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Curating the Papers of Best-Selling Authors:  
A Preliminary Case Study of the John Grisham Papers

by

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Guest Editor

In 1989, Mississippi State University (MSU) acquired the papers of alumnus, lawyer and Mississippi State legislator John Grisham, who was at the time selling his first novel *A Time to Kill* out of the trunk of his car. Though the first accession of papers was small, consisting of the early papers of Grisham's legislative career, the acquisition was an exciting one. Mississippi State University has long exhibited pride in its alumni, and the MSU Library's collection of papers reflected that pride and connection. Although University President Don Zacharias and Library Directory George Lewis certainly had high hopes for Grisham's writing career, neither of them could have foreseen the influence of first novelist John Grisham on the future of the university, the library, and on the Manuscripts Division of Special Collections. For John Grisham's second novel *The Firm* and the subsequent film made from it launched a career which propelled Grisham and the Mississippi State University Library into an archival relationship which appears to be fairly unique in archival history: an archival relationship in which the manuscripts of a best-selling author are acquired as a complete body during the lifetime of the author, and in this case, during the period of the author's greatest celebrity. This article will document this archivist's experience in curating

the John Grisham Papers with special attention given to acquisition, donor agreements, research value, demand, exhibits and processing issues.

In thinking about writing this article, this author attempted to determine whether MSU's experience with the John Grisham Papers is a unique experience. Answering this question turned out to be not an easy matter. Searching various databases and the Internet for such papers in archives turns up wonderful collections of the works of literary figures whose works were acquired after the authors had built a literary reputation. However, the search has to date brought to light no significant and complete archives of current best-selling authors. Although no comprehensive search of best-selling authors was possible, this author ultimately concluded that there are no significant bodies of papers of current best-selling authors in archives, or if they do exist, they are archived under conditions of secrecy. Given the current collectors market, it is safe to say that many manuscripts of best-selling authors are in private hands and will come on the market in the future. So in the end, it was necessary to make a hypothesis that archiving the Grisham Papers is a fairly unique experience in the archival world. Readers and researchers are welcome and encouraged to challenge this hypothesis.

How does an archives acquire the papers of a best-selling author? Acquiring the papers of an author after the author has achieved best-selling status almost certainly necessitates planning, hard work, building donor relationships, and maintaining a high profile that ensures the prestige of the archives. It may also be a function of how much money the archives has to purchase the collections, since these papers acquire monetary value because of their connection with the celebrity author. Conversely, acquiring the papers of a best-selling author in the early stages of his career may be more a function of happenstance and circumstance. Such was the case with Mississippi State University's acquisition of the papers of John Grisham. Ultimately, luck and attention to detail in documenting the university and its alumni as well as the state and its writing heritage led the university into a new adventure: documenting the twentieth century phenomenon of the career of a best-selling author.

Archives acquire collections for use. But in the case of collections of current best-selling authors, several factors may require that the collection be closed, or partially closed. In honing the donor agreement, the archives would be prudent to take into account the author's point of view. The best-selling author will be rightly concerned to protect his/her livelihood by keeping his writing methods secret. Writers' collections may also contain manuscripts of unpublished books or scripts that have monetary value to the author, who may want to publish in the future. Moreover, the author's image and reputation are very much at issue in his/her ability to continue to attract an audience. Recent posthumous archival discoveries such as that of Martin Luther King's plagiarism may lead writers to be cautious about opening papers. Closing the papers may also serve to reassure the author that he and his publicist have control over the author's image.

Demand for a best-selling author's papers is driven by research value. What are some of the uses of literary papers? It is a given that writers of articles and books are going to be interested in the celebrity author's biography. In the case of Grisham, there has been a demand for information for adult and young adult biographies and articles, interviews and other products. While some scholars disdain the best-selling author as not worthy of literary criticism, others are not so discriminating. In fact, the author's celebrity will almost guarantee that there will be a demand for his papers by those who want to write literary criticism works. In Grisham's case, at least two book-length works of criticism of Grisham's works have been written despite the fact that his literary papers are closed. While there has been some demand for the use of the papers for biography and criticism, there has been just as much interest from budding authors who want to learn to write a best-selling novel. There has also been interest from teachers of writing who are looking for collections that teach the art of writing from the first creative idea to the last stages of the creative process. Perhaps the greatest and most surprising demand has been from elementary and high school readers who enjoy reading the novels and are writing papers on Grisham as an author. Testimony to the juvenile interest in Grisham are the many fan letters to Grisham which are a part of the Grisham papers. Fortunately for MSU, the recent explosion of Internet information on Grisham has freed the staff from much of the burden of providing answers to specific questions and sending copies of articles about Grisham.

In the case of literary papers that are closed to research, the matter of exhibit will usually be a non-issue. Circumstances were again different in the case of the Grisham Papers. Those circumstances were the creation of the John Grisham Room in the MSU Library, which opened in 1998 through a generous donation of John and Renee Grisham to the MSU Library. Intended as a Mississippi Writer's Room, the Grisham Room ultimately became the venue for the continuing display of portions of the Grisham papers. Since its opening, the room has hosted tours for individuals and groups who are interested in the John Grisham Papers. The Grisham Room has also been hugely successful as a place for holding library and university receptions, meetings and other events. The opening of the John Grisham Room has certainly contributed to the uniqueness of MSU's experience, since it has also created a demand for the papers. Readers and potential researchers from all over the world have discovered the John Grisham Room and learned of the existence of the Grisham Papers on the Library's Internet site. While the exhibit does fulfill the desire for knowledge of the casual viewer of the Grisham exhibits, it has served to frustrate those who have interpreted that they would be able to see all of Grisham's Papers in the room, despite the fact that the Internet site clearly states that the papers are closed. Three John Grisham exhibits have been mounted to date and each exhibit has placed on view a different group of materials. Anyone who has viewed all three exhibits could certainly have accumulated considerable knowledge of Grisham's writing methods. But because the literary papers have been officially closed, some strict policies had to be made about the use of exhibits. These policies are few but important: no papers are taken out of the exhibit cases either to be viewed or copied; and no literary papers are available for viewing other than on exhibit, even if they have been exhibited before. Adhering to these policies has enabled the Library to answer some of the demand for the papers, while still honoring the donor agreement by keeping the great bulk of the literary papers closed to researchers.

The necessity to continually exhibit the papers of John Grisham has had a decided effect on MSU's archival program. For one thing, it requires that the Library continually receive new material which can be used for exhibit. Part of this demand has been satisfied by an agreement with the publisher by which publicity materials for each new Grisham book are received as produced. These materials, together with recent articles, are exhibited in a case outside the room, which is easily changed and augmented. But to maintain some currency in the larger exhibit area, the ongoing body of Grisham papers must be regularly received, listed, identified and evaluated for exhibit purposes. Since Grisham has been producing novels at the rate of one per year since 1989, this task has proved quite challenging and has required the addition of staff and students.

The need to fully process large additions to the papers at regular intervals has been the most unanticipated effect of acquiring and exhibiting the papers of a best-selling author. The size of the manuscript material in the Grisham Papers have grown from one cubic foot in 1989 to more than seventy cubic feet of papers in 2004. Of this group, forty-two cubic feet has been processed in two groups. The first group of feet of papers was processed in fairly ordinary fashion by a talented student under the supervision of the Manuscripts Librarian. An advanced archival practicum student was able to take the inventory created by the student and write the scope and content note, biographical statement and assign subjects and personal names for the creation of the first finding aid.

With the need to create an exhibit in the Grisham Room, additional materials were solicited and received, and a new and equally talented student was assigned to the processing of the papers. In order to keep all manuscript materials for a single book together, the literary series was arranged in chronological order by book title. However, we were surprised to find that the new addition of materials contained manuscripts for books which had been processed in the first addition. Because it was anticipated that this might be the case with future additions, the Manuscripts Coordinator made the decision to use a finding aid technique that had been previously used for the records of organizations, where the continual addition of materials in ongoing series poses the problem of how to keep the organization logical without re-boxing materials. The method used is to arrange, list, assign folder numbers and box to each addition of the papers in established series order. After the addition is processed, rather than adding the new folder list as a separate inventory to the end of the previous folder list as was the past custom, materials were added into the computerized inventory in the series and

subseries to which they belong, regardless of folder and box number. A simple location guide gives the location of folders within boxes. This method requires a little bit of understanding on the part of the archives staff, but should yield benefits for the researcher since it allows the researcher to peruse the finding aid and see at a glance all materials related to a single literary product, no matter when the archives received it.

In summary, the acquisition of the John Grisham Papers by MSU has been a unique and worthwhile archival venture, benefitting the university, the public and the author. The university's reputation has been immeasurably enhanced over the fifteen years since the papers were acquired. The university has provided a service to the public during the period of greatest visibility of the author by making available a sampling of the papers on exhibit. At the same time, the larger body of papers is being continually processed, and will be ready for research when the papers are opened. Finally, by committing his papers to an archive at an early point in his career, the author has been relieved of the burden of caring for the papers, and has a guarantee that the papers will survive intact so that they can be used by future scholars.

