



FROM THE ARCHIVES

DID THE CURATOR REALLY DO IT?

THE SMITHSONIAN IN POPULAR FICTION

How do people outside of the museum/research community perceive museum curators, the collections they acquire, and the research questions they answer? Whether in popular literature, including mysteries, romances, and science fiction; film; or television, the portrayal of museum culture often differs dramatically from that which museum employees know. How is the Smithsonian portrayed in fiction such as books, plays, TV series, and film?

The Smithsonian Institution, perhaps more than any other cultural institution, has been the setting for fiction ranging from a Gore Vidal novel to the TV series *Bones* to films including *Night at the Museum*. Anthropology, especially forensic anthropology, has been perhaps the most popular topic for fiction writers. As the Smithsonian launches a major public awareness campaign, it may be illuminating to look at how its museums are perceived and portrayed in popular fiction.



THE SMITHSONIAN: A NOVEL EXPERIENCE

The Smithsonian and its staff began to appear in fiction writing shortly after it was founded, reflecting popular ideas of what this new institution was. References to the Smithsonian appeared in biographical novels, satires, murder mysteries, and adventures, ranging from a few words to complete novels set at the Smithsonian.

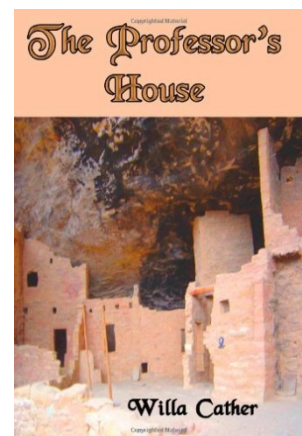
SATIRE

The first novel that referenced the Smithsonian was Mark Twain's 1869 *Innocents Abroad*. Here is found the caricature that would soon give the United States National Museum the nickname "The Nation's Attic." Twain's protagonist is awed by his traveling companion with the title "Commissioner of the United States of America to Europe, Asia, and Africa." Twain notes that the impressive title did not carry much weight, remarking "that his mission had nothing more overpowering about it than the collecting of seeds and uncommon yams and extraordinary cabbages and peculiar bullfrogs for that poor, useless, innocent, mildewed old fossil the Smithsonian Institute." His shipmates are all consumed with the collecting mania, turning their staterooms "into a museum of worthless trumpery . . ." Twain skewers the 19th-century romantic obsession with mementos of the distant past, and the Smithsonian as the center of what he considered to be a useless universe.



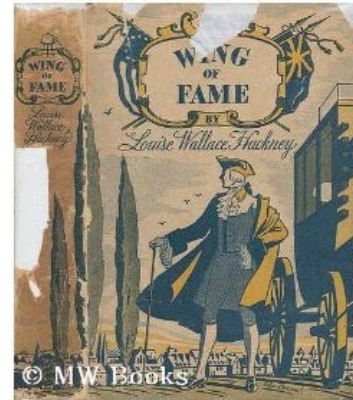
Willa Cather's *The Professor's House* (1925) also takes a cynical look at collectors and collecting, but with a far more serious tone. She portrays the Smithsonian as a flawed source of expertise filled with staff who, like other modern Americans, have been corrupted by desire for material things. Cather also provokes a sophisticated discussion of the moral value of antiquities.

"But I never thought of selling them, because they weren't mine to sell—nor yours! They belonged to this country, to the State, and to all the people. They belonged to boys like you and me, that have no other ancestors to inherit from. You've gone and sold them to a country that's got plenty of relics of its own. You've gone and sold your country's secrets, like Dreyfus."



THE LIFE OF JAMES SMITHSON

Very little is known of the Smithsonian's enigmatic founding donor, so authors have tried to fill the void by writing James Smithson into romances. The worst of these was written in 1934 by the appropriately named Louise W. Hackney. Titled *Wing of Fame: A Novel Based on the Life of James Smithson*, the story is loosely based on Smithson's life, focusing on his struggles to make a name for himself in science and his life in France during the Revolution. It explains away his lack of a wife by positing that he secretly married a young woman during the Revolution and never recovered from her premature death.

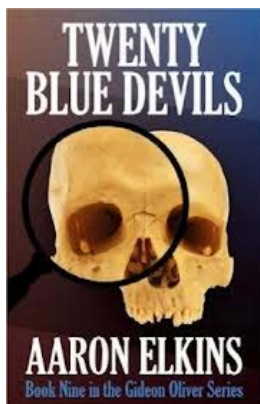


Another novel in which a character based on Smithson takes a very romantic turn is John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, which was published in 1969. In the story, Charles Smithson (loosely based on James Smithson) begins an intimate relationship with another woman, the disgraced Sarah Woodruff. The story was altered quite a bit in Harold Pinter's 1981 screenplay, which was directed by Karel Reisz. As in the other novels, the Smithson character is a modern scientist who has been unmoored from traditional values. Modernity has its drawbacks.

MURDER AT THE SMITHSONIAN

The largest subset of novels to utilize the Smithsonian are murder mysteries. The Smithsonian's museums, quirky staff, spooky exhibits, forensic scientists, and endless collection storage areas have provided local color for many of these stories.

Some authors turn to the Smithsonian for background research but don't actually mention the Institution. Such was the case with Patricia Cornwell, the prolific mystery writer who consulted with Smithsonian staff at length while developing her forensic anthropologist, Kay Scarpetta, who appears in 20 novels. Scarpetta uses science to solve crimes, primarily studies of the human body, but also turns to naturalists for additional clues, such as the life cycles and normal locations of insects found on human remains.



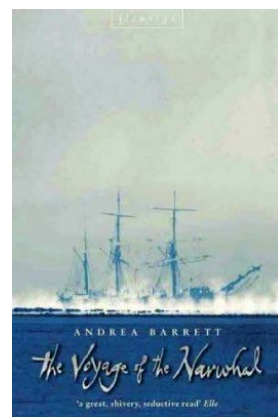
Other authors use physical anthropologists with Smithsonian connections to solve crimes. Author Aaron Elkins has developed the character of Gideon Oliver, a physical anthropologist skilled at solving all sorts of unusual crimes in remote locations. In *Twenty Blue Devils*, for example, Oliver teaches part of a week-long forensic seminar hosted by the Smithsonian. In solving a murder in Tahiti, he quotes Smithsonian anthropologist Doug Ubelaker, a real member of the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) staff who once stated "We are the final chance for the voice of the victim to be heard."

Perhaps the best known of these murder mysteries is Thomas Harris's *Silence of the Lambs*. In the novel, the lead FBI agent not only relies on forensic anthropologists, but also brings a moth to the Smithsonian to be identified. The Black Witch moth would not naturally occur where the body was found, proving that the murder took place elsewhere.

Some of the researchers found in these mysteries are heroic, while others are evil. Kathryn Lasky Knight and Tony Hillerman both portray good and bad curators. In Lasky's *Trace Elements*, the academic and government research communities are taken on with the aid of Archie Baldwin, a Smithsonian anthropologist. Hillerman, known for his crime novels set on Native American reservations, includes the Smithsonian in his book *Talking God*, where cases of murder and grave robbing begin to intertwine. Anthropological specimens in the story come from the Smithsonian and scenes in the book take place at NMNH. Ultimately, a Smithsonian conservator is arrested for grave robbing. Sometimes devotion to scholarly achievement can lead characters down adventurous or evil paths.

HISTORICAL FICTION

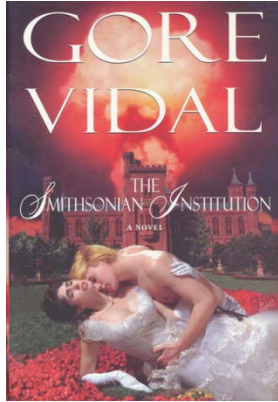
Several interesting works of historical fiction incorporate the Smithsonian. Andrea Barrett's short stories and her novel *The Voyage of the Narwhal* focus on 19th-century natural history. In the *Narwhal*, ill-prepared "discovery men" on an expedition to the Arctic are rescued by Native Americans. When an Eskimo who returns with them dies, however, her remains are sent to the Smithsonian for exhibit; she does not get a human burial. Once again, men of science are morally ambiguous.



Another natural history novel is Diane Smith's *Letters from Yellowstone*. A.E. (Alexandra) Bartram, a young woman studying botany, joins an 1898 expedition to Yellowstone National Park sponsored by the Smithsonian. The group includes three Smithsonian scientists. Taken for a man from her letters, Bartram must deal with gender issues and her own evolving views on both science and her life.

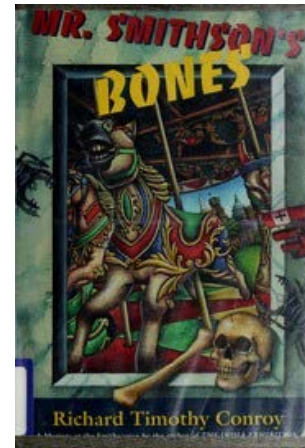
THE SMITHSONIAN AS CENTER STAGE

For a smaller set of novels, the Smithsonian is center stage with most of the story set at the Institution and most of the characters related to the Smithsonian in some way. One of the most recent and well-known is Dan Brown's *The Lost Symbol*. In this story, Robert Langdon travels to Washington to see his mentor, Peter Solomon, now Secretary of the Smithsonian, who in fact has been kidnapped. Heavily steeped in Masonic lore and the search for the "Lost Word," part of the book is set at a vacant section (pod 5) of the Museum Support Center. [The idea that any Smithsonian storage space would be unused is indeed a fictional concept.]



Gore Vidal's *The Smithsonian Institution: A Novel* is the story of "T.," a 13-year-old St. Albans student summoned to the Smithsonian in 1939 under mysterious circumstances. T. stumbles on a coven of nuclear physicists huddled in the Castle basement and discovers he is there to help Robert Oppenheimer solve the problem of nuclear fission. Along the way, he learns how to manipulate breakthroughs in the time continuum and interacts with historical figures such as Albert Einstein, Abraham Lincoln, and Charles Lindbergh, who come to life in Smithsonian exhibits.

Some books have been written by Smithsonian staff, such as Richard T. Conroy of the Office of International Activities. In three of his novels, the protagonist Henry Scroggs, a rather unsuccessful foreign service officer on loan to the Smithsonian from the State Department, finds the general counsel's freeze-dried body in Smithson's crypt; solves the disappearance of an exhibit designer and a gold-and-ruby statue destined for an exhibition; and cracks the mystery of the murder of an ethnomusicologist from Aganga during the Bicentennial.



SMITHSONIAN ON THE SMALL SCREEN

The Smithsonian often plays a small role on television, and those references are very revealing about popular stereotypes of the Smithsonian. For many TV series, the standard destination for something really old and dilapidated is, of course, the Smithsonian. *The Golden Girls* used the Smithsonian as a foil to describe well-used items. When the free-spirited Blanche asks, "Dorothy, what do you think I oughta do with my bed?," Dorothy replies, "Put it in the Smithsonian, Blanche. It's got more miles on it than the *Spirit of St. Louis!*"

In other series, the Institution is the place where everyone went on an 8th grade school trip. In a 1991 episode of *The Simpsons* called "Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington," the Simpsons head to Washington, D.C., because Lisa is in the Reading Digest essay contest. The family stops at the



National Air and Space Museum (NASM), where Bart plays around in the *Spirit of St. Louis*. A 2008 episode of *South Park* is set at the inauguration of Barack Obama. Viewers learn that Obama and McCain ran for president because they are both members of an elite team of professional thieves who plan to steal the Hope Diamond from NMNH. They break into the building from under the museum, using a secret tunnel that connects directly to the Oval Office.

The Smithsonian appears regularly in crime and spy series. The series *Bones*, which launched in 2005, is set at the "Jeffersonian" in Washington, D.C., a version of the Smithsonian's forensic

labs (although the exterior shots are of the Los Angeles Museum of Natural History). Dr. Temperance “Bones” Brennan and Special Agent Seeley Booth solve crimes when FBI cases come into their Jeffersonian labs. Booth explains Brennan’s quirky, logical personality by saying he found her at a museum.

In the 1960s, the comedy show *Get Smart* parodied popular spy series by contrasting Secret Agent Maxwell Smart with *The Saint* and *007*. In the episode “Spy, Spy, Birdie,” Smart and Agent 99 need to stop a man who invented a silent explosive.

Smart says, “Very simple, 99, I happen to know that Ludwig will be at the Smithsonian Institute at 9 a.m. on Tuesday.” The Chief interjects, “The ‘Smithsonian’ is the KAOS codename for park.” *NCIS*, a crime series set in Washington, occasionally has scenes with the Smithsonian as a backdrop. In the “Silver War” episode, a deceased Marine is found encased in a Civil War–era tomb at a Smithsonian museum. In another, when geeky Agent McGee’s parents send him his old computers, he’s told to donate them to the Smithsonian. In the current series *Covert Affairs*, CIA field agent Annie Walker works for the Domestic Protection Division, but her cover is that she works in acquisitions at the Smithsonian Museum.

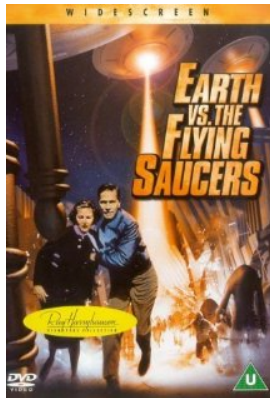


The West Wing was primarily set in the nation’s capital. In an episode reminiscent of Washington today, President Bartlet shuts the government down during a budget crisis. Smithsonian museums are among the closed facilities. A girl being interviewed complains she and her family were going to visit Grandma and see the Constitution: “But the Smithsonian’s closed. Now we only get to see Grandma.” [The Constitution, of course, is in the National Archives, not the Smithsonian.]

The Smithsonian also appears in children’s TV programs. In “The Spirits of ‘76/The Prophet Profits,” a 1976 episode of *The Scooby-Doo/Dynomutt Hour* cartoon series, Scooby-Doo and friends head to Washington to visit the Smithsonian. While there, they soon realize the Smithsonian is haunted by Benedict Arnold, Major André, and William Demont. In the 1989 Peanuts special *This is America Charlie Brown: The Smithsonian and the Presidency*, the Peanuts gang visits NASM, NMNH, and the National Museum of American History (NMAH) to learn about George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The Smithsonian name was allowed in the title.

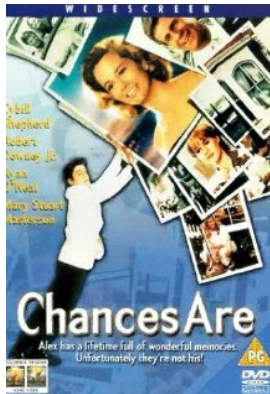
SMITHSONIAN AT THE MOVIES

Years before the popcorn trucks appeared on the Mall, the Smithsonian was being portrayed in movies ranging from science fiction, romance, and adventure to historical fiction. In the 1950s, sci-fi was one of the first genres to use the



Smithsonian's distinctive image. Sci-fi films such as *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) and *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers* (1956) utilize the Smithsonian's buildings as backdrops for alien invasions. Space ships fly over the Smithsonian Castle and through its towers. Though Sputnik had yet to launch, space flight was on the minds of Americans, and the Smithsonian was center stage for this fantasy. This fantasy continued to invade popular culture for years to come. In *Star Trek: First Contact* (1996), *Enterprise* Captain Jean-Luc Picard mentions the Smithsonian: "It's a boyhood fantasy . . . I must have seen this ship hundreds of times in the Smithsonian but I was never able to touch it."

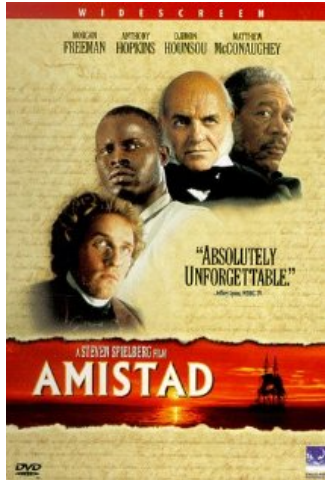
In the 1980s the Smithsonian once again became a popular backdrop for films. The *First Monday in October* (1981) traces the relationship of two Supreme Court Justices: Dan Snow, a liberal, and the ultra-conservative Ruth Loomis, who is the first female justice appointed to the Supreme Court. Many scenes are set in front of the Arts and Industries Building and the Castle, and the rotunda of the Arts and Industries Building was turned into a movie set. In 1989's *Chances Are*, main character Corrine Jefferies is a curator in charge of the First Ladies Collection at NMAH. Several scenes were shot in the First Ladies Collection and Haupt Garden, as well as outside of the Castle.



The romance of the 1980s films changed with the release of the 1991 crime drama *Silence of the Lambs*, based on the novel of the same name. The dark story has forensic scenes that were ostensibly set at NMNH, but in fact were filmed at the Carnegie Museum. The Smithsonian considered the movie's content to be too violent to approve for onsite filming. Hannibal Lector and the NMNH's collections also appear in the 1986 film *Manhunter* in which FBI profiler Will Graham comes out of retirement to investigate the serial killer known as the "Tooth Fairy."



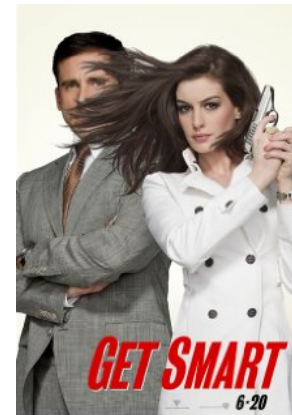
The historical film *Amistad*, released in 1997, unfortunately has an inaccurate Smithsonian reference. The story is the trial of African slaves who mutinied aboard the slave ship *Amistad* in 1839. When the Africans land in America, they are taken captive as runaways and tried for the murder. An abolitionist lawyer defends the accused, arguing they are free citizens of a different country, not slaves. In the film, the case finally gets to the Supreme Court, where John Quincy Adams makes an impassioned and eloquent plea for their release. However, Adams also is portrayed as sleeping through Congressional debates about the Smithsonian bequest, a topic he was passionately engaged in.



The 21st century has seen a tremendous growth in films portraying or set at the Smithsonian. Several of these have been entertaining and successful adventure films—hopefully reflecting a much more positive image of the Smithsonian. The first, from 2001, *Atlantis: The Lost Empire*, is an animated film about a young historian

working in the boiler room of a museum, which looks like the Smithsonian, and his quest to find the lost city of Atlantis. *The Young and Prodigious Spivet*, based on the novel *The Selected Works of T.S. Spivet*, will soon be released.

In the 2008 film *Get Smart*, Secret Agent Smart walks through the Rotunda of NMNH to clandestinely access the headquarters of CONTROL, a secret government agency that is located under the museum. *Transformers 2: Revenge of the Fallen*, which was released in 2009, was filmed at both NMNH and NASM’s Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center, where it featured NASM’s SR-71 *Blackbird*. In the film, the *Blackbird*, also known as *Jetfire*, is an aged transformer that helps the main characters in their battle against the evil robots known as the Decepticons.



The *Jetfire* was not the only museum object to come alive in the movies. The Smithsonian was center stage in *Night at the Museum: Battle of the Smithsonian*. In this 2009 sequel to the 2006 hit *Night at the Museum*, Security Guard Larry Daley heads to Washington, D.C., to find artifacts and exhibit pieces from his museum that were accidentally sent to the Smithsonian. This was the first time the use of the name “Smithsonian” was allowed in the title of a feature film. The movie includes scenes filmed at the Castle, NMNH, and NASM, and uses many artifacts, exhibits, and notable items exhibited in Smithsonian museums. It was a great success, although millions of viewers now believe the Smithsonian has multiple floors of storage space below the Mall, accessible via the Castle.