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Reading on the Dark Side

OR, THE PRODUCTIVE PLEASURES OF THE SCHOLARLY
ADMINISTRATOR

**ROSEMARY
ERICKSON
JOHNSEN**

ABSTRACT: This article builds on the models of the teacher-scholar and the public scholar to delineate the role of the scholarly administrator. Literary studies faculty members who transition to the administrative ranks face obstacles to continuing their scholarly research and writing, and Johnsen argues that such administrators should persevere in their efforts as these can serve ethical, civic, and institutional progress. Reading is the foundation for this work, and scholarly administrators should read widely for pleasure and productivity. Sources include literary criticism on women's writing, crime fiction, and mass observation along with personal experience as faculty member and academic affairs administrator.

KEYWORDS: higher education, administration, literary studies, feminist reading, public scholarship, crime fiction

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A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, when I was a visiting assistant professor in the English Department of a regional university in the U.S., an associate professor of marketing asked me with open curiosity, “So what’s research for you, reading a few books?” Fast forward fifteen years to my discovery, as a tenured professor moving into administration at another university, that for some faculty, references to administration as “the dark side” are not metaphorical.

From the beginning of my administrative career, however, I committed to continued growth and development as an academic affairs administrator *and* as a literary scholar. My administrative qualifications allowed me to move to a campus of a Big Ten university system in 2022; the awarding of tenure and the faculty rank of professor came after thorough vetting of my teaching, research, and service according to faculty criteria. As of May 1, 2023, I am the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, the chief academic officer of the university. It is from this vantage point that the continuities of my career come into focus and allow for analysis and reflection; past realizations, surprising and occasionally unpleasant, fall into place as directional indicators on a map I am only now able to read. My essay foregrounds the experiential in order to offer an analysis of examples that delineate the role I am calling the *scholarly administrator*. The scholarly administrator works toward personal and pragmatic goals but also ethical, civic, and institutional goals. Reading is the foundation for this important work, and aspiring scholarly administrators should read widely for pleasure and productivity.

I. Conceptualizing the Scholarly Administrator

In conceptualizing the *scholarly administrator*, I am building on two models of engaged scholarly endeavor, those of the teacher-scholar and the public scholar. Each of these models offers important links between reading and its uses that illuminate the spaces inhabited by scholarly administrators. These models inform the situation of the literary studies scholar who moves into administration, and frame issues of pleasure and productivity, recording and rewarding, fast and slow reading, for would-be active scholars in administrative roles.

The *teacher-scholar* is a recognized, respected role, particularly in disciplinary fields where primary-source reading is integral to the work. For literary studies faculty, reading can always be linked to productivity. It can be identified as research, either primary or contextual. Such reading drives scholars' research and keeps them current for graduate student supervision and innovative course design at all levels. Reading is also preparation for class, or prospecting for new class materials, or providing context for other class readings. These justifications can be offered for any reading, in fact, even reading that is purely pleasurable; after all, who is to say the reading is not serving a research-related purpose? Much of this reading is self-selected, chosen and performed independently, even privately. Its productivity is measured through scholarly and pedagogical outputs, and rewarded through faculty review processes, outside opportunities, and expanded networks. My experience as literary studies faculty followed these patterns, and I was fortunate to teach in a flexible curriculum to many adult

students.¹ My reading was wide and various, and supported engaging courses, innovative curriculum development, and traditional scholarly dissemination. The nature of my department and course assignments generated considerable crossover between the texts I was reading for pleasure and for work. The purpose to which I would put the reading influenced the substance of the reading itself and the form of my responses to it, which might involve reflection, discussion, class notes, preliminary writing for essays, academic research, or dissemination in scholarly fora. Literary studies faculty are accustomed to multi-tasking in their reading.

An established teacher-scholar in literary studies, I also chose to engage with broader communities as a *public scholar*, another model on which I build my concept of the scholarly administrator. Over time, my own public scholarship activities led to my taking up public scholarship itself as a subject for scholarly writing, generating conference presentations, peer-reviewed articles, and a co-edited book, *Public Scholarship in Literary Studies*, published in 2021 by Amherst College Press.² The book demonstrates that literary studies scholars have a knowledge base and a skill set that position them to contribute to public life, and that literary criticism can have practical value for understanding the world. Public scholarship takes many forms, and it allows for scholarly innovation in how to best reach the desired audience. Active public scholars reach many different publics, and they create many kinds of engagement. Public scholars often work in multiple modes, including in-person or virtual events, written pieces for public audiences, and podcasts or other media. The capacity for connection when groups are brought together to engage in literary criticism is among my favorite modes, but public scholarship is a big tent that fosters diversity and creativity. Public scholarship opens the boundaries of what scholars can do with their reading and introduces new questions and information from novices and experts; it also provides feedback from reviewers who are not part of the academy. In *Public Scholarship in Literary Studies*, all the contributors wrote out of their own experience, sharing contributions to praxis, ethical and critical frameworks, and insight on how public scholarship in the humanities might be evaluated.

Building on both of these models, the teacher-scholar and the public scholar, helps carve out space for my concept of the scholarly administrator, particularly in regard to reading. In addition to the humanities-based teacher-scholar's significant, flexible engagement with reading, the public scholar model speaks to those who want to be scholarly administrators in its combination of lofty goals with pragmatic engagement. Scholars inhabit well-established relations with faculty and disciplinary colleagues, and find energy (or frustration) with students. Engagement with the public exposes the scholar to direct feedback often from audiences with no allegiance to traditional power structures within

higher education. And yet humanities-based public scholarship is grounded in belief in the value for all of what we study, and focuses our attention on what we might strive for as humanities scholars. How can the scholarly administrator bring the values, skills, and knowledge of the humanities to her administrative work? Administrative work, as discussed in the next section, is systems work; at its best, it has an ethical imperative, and it always requires the administrator to engage with issues not necessarily of her choosing.

II. Literary Studies Trajectory: From Graduate Student to Administrator

Continuities can be identified in the touchstones of my literary research since beginning graduate studies in literature at the end of the 1980s. My postgraduate years were dominated by theory, but my own interests gravitated toward material culture, genre fiction as worthy object of study, and the ‘ordinary.’ My intellectual debts turn out to have more consistency than it seemed as I moved from focus to focus; serendipity turns out to have some recognizable themes. Those themes blossom into my ambitions to be a scholarly administrator folding specialist humanities knowledge into forward-looking, strategic, and effective higher-education leadership. I have lost track of how I first encountered Mass-Observation with its enthusiasm for quotidian inter-war English life, but Tom Harrisson’s “anthropology of the ordinary” immediately captivated me with its affinity to the documentary form, its insistence on defining objects worthy of serious study, and its engagement with its own participants. It seemed the perfect antidote to the high theoretical posturings then in the ascendant, and I spent several weeks during multiple summers happily trolling through the Mass-Observation Archives held at the University of Sussex. That research made its way into my doctoral thesis on Patrick Hamilton, and my notes later fed into writing on Penguin publishing, capital punishment, and true crime. Mass-Observation itself seemed to dissolve boundaries between high and low, material and theoretical, serious and popular. In her inaugural lecture as Goldsmith’s Professor of English Literature, published as *Reading in Bed* (2000), Hermione Lee describes the “conflict between what one might call vertical and horizontal reading,” the former being authorized while the latter is “private, leisurely.”³ Lee notes that the divide “has never been straightforward,”⁴ and her own exemplary record of scholarly and accessible criticism and biography demonstrates the truth of that claim.

Critical touchstones from my years in graduate study and as early-career researcher have connections with Mass-Observation and/or Sussex, with its strong cultural studies faculty. Alison Light’s *Forever England: Femininity, Literature, and Conservatism between the Wars* (1991) took seriously—in

productive and exciting ways—Agatha Christie, Daphne du Maurier, and *Mrs. Miniver*.⁵ Her study demonstrated new approaches to reading and addressed itself to questions of reading pleasure and value in original ways. Light's book stands the test of time; I return to it often. The book does not draw on Mass-Observation, but it was written as a doctoral thesis at Sussex under the direction of Cora Kaplan. Nicola Humble's influential study *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism* (2001) recognizes the importance of reading pleasure, noting that scholars can begin to understand the overlooked "cultural, social, and political significance" of middlebrow writing "by taking into account the issue of textual pleasure, and by establishing a history of its readership."⁶ The Mass-Observation Archive is among the study's research sources.

In the context of defining the scholarly administrator, it is also worth noting that Humble's interest in these novels "began with pleasure"⁷ as she and her friends studying English at Oxford escaped the subjects of their formal studies through these books. What Humble perceived then as a clear demarcation between unserious pleasure reading and serious academic reading looks different to her in retrospect: "I think we saw them as a form of camp—revelling in their detailing of a mode of feminine existence that seemed eons away from our own. . . . Fifteen years later, I no longer see these novels as camp: their concerns seem both more serious and less safely distant."⁸ That Humble's escapist pleasure reading as a student at Oxford became the subject of a study published by Oxford University Press is perhaps ironic. It is also inspirational, and encourages humanities faculty who have moved to administration to pursue their own reading choices without apology, as illustrated by my experience with crime fiction, described below.

Perhaps the most formative piece of scholarship encountered during my graduate school years was "Feminist Criticism Twenty Years On," a 1989 chapter by Cora Kaplan. Not yet aware that I would spend many years reading and writing feminism(s), the only reason I read the chapter was because it was in *From My Guy to Sci-Fi: Genre and Women's Writing in the Postmodern World* and I was looking for material on genre fiction for an essay. I was impressed by the way Kaplan conceptualized *political* for humanities scholars as a deliberate position in which "what is being taught . . . is being taught in relation to a dynamic of what you might *do* or *produce* or *be* in some future conjuncture, rather than just as an object of study."⁹ For the teacher-scholar, the public scholar, and the scholarly administrator, Kaplan's formulation calls us to look forward, to think actively. Literary study has a rich store of material on which to draw; that material rewards study but it should resonate beyond the (f)act of studying. Public scholarship in the humanities, like feminist teaching and scholarship, teaches us that doing what you can, where you are, can add up to

real change even in the face of an overwhelmingly negative zeitgeist. What may be more surprising: the same is true of administrative work.

In a Q&A on their 2021 book, *Pollution is Colonialism*, Max Liboiron is asked a question that presents an opportunity to contrast university administrators with researchers, artists, and activists. Liboiron instead offers a series of observations on the potential of administrative roles, noting that “as someone who has been a professional activist for my entire adult life, I found admin to be the absolute best place to do lasting systemic, and impactful anticolonial work.”¹⁰ To create progress, we must “chang[e] and reimagin[e] systems. Administrative work is systems work.”¹¹ Liboiron contrasts the choice available to researchers with the reality that “as an administrator, things are hurled at you that are impossibly tangled and on fire, and you are accountable to them whether you would choose to deal with them or not.”¹² As someone with administrative experience and unquestionable progressive credentials, Liboiron’s stance on administration provides some relief after the typical portrayal of administration as heartless bureaucrats who apparently parachuted in from another planet to enrich themselves.¹³

III. The Scholarly Administrator in Action

My reading practice necessarily altered once I became an administrator. As the university’s contract administrator for the faculty collective bargaining agreement in my first administrative role, my source text became the collective bargaining agreement rather than a series of chosen texts with rich literary and cultural rewards. In a sense, all other reading thus became pleasure reading, and the lines between slow reading (formerly the province of my research-related reading) and fast reading (my consumption of leisure reading) became blurred. Leisure reading is now to be savored, perused slowly with some passages re-read. Reading has been nowhere in my assigned duties, and the only expectations for reading have been currency in higher-education issues and functional reading of internal and external reports. None of this reading generates specific, measurable outcomes in the way faculty reading does; instead, my ability to read critically, marshal evidence from texts, and write effectively blends, chameleon-like, into overall “job performance.”

As an administrator, the other forms of reading and writing which I pursue have been seen variously as a distraction from my “real work”; as a purely leisure pursuit akin to crafting or sports; and, occasionally, as a valid means of maintaining my scholarly profile as an academic affairs administrator. My own belief is that the ability to fulfill the role is grounded in wide reading, and I will always argue for the importance of reading for erstwhile humanities faculty

members who are now administrators, regardless of institutional support (including time).

The value of literary study is well known to those who have been in college classrooms (teacher-scholars) and led public engagement events (public scholars). I believe that scholarly administrators' grounding in humanities scholarship can help advance ethical and civic goals analogous to those of public scholarship, and that it can improve the university itself through Liboiron's "systems work." Examples such as Hilary Link, president of Allegheny College and scholar of Renaissance Italian culture, and Elaine P. Maimon, president of Governors State University from 2007 to 2020 and professor of English, should be recognized as scholarly administrators whose scholarly knowledge bases enable them to provide academic leadership addressing major issues in higher education. In her blog posts on initiatives at Allegheny College, Link develops comparisons between "historical, innovative Renaissance thinkers and our technophile Gen Z students" in order to address some of the post-pandemic and generational challenges facing higher education.¹⁴ Maimon's book on the needs of twenty-first-century students is rooted her own scholarly engagement with foundation-level general education and the model of Writing Across the Curriculum.¹⁵

The reading of the scholarly administrator need not respect traditional boundaries demarcating pleasure reading as not scholarly. The clear arc of my own scholarly development in crime fiction is visible only in retrospect; when I began writing about crime fiction I assumed I would return to more serious work. Not only has crime fiction been the base of my scholarly work, as a popular genre it provides a natural springboard into public scholarship. As a genre invested in local geographies and cultures, crime fiction now enables me as an administrator to engage in the history and culture of the region into which I have moved through enjoyable reading. It also expands the range of my crime-fiction research subjects and has already been incorporated into my writing, including a grant application for a project on local heritage that includes the author of a crime fiction series set in the region.

In *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Raymond Williams describes work as "our most general word for doing something."¹⁶ As the word specialized over time to reference primarily paid work, Williams notes, "a person may be said to do his real **work** on his own, sometimes quite separately from his *job*."¹⁷ Currently, scholarly administrators are mostly doing scholarly work on their own, but observing the rapid growth in institutionalization of publicly-engaged scholarship over the past decade gives me hope that similar recognition of the presence and value of the scholarly administrator might materialize in the next decade.

Scholarly administrators are *not* the dark side. The scholarly administrator can be a powerful model, intervening in conversations across disciplines and with many audiences, but she needs to be prepared: keep reading!

ROSEMARY ERICKSON JOHNSEN, PhD, is professor and division head of Business, Arts, and Education at the University of Minnesota, Crookston. She is the author of *Contemporary Feminist Historical Crime Fiction* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) as well as co-editor and contributing author for *Public Scholarship in Literary Studies* (Amherst College Press, 2021). She has been on the Editorial Advisory Board of the *Journal of Popular Culture* since 2008, and is an elected member of the Executive Council of the Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Studies. She received the 2021 Dove Award from Popular Culture Association's Mystery and Detective Fiction Area for significant contributions to the serious study of mystery/detective fiction.

NOTES

1. I want to acknowledge the challenging circumstances under which many contingent faculty, independent scholars, and other scholars pursue research.
2. Rachel Arteaga and Rosemary Erickson Johnsen, eds., *Public Scholarship in Literary Studies* (Amherst: Amherst College Press, 2021).
3. Hermione Lee, *Reading in Bed: An Inaugural Lecture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3.
4. Ibid.
5. Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature, and Conservatism between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991).
6. Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 5.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 6.
9. Cora Kaplan, "Feminist Criticism Twenty Years On," 15–23 in *From My Guy to Sci-Fi: Genre and Women's Writing in the Postmodern World*, ed. Helen Carr (London: Pandora, 1989), 21 (emphasis in original).
10. Max Liboiron, "Q&A with Max Liboiron, Author of *Pollution is Colonialism*," interview by Jessica Covil-Manset, *Duke University Press Blog*, May 14, 2017, <https://dukeupress.wordpress.com/2021/05/14/qa-with-max-liboiron-author-of-pollution-is-colonialism>.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Twitter, for example, is filled with such takes.
14. Hilary L. Link, "Meeting Gen Z: Avoiding the Demographic Cliff and Preparing for Their Future," *Higher Education Today* (American Council on Education blog), April 15, 2022, <https://www.higheredtoday.org/2022/04/15/meeting-gen-z-avoiding-the-demographic-cliff-and-preparing-for-their-future>.
15. Elaine P. Maimon, *Leading Academic Change* (Sterling, Virginia: Stylus, 2018).
16. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 281.
17. Ibid., 282 (emphasis in original).