Paulette Rothbauer and Marni Harrington
The University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada

Honouring a Love of Books and Reading in Library and Information Science (Paper)

Abstract or Résumé:

This paper presents the findings of a research study into the "love of books" trope in Library and Information Science. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 23 MLIS students between February and August of 2019. Interview questions were designed to elicit motivations for entering the field and taking the degree. The study findings show that students' decisions are animated by a love of books and reading, a love of libraries, and by a desire to work with and serve others. We argue that by putting love and desire at the centre of analysis the findings can be understand as positive affective engagement with information, information processes, information institutions, and information practices.

1. Introduction: being motivated by love

The many benefits of reading – individually and collectively – have been enumerated countless times by LIS researchers and by scholars working across the disciplines (Ross, McKechnie, and Rothbauer 2018). That reading is good for people and good for society (Wolf 2018), that it supports a good life (Billington 2016) is not what is up for debate, but rather, whether a love of books and reading can drive valuable participation in the always changing fields of professional librarianship.

A love of books and reading is often invoked in professional discourses of librarianship as either a liability to the field or as an enduring yet naïve motivation for embracing it. In scholarship conducted over the past twenty years, a love of books and reading is commonly offered by new students as a reason to pursue a graduate degree in LIS (see Lo et al 2015; Moniarou-Papaconstantinou et al 2015). It is also fervently articulated by members of the general public as a reason to value and support libraries (e.g., Pew Research Centre 2013). A counter trope of "libraries are about more than books" is also widely deployed by professional librarians, LIS educators, and library commentators, offered as a caution for what is perceived to be outmoded and professionally damaging nostalgia for books and physical collections. The sheer pervasiveness of the trope suggests it is worthy of a close look to tease out its implications for the contemporary conceptual field of LIS, as well as for LIS education and for LIS professional practice. One of our guiding questions becomes "How do we understand (and honour) the love and desire that motivates and defines people's deeply felt allegiance to LIS, to libraries, and relatedly, to books and reading?" Our work here responds to a recent ethical turn in LIS that surfaces affective engagement with information, information processes, and information practices (e.g., Greenshields and Polkinghorne 2020; Hartel 2019; Worall et al, 2021).

2. Methodology: finding the love

We wondered whether a "love of books and reading" was still part of the motivation of a cohort of MLIS students enrolled in the graduate program of our home institution. We decided to interview students who were new to the program (i.e., in their first term of study), and students who were completing the degree (i.e., in their final term). We asked a series of questions designed to get at motivations and decision-

making for entering the field and taking the degree. If the "love of books" trope arose through the course of the conversational interview, the interviewer explored it together with the participant; if it did not, then a direct question was asked about it. To establish rapport and to mitigate any possible effects of the unequal power dynamics between student research participants and faculty member researchers, we hired a contemporaneously enrolled MLIS student to conduct all interviews. We differentiated the cohort with interest to observing whether graduating students still carried (and reflected upon) a love of books and reading as they left their studies and embarked on new careers.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted over two terms— Winter (January-April) 2019 and Summer (May-August) 2019—in the weeks at the beginning and end of each term. Ten students were interviewed from the incoming cohorts, and 13 different students were interviewed from the outgoing cohorts, for a total sample of 23 students. We did not collect demographic data. However, the majority of our participants were women. (Because we did not explicitly ask people to self-identify and we do not want assign gender arbitrarily, we do not report on gender breakdown in our sample except in these general terms.) The interviews ranged in duration from 20 minutes to an hour, with an average of about 34 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded, and then transcribed. Transcripts were anonymized and pseudonyms were assigned to each participant by one of our research assistants before we examined the textual transcripts.

Each transcript was analysed in two different ways: first we conducted several close readings for emergent themes, and then we coded each transcript for deliberate categories that guided our research interests including the concept of "love of books and reading" which is the theme we report on in this paper.

3.   Findings: exploring the love

The responses from students in our sample to questions about their motivations to study for the MLIS degree exhibit a productive tension that falls between two positions: a strong identification with a love of books and reading as a precipitating factor in their decision, and a strong rejection of the notion as relevant to their planned futures as librarians and informational professionals. Love of books and reading extends to a love of libraries. The following edited excerpts from an interview with a student in their final term exemplify this tension:

> "The love of reading trope, as in, we're coming to the program because we love reading? That's why we are librarians? […] There's something deeper to that, you know. Like, yes, you love books, but what is it that that represents for you? This represents that you can come together as a community through reading, right? It stops at reading and becomes more of like, what we could do to better ourselves."

> "We create these misconceptions through our romanticizing of libraries, specifically because we stem from this childhood love of the place and then when you get to it as a profession, you shouldn't be there sitting like, "I just want to read all these books all the time". I think you have to realize that it is an act of service. It is like a job that like you are—no matter what field you're in—you're serving some sort of patron, you're helping."

Using excerpts like these from the interviews we will explore three main ways that love figures in the participants' reflections on their reasons for taking the MLIS degree and in their expectations and hopes as they leave the program: a love of books and reading, a love of the place of libraries, and a desire to work with and help others.

4.   Conclusion: engaging the love

The findings that we present can be easily imbued with blind positive affect that we can understand through Fobazi Ettarh's (2018) propositions regarding "vocational awe". However, we can also at the same time consider expressions of love for reading, books, and libraries for their potential to generate empathetic, creative, productive, joyful professional practice. Even the responses that criticized this orientation did so by invoking positive affective associations related to connecting with community, contributing meaningfully to the professions, and in short, to making the world a better place. We conclude by speculating on the power of the trope to organize professional commitments by engaging with (rather than refusing) this productive force of love in our overlapping fields of theory, pedagogy, and practice.

6.   Acknowledgements

7.   References

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