owner. She also said that she usually does not talk to people about her fiction writing.

Novelists B and C emphasized their use of people for finding information. Novelist C, in explaining that she spoke to an artist, said that people were good sources of information, especially for jargon. Interviewing people and reading bulletin boards were important to Novelist B. Later, she explained that she used to be a newspaper reporter and that it was easy to ask around to find a person who was an expert on a given subject. When prompted about specific contact with librarians or use of libraries, both Novelists B and C said that they

telephoned various reference departments for answers to questions. Novelist B said phoning was especially helpful for finding quotations.

Six novelists said that they used general encyclopedias, with *Encyclopædia Britannica* being named the most often. Novelist C was the only one who said that she used general encyclopedias at a library, although Novelist F borrowed volumes from a relative. Also, Novelists D and F had encyclopedias on their computers. Four novelists used subject encyclopedias. For the most part, they could not recall exact titles, just the subjects. Only two of the specific subject encyclopedias were used in a library. The rest were from the novelists' personal collections.

Seven novelists used dictionaries, with Novelist D also having one on his computer. Various Webster's titles were mentioned the most often, not surprising since the name "Webster" has gone into the public domain. Two novelists said they had thesauruses; two had *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary in Slipcase with Reading Glass*; two had Bible dictionaries; and two had visual dictionaries. All of the dictionaries were from the novelists' personal collections.

Four novelists said they used almanacs. There were four almanac titles mentioned. Novelist B collected *The World Almanac & Book of Facts* from 1964 to the present. Novelist G had three different almanacs, including the *Farmer's Almanac* and the *New York City Almanac*. All of the almanacs were owned by the novelists.

None of the novelists identified anything they had used in the past twelve months as yearbooks, although some of the sources they mentioned later were periodic in nature and were published yearly, such as *Literary Marketplace*, *The Writer's Market*, and *Editor's and Publisher's Yearbook*. Only two novelists used sources they identified as directories. There seemed to be some confusion about the meaning of research guides. Two novelists said they used guides or bibliographies from both their personal collections and libraries.

Six novelists said they used periodicals, although Novelist G said she did not do much research in the periodical room. She did, however, subscribe to a few newspapers to get a local view of different communities. Three others subscribed to newspapers or magazines for research purposes. Novelist D included several general science magazines, such as *Scientific American*, *The Sciences*, and *Science News* in his list of research subscriptions. He also subscribed to *Mac User* and *MacWorld*. Novelist B said she keeps an article file. Three novelists said they used specific newspaper articles for their writing. Some of the sources came from libraries.

Every novelist said they used specific books, that is, books not included in the other categories, for their writing. The types ranged from biographies to popular novels. These are listed in Appendix C along with other books that the novelists mentioned by name.

Only Novelist G said she used government documents. She used various publications and maps distributed by the U.S. Forestry Service. None of the participants used any statistical sources.

As with the research guides, the novelists seemed a little confused about biographical sources, citing both biographies and biographical dictionaries. Three novelists said they used biographical sources. The sources were mixed between personal collections and libraries.

Five novelists used historical time lines or chronologies in their research. No title was mentioned more than once. All the sources listed were from the novelists' personal collections.

None of the novelists said they used manuscripts or archives in their research, although Novelist G contacted and visited a museum related to her work. She bought several books from the museum bookstore.

Four novelists used pictures. Three of the novelists bought certain materials just to get the pictures. Novelist F said he was particularly frustrated that better pictures did not exist for a historical setting he was using in one of his novels. He said he had a hard time visualizing ordinary things such as clothing and views from the streets, and that more pictures would be helpful. He sometimes found children's books which contained useful illustrations. He also used a visual dictionary for pictures of specific items. Novelist G bought several guidebooks to get photographs of Nevada.

Six novelists mentioned using maps and city or regional guidebooks. Only one novelist specifically mentioned atlases. Only Novelist A used an on-line database. He said he used one of the newspaper databases available on the on-line catalog at a nearby research library.

Six of the novelists said they had talked to people or experts for their research. Novelist E intended to talk to a violin maker, but had not yet at the time of the interview. Through a mutual contact, Novelist G spoke to a medical technician and toured a dialysis unit. Another way to find an expert, said Novelist B, is to contact a relevant organization and ask the contact to recommend someone. She also said that if one makes it easy, people will answer almost any question and that by cultivating a network of people, one will never have to use a reference book. Novelist C also advocated just asking around the community. Novelist F interviewed a friend who was a Bible scholar.

Opinions about "how-to" and "market" books were mixed. Four novelists mentioned or used "how-to" books. Not all four actually used the books in the last 12 months, but they had some titles to recommend that had been helpful to them in the past. Only three novelists used market books. Novelist G only buys the market books for her students. Novelist D said he did not use market books because he had an agent. Novelist A bought a science fiction market book to send to his agent, because editors change so often. He felt that the genre was too specific for his agent to be able to keep track of the changes in the market through the usual sources.

Several novelists recommended titles from Writer's Digest Books, a publisher who specializes in writing-related books. Two series in particular were mentioned, the Howdunit Series, and the Elements of Fiction. A complete list of currently in print titles from these series is included in Appendix C. Writer's

Digest Books also publishes several of the yearly market books, such as *The Writer's Market* and *Novel and Short Story Writer's Market*.

Six novelists were members of writers' organizations. Novelist A used to be a member of a national organization, but left it because he thought he was not getting any benefit from his membership. The novelists mentioned 13 different organizations, ranging in size from a local writers' group to international organizations. In general, the novelists could not recall any formal research assistance services provided by these organizations. Novelist E said that the Science Fiction Writers of America have a private section on Genie, an on-line service. Most of the novelists said that they could get help from other writers in the same organizations, thus the organizations themselves provide an informal network. Novelist C said that the only official service she knows that the National Writer's Union provides is legal assistance for members. Novelist B said that the Carolina Crime Writers host speakers like police detectives and bail bond agents, and provide transcripts of the talks.

Six novelists reported various problems they had with their research. Novelist A said that he had some trouble with a library assistant not knowing where to find the materials. Novelist C had difficulty finding a movie market book. She also failed to find a foreign magazine article and book she needed. Novelist F, as mentioned before, had trouble finding pictures of ordinary historical things and other historical information relevant to the period in his novel. Novelist E could not find any books on violin making or Welsh mythology at his local public library. He also discovered that many of the books he needed

were out of print. Novelist G said that research was not the hard part, and that she had more problems writing than researching.

When asked about the research tool each wanted and did not already have, most of the novelists shrugged before searching for an answer. Two novelists said that they wanted to go on-line. Novelist D said the computer was already the most useful tool for storing and organizing the information he needed to write. He hoped that libraries would be able to keep their budgets. Novelist C wanted her own set of the full *Oxford English Dictionary*. Novelist F wanted his own set of encyclopedias. Novelist A wished for more money and room to expand his private collection.

One of the advantages of interviewing people instead of surveying them is that the participants are free to stray from the questions. Several of the novelists spoke about writing techniques they used to explain some of their research habits. In detailing his on-going research habits, Novelist D explained his technique of "black boxing" parts of the story when he did not know the information and it was not necessary for the story. One of the examples he used was writing that a character went off to his or her job, naming the job, but not explaining it because the job was not relevant to the story.

Novelist F said that he tends to shape his story by what he knows. He also used a type of source I had not thought to include in the study, a video tape of a walking tour of Los Angeles. Novelist E said that he was not likely to ever use research assistants, because he feared they may just give him a list of bare

facts. Novelist B said that she researches from the general to the specific, often starting in the children's room to get the very basic information on a subject.

Four of the novelists also commented specifically about information services they had encountered in the past year. Novelist G praised inter-library loan as "the best invention since the birth control pill." Novelist E explained and praised an out-of-print search service he had found. Novelist C mentioned a new online reserve service available at her local public library. Novelists B and C said that telephoning reference questions into public libraries was much easier than going to them.

Much of what the novelists said in the interviews was anecdotal. They related most of the topics, problem descriptions, and specific books back to a particular novel they had written. The novelists had the most to say about specific books and the initial listing of their research topics at the beginning of the interview. After that, they had more to say about talking to people and experts than any other type of resource. Although "how-to" and "market" books were not the most widely used sources, they elicited specific opinions from the novelists who spoke about them. Obviously, the novelists had the least to say about the sources they did not use: yearbooks, statistical sources, manuscripts, and archives.

Discussion

By the time I was conducting the last interview, one particular trend had already become evident. Overall, the novelists prefer researching from their

private collections instead of using libraries or other outside sources. The only two novelists who more often used a library first were on the faculty of major research universities.

Closer analysis does not contradict this observation, but does give a clearer idea of the circumstances in which the other novelists would use resources beyond their own collections. The private collections of the novelists most often consisted of general reference tools, such as encyclopedias, almanacs, and dictionaries. When looking for information on a particular subject, the novelists look wherever necessary to find it, but within the boundaries they have set themselves. If it is important enough, they will buy or request the book through inter-library loan. Some of the novelists buy their own books whenever possible for both speed and convenience. When a book store orders a book that is still in print, it can arrive as quickly as three days, while inter-library loan can take as long as a month. Thus the specific subject research is divided between library and other outside research and personal collections.

Although complete information on this is not available, some relationship between previous or other occupations and research habits seems to exist. Occupational information other than novel writing was not formally requested, but several of the novelists mentioned it. As stated before, the two university faculty members tend to use libraries more regularly than the others. One novelist worked as an assistant collection development librarian many years ago. He tends to avoid libraries. The novelist who said she used to be a journalist is one

of the biggest proponents of talking to people to get information. Another novelist still writes free-lance factual magazine articles. He researches his factual articles more extensively, and uses his personal collection more for his fiction. Finally, the novelist who seems to have the least use for libraries has worked in book stores for years. Although the number of interviews was too few to be conclusive, the two extremes of the faculty members and the book seller indicate that it may be useful to look into the possibility of occupational relationship in a future study.

The interview schedule was based on the categorizing of information and the techniques described in the research advice books by McCormick (1988), Horowitz (1984, 1986), and Hoffman (1986). Since these books were written specifically with writers in mind, fiction writers included, it was assumed that novelists would research according to the pattern established in these books. The interviews indicate that the methods novelists use to research are as varied as the topics they research. A broader study would be necessary to see if there is an overall pattern to fiction writers' research methods that is different from that described in the research advice books.

A better understanding of the use of the "how-to" and "market" books could be obtained by studying beginning writers instead of published novelists. The comments that these books were no longer needed and the recommendations made by the participants indicate that these books may be more useful to writers at earlier stages in their careers.

The novelists' opinions about libraries and librarians are generally positive. The main complaints are about loan periods and convenience. Many of the novelists have nothing negative to say about libraries; they simply do not use them. Novelist A's complaint about the student library assistant not being able to find the materials is the only negative comment about a staff person in the library. Since this study was by personal interview, it was not possible to conceal my identity as an aspiring librarian from the participants. Perhaps a textual analysis of writers' biographies and journals or some form of unobtrusive observation could provide a less biased view of libraries and librarians.

The novelists' lack of creative responses when asked about the tool they most want does not indicate any particular dissatisfaction with library services or the novelists' established research habits. I imagined this question as an open wish list. I am surprised that the novelists want so little more than they already have.

For the future, I believe it is possible to get a clearer idea of what it is that writers think they need. This study indicates that writers have their own research habits that are not necessarily influenced by the books published to guide them. Instead of envisioning a perfect library collection to help writers perhaps it would be better to look for recommended elements for a personal collection. Thus writers would need to look outside their own collections only for specific subject research for a particular story, although it would be useful to include the general reference books most writers need in library reference collections. With most of the general books in reference collections, a smaller number of materials would

be needed for a special writing resource collection, mainly the "how-to" and "market" books, and a handful of "writer's guide" books.

In summary, this study suggests that a writer's research habits are individualistic. A possible relationship exists between other or previous occupation and writers' tendency to use libraries for research. Library service to writers elicits few direct complaints, but positive attitudes have little relationship to library use. The writers in this subject group were not obviously influenced by advice books about research. More research into writers' information needs would possibly involve a further division of the population into beginning and experienced writers.

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Appendix A

Consent Form Research Needs of Fiction Writers

I agree to participate in a study of the information needs and research habits of fiction writers. This study is being conducted by Shannon Russell, a master's degree candidate at the School of Information and Library Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The objective of this study is to understand better the information needs and research habits of fiction writers so that librarians and other information providers may be able to give better assistance to other fiction writers with similar needs.

I understand that Shannon Russell will interview 6-10 novelists. The interviews will last approximately one half hour each. Each interview will be recorded, if permitted, otherwise notes will be taken with pencil and paper. Material used from this interview will be anonymous unless I specify otherwise. No one except Shannon Russell and Dr. Evelyn Daniel, the faculty advisor for this project, will have access to the interview tapes or transcripts.

I understand that there is no personal risk or discomfort directly involved with this research. Participation is completely voluntary, and there is no penalty for not participating. I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue participation in this study at any time.

If I have any questions connected to my participation in this study, I may contact Shannon Russell at (919) 933-7689 or Dr. Evelyn Daniel at (919) 962-8062. I may also contact the UNC Academic Affairs Institutional Review Board if I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a research subject.

Academic Affairs Institutional Review Board
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Subject's Signature

Print Subject's Name

Date

Appendix B

Interview Schedule

1. In the past 12 months, have you done any research for topics related to your writing?

(If needed, clarify what is meant by research, i.e., searching for information needed to write your book.)

(If NO) Have you ever done research of this kind?

(If needed) Examples of this might be historical or scientific or market research, more specifically, the research for your last book.

2. What kind of information did you need? Where did you search for this information?

People?

Organizations/Places?

Sources?

(If not mentioned) Did you use a library or ask a librarian?

Please detail one or two instances.

3. In your research of the past 12 months, have you consulted ... Which ones? Where?

general encyclopedias

subject encyclopedias

dictionaries

almanacs

yearbooks

directories

bibliographies/research guides

periodical articles

specific books

government documents

statistical sources

biographical sources

historical outlines/chronologies

manuscripts

archives

pictures/photographs

maps/gazetteers/atlas

online databases

...Have you used any local experts? How did you find them?

...Have you used any "how-to" books? Which ones? Were they helpful?

...Have you used "market" books? Which ones? Were they helpful?

4. Do you belong to any writers' organizations?
...Do they provide research assistance? In what way?
...Have you used that assistance?
5. Did you have any problems while you were doing your research? What were they?
6. If you could have any "tool" to help with your research, what would it be?

Appendix C

The novelists mentioned many specific book titles during the interviews. Sometimes the novelists apparently misremembered the titles or not they did not give enough information for me to provide a complete citation. I completed as many of the citations as were possible with reasonable effort to produce this list. The incomplete citations are at the end of the list.

Selected List of Titles Identified by Participants

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The Bible

Bible dictionary

Biographical dictionary

Chronology of the 20th century

Classical dictionary

Computer dictionary

Craftsman's handbook

Dictionary of classical antiquities

Dictionary of classical mythology

Directory of literary agents

Directory of poets and writers

Geographical dictionary

The guide to Pinacoteca [art gallery] in Siena

Italian-English dictionary

Law dictionary

Oxford encyclopedia of art

Oxford encyclopedia of music

What's what [visual dictionary]

- *Howdunit* series by Writer's Digest
- ◆ *Elements of Fiction* series by Writer's Digest