"My kind of librarian or your kind of librarian?": Information Seeking Behavior in *Supernatural*

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MIDWAY THROUGH SEASON 8 of the long-running CW show *Supernatural* (2005–2020), brothers Sam and Dean Winchester, monster hunters and the show's main characters, learn that hunting is not their only "family business."[1] It turns out they are also legacies of a defunct secret society called the Men of Letters. The Men of Letters were responsible for finding, collecting, and organizing information on supernatural beings of all kinds. Essentially, they were the librarians or archivists of all available knowledge concerning angels, demons, spirits, and monstrous beings. (Libraries and archives, archivists and librarians are frequently confused in *Supernatural*, but I will not belabor the point here. For an excellent discussion, see Karen Buckley, cited below.)

The Men of Letters collection resides in a hidden bunker which houses "every object, scroll, spell ever collected for thousands of years under one roof" ("As Time Goes By," 8.12).[2] The bunker becomes Sam and Dean's home and workplace, affording them ready access to this remarkable body of knowledge on the supernatural. At first Dean is dismissive, telling Sam "not to go all geek on this stuff…don't think [the Men of Letters] knew some big secrets that we don't know." But Sam understands its value: "I think we might have something here—something that could help us, help humanity" ("Everybody Hates Hitler," 8.13).

The importance of researching, of acquiring knowledge as an essential component of the monster hunter's toolkit, is introduced long before the Winchesters move into the Men of Letters' bunker. In the pilot episode of *Supernatural*, a scene in a Jericho, California public

[1] One of the most iconic lines in the show comes from the second episode of the series, "Wendigo." Referring to their father John and the journal he left behind, Dean tells Sam, "I think he wants us to pick up where he left off. You know, saving people, hunting things. The family business."

[2] Throughout this essay episodes of *Supernatural* are designated by season, episode number within that season, and episode title. For episode synopses, transcripts, original air dates, writers, directors, cast and crew, I refer the reader to supernaturalwiki.com. It is inarguably the best online source for all things *Supernatural*.

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library shows the brothers at a computer terminal looking for a case lead in the local newspaper. Dean, the older brother, is at the keyboard and having no success with his search terms. Sam pushes him out of the way, changes one word in the search, and up pops the relevant news item. This small gesture reflects the way the brothers are frequently portrayed throughout the series: Sam, who was an upperclassman at Stanford when he was pulled back into hunting by his brother, is the expert researcher…and his expertise includes using a microform reader, as we see in 1.18, "Something Wicked." Dean appreciates the necessity of understanding their prey but mostly wants to get to the monster killing. The bulk of figuring out which monster is doing the brain sucking, shapeshifting, possessing, savage clawing, or just plain eating of people falls to Sam.

"The Girl Next Door" (7.03) shows how far back Sam's role as the designated researcher goes. In flashback we see a 15-year-old Sammy on the phone with Dean. He has been helping Dean and their father identify a monster they are hunting. We hear only Sam's side of the conversation:

> SAM. Yeah, so, from what I can tell, it's something called a Kitsune. Not much. They…look human…till they sprout out claws and stab you behind your ear to get to your brain. I don't—I don't know yet. Yes, Dean, I realize killing 'em's important. Maybe if Uncle Bobby sent a book in English. I am! No, no, don't—don't put him on the phone. Hi, Dad. Yes, sir. I realize people are dying. Yeah, I'm on my way to the library right now.

Sam is burdened with the responsibility of keeping both his family and the public at large safe, not with fists or weapons (though he is skilled with those as well), but with his ability to find information. The public library to which Sam is headed, by the way, is in Lincoln, Nebraska. Sam finds the book he needs, which is notable because the characters in *Supernatural* nearly always find the books they need, no matter how small the library.

Sam's research skills help define his character and distinguish him from his brother—and sometimes, from other hunters. In "Metamorphosis" (4.04), for example, Sam and Dean join up with Travis for a rugaru hunt. The rugaru is a creature that starts off indistinguishable from a human, but at a certain age transforms into a human-flesh eating monster. Travis has a broken arm and needs the Winchesters to kill the as-yet untransformed creature by the only known method: fire. But Sam has some concerns.

> SAM [*to Travis*]. Not wasting any time, are you?
> TRAVIS. None to waste. The guy hulks out, we won't be finding bodies, just remains.

> SAM. What if he doesn't hulk out? I did a little homework. Uh, I've been checking out the lore on rugarus.
> TRAVIS. What, my 30 years of experience not good enough for you?
> SAM. What? No. No, I—I—I just wanted to be prepared. I mean, not that you didn't.
> DEAN. Sam loves research. He does. He keeps it under his mattress right next to his KY. It's a sickness.

Returning to the pilot episode (1.01), after finding their news item and chasing down the monster, the brothers check in to a motel where, it turns out, their father had also stayed. John Winchester's research covers the walls: an assortment of newspaper clippings, missing person flyers, a timeline of the murders, and notes and illustrations from the lore on various devils and witches. There is a lot more to the study of monster hunting than typing keywords at a library computer.

One reason that research is so important in *Supernatural* is that it was important to Eric Kripke, the show's creator and its showrunner for the first five years. As related by Executive Producer Robert Singer, "Eric [Kripke] was very specific about what he thought the show should be. Eric originally would say, 'You have to have Google-able monsters or Google-able urban legends'" (*Entertainment Weekly: The Ultimate Guide to Supernatural* 52). This was an early talking point for the actors as well. In an interview with Ellen DeGeneres that aired a week before *Supernatural* debuted, Jared Padalecki (Sam) said "What's great about the show…is that our show is about true urban legends…true folklore, and it's stuff that you can look up in Google and see Wendigo or Bloody Mary or the Hook Man legend. […] We're not just kind of making up stories…the writers are researching and Googling" (Padalecki).

Dean's forte is getting people to give him information through the use of his charm, good looks, and confident ability to lie. But when it comes to buckling down with a book—particularly those arcane volumes of occult lore—he typically approaches them grudgingly or out of sheer necessity. In "Shadow" (1.16) Dean charms a woman at the police department into giving him the complete records of two victims. Notably, in this episode Dean identifies a sigil. Sam asks how Dean figured out the sigil. Dean responds, "Give me some credit, man. You don't have a corner on paper chasing around here." But it turns out Dean has not chased any paper; he called another hunter.

When Sam and Dean separate to work different cases in "Scarecrow" (1.11), they have a phone conversation about the pagan god Dean is hunting. Sam tells Dean that when he figures out which god Dean is up against he'll be able to figure out how to kill it. Dean agrees. "I know," he tells his brother. "I'm actually on my way to a local

community college. I've got an appointment with a professor. You know, since I don't have my trusty sidekick geek boy to do all the research."

In "The Monster at the End of this Book" (4.18) Sam and Dean resolve to do the exact opposite of what they normally would, trying to avoid a fate that has literally been written for them:

> DEAN. It's opposite day. It says that we, uh, we get into a fight. So, no fighting. No research for you…
> SAM. No bacon cheeseburger for you.

The most amusing example of Dean's aversion to hitting the books and Sam's reluctance to have fun occurs in "Changing Channels" (5.08), in which Sam and Dean are forced to take part in a series of television genre shows. The episode opens with Sam entering a set done up to look like the kitchen of a 1970s sitcom. Sam asks his brother whether he's done his research yet. Dean replies, "Oh, yeah. All kind of research. All night." Sam seems impressed until a scantily-clad young woman enters the set and says, "Oh Dean…We have some more research to do."

The information keepers used by the Winchesters can be sorted into three groups: the "civilian" world of libraries, records offices, and archives; the hunter world of arcane and occult literature, journaled experience, and passed-down wisdom; and the world of museum curators, local history buffs, and college professors. This last category contains people who are experts in their fields but have only an academic knowledge of their subjects; they have the rare books or cursed objects but don't actually believe in the supernatural creatures they study. As such, they are both civilians and cognoscenti.

In one of several instances where one or both Winchesters visit a college posing as students, Dean meets with a professor of Islamic studies in "What Is and What Should Never Be" (2.20). Their exchange is typical of the civilian-cognoscenti. Dean has asked the professor about Djinn.

> PROFESSOR. Well, a lot of Muslims believed the Djinn are very real. And they're mentioned in the Koran—
> DEAN. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. I know. Get to the wish part.
> PROFESSOR. What about it?
> DEAN. Do you think they could really do it?
> PROFESSOR. Um…Uh, no. No, I don't think they can "really do it." You understand these are mythic creatures?

Hunters have their own libraries and their own guardians of knowledge. What Young Sam learned about Kitsune was no doubt entered in his father's journal. The brothers find their father John's journal (but not their father) in the Pilot, and as we learn in the following episode, it is "Dad's single most valuable possession—everything he knows about every evil thing is in here" ("Wendigo,"

1.2). John Winchester's journal, a leather-bound book filled with notes, telegrams, sketches, newspaper clippings, and the characteristics, habits, and dietary preferences of all kinds of monsters, was a knowledge base upon which Sam and Dean relied for much of the early seasons of *Supernatural*. Nor was John the only hunter to keep a journal. As we learn in "Frontierland" (6.18), Sam and Dean's maternal grandfather, Samuel Campbell, had an underground library that included several volumes of hunters' journals, including one from Samuel Colt, the gunsmith. Information Sam and Dean find in Colt's journal help them defeat the monster of the week.

At the center of this information hub is the seasoned hunter Bobby Singer—the "Uncle Bobby" young Sam refers to in "The Girl Next Door." Bobby's collection of books on demons, monsters, pagan gods, and mythical creatures (who turn out to be not mythical after all), is perhaps second only to that in the Men of Letters bunker. But unlike the Men of Letters, Bobby has first-hand hunting experience and a wide network of contacts. He was a crucial source of information for Sam, Dean, and other hunters, as evidenced in the episode "Weekend at Bobby's" (6.04). In this episode we get a glimpse into Bobby Singer's busy life as a researcher, fake validator of hunters' fake identities, and hunter in his own right. Although he is in the middle of his own investigation and fielding calls from other hunters, when Dean calls to get "an ID ASAP" on a clawed creature that rips open its victims, Bobby surrounds himself with books and gets to work on the Winchesters' case. When hours of page-turning don't turn up anything from his own collection, he heads to the Sioux Falls University Library, only to find it closed…so Bobby breaks in and grabs the volume he needs.

Some suspension of disbelief is often required when it comes to watching the Winchesters do their research. One might have an easier time believing in ghosts and ghouls than in the possibility that even the smallest town's public library or community college seem always to have accurate books on the lore of assorted supernatural creatures. When we see Sam at the reader in "Something Wicked this Way Comes," he is finding newspaper articles related to their monster in different cities, years apart, going back to the 1890s…all on the same reel of microfilm. To be sure, there is very little relationship between the process of gathering information in the real world and in the world of *Supernatural*. As Karen Buckley notes, "in one episode alone ["Hook Man"] [Sam and Dean] access prison records, birth and death records, church ledgers, and cemetery and land records—all in a library setting" (98).

Of course, Sam and Dean also have access to the internet. As skilled researchers the brothers need to be able to determine the reliability of the sites they find on the web. Sam is seldom without his laptop, typing into Search the Web!, his search engine of choice. (With one regretable exception, *Supernatural* has resisted product placement, instead creating its own brands of beer, convenience stores, ubiquitous family restaurant chains, etc.) In "Hell House" (1.17), Sam and Dean are looking into a case about a possible malevolent spirit tied to an abandoned house. As they drive, Sam briefs Dean about the case. Dean thinks the "supernatural" incidents might be just pranks.

> SAM. Maybe, but I read a couple of the kids' firsthand accounts. They seemed pretty sincere.
> DEAN. Where'd you read these accounts?
> SAM. Well, I knew we were going to be passing through Texas. So, umm, last night, I surfed some local paranormal websites. And I found one.
> DEAN. And what's it called?
> SAM. HellHoundsLair.com
> DEAN. Lemme guess, streaming live out of Mom's basement.
> SAM. Yeah, probably.
> DEAN. Yeah. Most of those websites wouldn't know a ghost if it bit 'em in the persqueeter.

Firewalls, encryption, and privacy policies do not seem to present much of an obstacle to Sam, Dean, and other hunters. Even before learning a few tricks from master hacker Charlie Bradbury, a recurring character introduced in season 7, Sam is able to look for tax records and addresses online ("The Monster at the End of this Book," 4.18) and somehow pull up medical records ("Heartache," 8.03). Their grandfather Samuel Campbell is able to access a home security company's client records despite very limited computing experience ("Two and a Half Men," 6.02). As is the case when considering Sam's other research skills, it's best not to expect a fictional world to follow reality's rules.

"Everybody Hates Hitler" (8.13) begins in the library of the newly-discovered Men of Letters bunker and then immediately cuts to a scene in an academic library, where Rabbi Bass, a frequent patron judging by his interactions with the librarian, asks to see a particular manuscript. He is brought to a small interior room where he dons his white cotton gloves as a staff member brings him the box containing the item. Never mind that the "manuscript" is a ledger and that the Rabbi is permitted to take it out of the "special reference section." Knowing he is about to be killed, the Rabbi calls his grandson and has him write down a series of numbers and letters…which Sam immediately recognizes as a Library of Congress call number! And he

knows it refers to ornithology, even though his major was pre-law. Sam's uncanny familiarity with the LC classification system leads him and Dean to where the Rabbi has hidden the ledger.

Despite playing a bit fast and loose with the normal practices of archival collections and Sam's dubious ability to remember call numbers more than eight after leaving university, library design in *Supernatural* can be very realistic. For the episode "Book of the Damned" (10.18), set designer Jerry Wanek took great pains to build an accurate small library, albeit pre-computerized catalog era. There are several stacks of books, a card catalog, a dictionary on a stand, books with Dewey numbers, a reading table, and even another room visible through partly glass doors. In a video posted by actor Misha Collins (Castiel) in advance of the episode, Wanek explains,

> Because we couldn't find a library cool enough to shoot in the flavor of our lovely *Supernatural*, we built one. This library contains more than 20,000 books, all bought from resale, and each one has to be labelled and put into the proper category […] and then the bookshelves also were all custom built […]. This set will be exactly one day's worth of shooting and we spent seven days to build it. ("Getting literate on the set of Supernatural")

What's more, the set appears on screen for a total of around five minutes and is largely destroyed in two seconds. Sadly, the reason for constructing this library was to have a place where Metatron could hide something from Castiel; as Metatron says, "Nobody goes to libraries anymore. It's the safest place in the world" ("The Book of the Damned," 10.18)

Metatron's comment aside, as a series, *Supernatural* displays the proper reverence towards libraries and archives. Librarians and archivists, not so much. The title of this essay comes from episode 6.17, "My Heart Will Go On." History has been changed by the angel Balthazar, and Sam and Dean are on the hunt for Fate, who is trying to set things right. Sam spots her: a petite blonde woman in glasses, button-down shirt, and tweedy blazer carrying a leather-bound book with embossed cover and gilt-edged pages.

> DEAN. What'd she look like?
> SAM. Kind of like a librarian.
> DEAN. Your kind of librarian or my kind of librarian?
> SAM. Well, she was wearing clothes, if that's what you mean.

Sam and Dean are referencing two common female librarian stereotypes: the prim, proper cardigan-clad, shushing spinster on the one hand, and on the other, the one who takes off her glasses, lets down her hair, and turns into the librarian of sexual fantasy.

Supernatural's writers cling to unflattering stereotypes of librarians and library staff for much of the show's run. The librarian in "Everybody Hates Hitler" is a man so uptight and self-righteous that the Rabbi tells him, in Yiddish, that he hopes he's paid well to keep that stick up his *tuchas*. Young Sam is shushed by a large cardigan-clad, hair-bunned, date-stamp wielding librarian in "The Girl Next Door." Also wearing a cardigan, sensible shoes, and her hair in a bun is the public librarian Marjorie Willis in "Repo Man" (7.15), who Lucifer notes is an "indoor gardening enthusiast" in a way that suggests "lonely spinster." Sam believes she is the next victim of the killer they are hunting, so when a young man in a black leather jacket follows Marjorie into the stacks, Sam investigates. Instead of finding Marjorie in danger, though, he finds her making out with the young man while panting "Right here in my discontinued periodicals. Oh. Oh, that's it." Marjorie starts out as the stereotypical bookish librarian but turns into the pornographic librarian trope. Even when the librarian is young, attractive, and knowledgeable as is the one in "Southern Comfort" (8.06), she's still sporting a cardigan and an air of sobriety. Finally, in season 14, air date November 29, 2018, Harper, a beautiful librarian, is in her early 20s, smiling, and cardigan-free ("Optimism," 14.06). She is clearly not lonely and is the object of at least three men's desire. She is neither Sam nor Dean's kind of librarian. She is central to the plot and not there merely to provide a visual gag. Unfortunately, she is also the monster of the week.

The air date of "Optimism" may be significant in that, in a show running for 15 years, writers, directors, and show runners change; times change, and with them, in an ideal world, stereotypes fade away. The amount of time Sam and Dean spend researching in libraries (apart from the one in the Men of Letters bunker), seems also to have declined over the years, as might be expected. For one thing, much more information is available on the internet now than when *Supernatural* began, in 2005. But there is another possibility for the decline in the Winchesters' use of libraries. Recall that Eric Kripke, *Supernatural*'s creator, wanted the show's monsters to come from urban legends and lore. But, as Robert Singer noted, "We quickly realized we were going to run out of good urban legends in a hurry" (Highfill). Angels were introduced to the show in its fourth season, and with them story arcs revolving around Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory—or what the fandom calls "angel-demon drama." Often the writers created or reimagined interesting foes for Sam and Dean to fight, but there was much greater reliance on witches, vampires, and werewolves.

Ending where we began, in Sam and Dean's inherited bunker, score one for the librarians. In "Slumber Party" (9.04), the character Dorothy dismisses the Men of Letters as glorified librarians. Charlie Bradbury responds, "Hey, these guys may have been sexist, but like all librarians, they were wicked smart, too."[3]

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[3] I refer the reader curious about the episodes referenced within to Supernaturalwiki.com. There can be found complete information about the cast, writers, directors and original air dates of each episode, as well as a summary and transcript. At the time of this writing, 14 seasons of *Supernatural* are available to be streamed on Netflix.

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