

They're Digging in the Wrong Place: The Influence of Indiana Jones on the Archives

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Tell me if this sounds familiar: you're chatting with friends, family members, maybe complete strangers and the subject of professions pops up. They ask you what you do for a living, and you reply with, "I'm an archivist." Their response, "Oh, like in Indiana Jones?" Now, there are a few ways to handle this situation. One, flip every table you can find and drop to your knees shouting at superhero-level "NO!" before setting fire to an expensive coat and leaving a you-shaped Bugs Bunny-esque hole in the wall as you disappear into the wilderness. Two, internalize their ignorance and drive it deep down into the void that was once your soul before everyone started making that same statement. Or three, take the more contemplative approach and explain what an archivist is and why the comparison to Indiana Jones isn't accurate. I'd recommend the third option, mainly because it's less psychologically damaging and you're less likely to be arrested for property damage. But to each their own.

Kidding aside, the truth of the matter is that I've gotten the Indiana Jones remark more times than I can count, which led me to wonder why *that* reference is so prevalent. Is it because archaeologist, Indy's actual profession in the films, and archivist contain the same *arch-* root word? For the record, *archive* comes from the Greek *arkheia* meaning "public records," which stems from *arkhē* meaning "government" while *archaeology* stems from the Greek *arkhaios* meaning "ancient."¹ Or, is it a genuine misconception due to the fact that the closing scene of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* is the only pop culture frame of reference most people have of archives? From what I can tell, it's a combination of the two.

There's no denying the cultural icon that is the Indiana Jones franchise. A combination of pulp comic and movie serial heroes of the 1930s and 1940s with a dash of inspiration from the lives of real archaeologists, Henry Walton "Indiana" Jones, Jr. (as played by Harrison Ford) remains the embodiment of the academic action hero that other properties strive to emulate. The influence is numerous in movies like *The Goonies*, *The Mummy*, *National Treasure*, *Atlantis: The Lost Empire*, *The Da Vinci Code*, *Tomb Raider*, television shows like *Legends of the Hidden Temple*, *The Librarians*, and *Warehouse 13*, and video games like *Tomb Raider* and

¹ "Archive," *Merriam-Webster*, accessed November 13, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/archive>; "Archeology," *Merriam-Webster*, accessed November 13, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/archeology>.

Uncharted.² They all follow a similar formula: action adventure scenarios where the search for ancient/historical treasure is at the center of the plot. The protagonists are often members of academia or someone with a vast knowledge of history who must use their wits to solve puzzles and outsmart the antagonist who wants the treasure for vaguely evil purposes. Even “reality” shows like the History Channel’s *Digging for the Truth* and the Travel Channel’s *Expedition Unknown* have cashed in on the Indiana Jones vibe of adventure and seeking knowledge.

Academia, however, has a very different view of Dr. Jones.³ Archaeological practices and philosophies have certainly changed since the days of bullwhips, fedoras, and Webley revolvers (or, at least, our perceptions of those practices have changed), but Indy remains an inspirational figure to many in the field despite his problematic methods. It isn’t difficult, however, to do a Google search and find yourself flooded with articles “debunking” the myths about archaeologists as presented in the Indiana Jones franchise.⁴ Most notable is Jones’ imperialist philosophy as summed up in one of his many quotable lines, “It belongs in a museum!” Given the track record of Indy in the films, I don’t think any of the items he tracks down ever make it to a museum except for the Cross of Coronado. Maybe he manages to put other artifacts in museums in the novels, but film-wise his average isn’t high. As has been pointed out many times over, he has far more in common with looters than archaeologists. Consistent across many of the properties inspired by Jones is his smash-and-grab idea of academic adventuring, a harmful and culturally destructive means of obtaining artifacts that rarely has consequences for the heroes involved.⁵

And this is just the profession where Jones supposedly belongs. Archives and archivists have been saddled with the Indiana Jones references as a byproduct of the franchise’s longevity and a simple lack of alternatives. At this point, whenever properties appear in media that have an archival slant, it’s rare that Indiana Jones *isn’t* referenced. Two television programs, *The Librarians* and *Warehouse 13*, were heavily influenced by Indiana Jones but also have a connection to archives. Neither is a perfect example, but both draw from the same pop culture repository. Let’s begin with *The Librarians* because, quite frankly, they’re not actually librarians.

A continuation of the *Librarian* trilogy of made-for-TV movies, *The Librarians* follows original librarian Flynn Carsen (Noah Wyle), three newbie librarians Jake Stone (Christian Kane), Cassandra Cillian (Lindy Booth), and Ezekiel Jones (John

² “Indiana Jones’ Legacy.” *TheRaider.net*, accessed November 13, 2018, <http://www.theraider.net/information/influences/legacy.php>.

³ Erik Vance, “Why Archeologists Hate Indiana Jones,” *iO9.com*, last modified September 19, 2014, <https://io9.gizmodo.com/why-archeologists-hate-indiana-jones-1636800753>.

⁴ Mikala Kass, “Indiana Jones’ archeology ideas? They belong in a museum!” *ASU Now: Access, Excellence, Impact*, last modified June 11, 2018, <https://asunow.asu.edu/20180611-asu-archaeology-experts-bust-indiana-jones-myths>.

⁵ Daniel A. Gross, “The Casual Colonialism of Lara Croft and Indiana Jones,” *Hyperallergic.com*, last modified April 6, 2018, <https://hyperallergic.com/436285/casual-colonialism-lara-croft-indiana-jones/>.

Harlan Kim), guardian Eve Baird (Rebecca Romijn), and the library's steward Jenkins (John Larroquette). Their mission: hunt down magical artifacts for safe-keeping in the library. Like Indiana Jones, *The Librarian* movies and television show borrow heavily from pulp adventures and leading the way are bookworms, historians, and geeks-turned-heroes. Even the cast can't help seeing the commonalities between *The Librarians* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Referring to why he felt the show was right for him, Christian Kane said:

"I was familiar with the films . . . I've seen 'em and to me it kinda felt like Indiana Jones, it was *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. I'm a fan of those films and that genre, so it was easy for me to walk into this role."⁶

Hanging over the show, however, is the misnomer of calling the characters "librarians" when nothing qualifies them to be librarians.⁷ The whole concept of the library as the show presents it works in opposition to libraries. No one is allowed into the library unless they are a librarian—or some member of an evil society who always manages to break in somehow. The only people doing research and reference are the librarians. And all the artifacts they track down are locked up tight with no plans for access happening in the near future. To be fair, I enjoy the show. It's fun and there are some lessons to be learned about hoarding knowledge and the power of friendship but saying any of these characters are librarians is like saying *I'm a librarian because I have a room containing many leather-bound books.*

Does that make them archivists? Sort of? At the very least, the librarians are closer to archivists based on how they go about collecting and storing documents and other physical materials. That they only appear to be locking these items away for no other purpose than keeping the items from other people makes the library more of a dark archive.⁸ Although, in an episode in the first season the librarians meet an archivist, but she turns out to be a near-immortal co-worker of Nicola Tesla responsible for keeping an entire town from winking out of existence.⁹ Ya know, like ya do. In all honesty, the show should just be called *Smart Action Heroes*. Calling it *The Librarians* is more about evoking the idea of smart people even if none of the characters have a background as librarians or archivists.

⁶ Morgan Jeffrey, "Christian Kane: The Librarians is Indiana Jones meets Angel," *Digital Spy*, last modified December 8, 2014, <http://www.digitalspy.com/tv/ustv/interviews/a615159/christian-kane-the-librarians-is-indiana-jones-meets-angel/>.

⁷ Aimee Lockhardt, "A Librarian's Thoughts on the TV Show 'The Librarians'," *Infospace*, last modified February 24, 2015, <https://ischool.syr.edu/infospace/2015/02/24/a-librarians-thoughts-on-the-tv-show-the-librarians/>.

⁸ "1. a repository that stores archival resources for future use but is accessible only to its custodian; 2. a collection of materials preserved for future use but with no current access." University of Michigan, *Digital Preservation Glossary*, accessed November 27, 2018, <https://www.lib.umich.edu/preservation-and-conservation/digital-preservation/digital-preservation-glossary>.

⁹ *The Librarians*. "And the City of Light." Season 1, Episode 9. Directed by Tawnia McKiernan. Written by John Rogers and Jeremy Bernstein. TNT, January 18, 2015.

When we look at *Warehouse 13*, however, there's an attempt made at showcasing the administrative side of a secret, government-funded organization tasked with tracking down artifacts of a magical/supernatural nature and storing them in a vast, semi-sentient building in South Dakota. Again, like *ya do*. And while the showrunners would rather viewers think of *The Thin Man* rather than *Raiders* or *The X-Files*, the comparisons persist.¹⁰ The concept of the program is to give the warehouse at the end of *Raiders* a place to exist and the "top men" some real faces.¹¹ Those top men, so to speak, are agents Pete Lattimer (Eddie McClintock) and Myka Bering (Joanne Kelly) working under Artie Nielsen (Saul Rubinek) with their tech wizard Claudia Donovan (Allison Scagliotti) and the warehouse's caretaker Mrs. Frederick (CCH Pounder). The episodes are typically stand-alone with the formula following the show's tagline of "snag it, bag it, tag it" as the agents find an item causing problems somewhere around the world, neutralize the supernatural element, and bring the item back to the warehouse to be cataloged and stored.

It's that last bit, the "tag it" part, that gives *Warehouse 13* a stronger connection to archives and museums. If the showrunners had changed the name to *Archive 13*, it would change very little about the normal operations happening within the facility. Like *The Librarians*, no one employed at the warehouse is an archivist, but episodes frequently feature the agents, staff, and caretakers doing inventory, data entry, and collection maintenance that mimic duties found in archival institutions. Each artifact has a connection to a historical figure, folklore, or legend which always gets a lengthy piece of background exposition from either one of the characters or their database.

Given Indy's long-reaching influence despite his real-life counterparts debunking him on a regular basis, where does that leave archivists? Well, it's not a simple answer. For thirty years, this has been a go-to reference for those outside the archival community, but we can't ignore the fact that archivists utilize this reference too. One example is Austin, Texas's local NPR station, KUT, and their piece on a Texas State Library and Archives Commission building. Both the article and radio program frame the piece within and around referencing *Raiders of the Lost Ark's* final scene.¹² The response from the Texas State Library, however, was positive;

¹⁰ Graeme McMillan, "Why Warehouse 13 Isn't A Raiders Rip-Off - But May Be Awesome," *Io9.com*, last modified June 19, 2009, <https://io9.gizmodo.com/5295962/why-warehouse-13-isnt-a-raiders-rip-off--but-may-be-awesome>.

¹¹ Anthony Letizia, "Warehouse 13: Snag It, Bag It, Tag It," *Geekpittsburgh.com*, last modified February 17, 2014, <http://www.geekpittsburgh.com/televisionreviews/warehouse13.htm>.

¹² Matt Largey, "Raiders of The Lost Archive: Is This Building off Shoal Creek a Top-Secret Warehouse?" *KUT*, last modified February 23, 2018, <http://www.kut.org/post/raiders-lost-archive-building-shoal-creek-top-secret-warehouse>.

Government Information Analyst Bonnie Zuber wrote that they were “pleased to see the comparison to the final scenes in the movie *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.”¹³

And at the 2018 Society of American Archivists’ Annual Meeting in Washington, DC, *Raiders* was referenced in Nate Jones’s presentation “‘The Indiana Jones Warehouse’: Records Appraisal, Purgatory, and Accession” during the Acquisitions & Appraisal Section Meeting.¹⁴ Jones utilized the same reference when he turned his presentation into a full-fledged article about accessing records using FOIA.¹⁵ Even your friendly neighborhood archives and pop culture analyst is guilty of using *Raiders* as an example during a meeting that happened about two weeks before this review dropped. I’ll admit to cringing after I brought it up, but it was the only example I had that the meeting’s attendees would understand. And that’s really the crux of it all. For many archivists, it’s the primary means of connecting with users who have no frame of reference beyond what Indiana Jones has shown them.

It’s worth noting that museums and libraries feature in many of the previously mentioned movies and television shows, which further blurs the lines between our professions as we’re all lumped together under Indy’s pop culture umbrella. Libraries and museums have their place carved out in the public eye that translates into film, television, etc. Archives, however, overlap with museums and libraries in so many ways that it’s difficult for that same public eye to extrapolate the differences. The misconception of the archival association with Indiana Jones then becomes a cycle of outreach efforts that perpetuate the misconception. We love any attention we can bring to archives but often lament that *Raiders* is the only long-running piece of pop culture available. And yet we still utilize it to our own advantage at the expense of turning users towards a more accurate representation.

Interestingly, there are some authors who have a very different vision of *Raiders*’ final scene. In *The Shakespearean Archive: Experiments in New Media from the Renaissance to Postmodernity*, Alan Galey posits that the film has actually cultivated an anxiety towards archives as the Ark of the Covenant “is crated up and numbered by an anonymous workman, and wheeled down the aisle of a vast US government warehouse into a shadowy expanse of identical crates . . . this figure of the archive represents a failure of centralized authority to organize its information and to

¹³ Bonnie Zuber, “State Records Center Featured on Local Radio,” *The Texas Record*, last modified February 23, 2018, <https://www.tsl.texas.gov/slrn/blog/2018/02/state-records-center-featured-on-local-radio/>.

¹⁴ Kathi Isham, “Acquisitions & Appraisal Annual Section Meeting – Archives*Records 2018,” *Assigning Value*, last modified September 6, 2018, <https://appraisalsaa.wordpress.com/2018/09/06/acquisitions-appraisal-annual-section-meeting-archivesrecords-2018/>.

¹⁵ Nate Jones, “The “Indiana Jones Warehouse”: How to use FOIA to get Documents from Purgatory.” *Unredacted: The National Security Archives Blog*, last modified October 4, 2018, <https://unredacted.com/2018/10/04/the-indiana-jones-warehouse-how-to-use-foia-to-get-documents-from-purgatory/>.

bequeath it securely to the future.”¹⁶ The authors of *The Year’s Work in the Oddball Archive* share similar sentiments that the archives can be just as fallible when it comes to forgetting, as summed up by the image of a biblical artifact being “crated up and buried away in the recesses of a government warehouse.”¹⁷ Indiana Jones’ final say on “bureaucratic fools” with no understanding of what they have made as much of an impact as the imagery of the warehouse where archives and archivists are concerned.

It’s difficult to determine what’s the best response to take with Indiana Jones and the archival community. The franchise helps and hinders us but for very different reasons. On the one hand, archivists continuously field questions about *Raiders of the Lost Ark* as if it’s a legitimate archival institution when in fact it’s simply a warehouse. On the other hand, *Raiders* is likely the only means of connecting with our users because we lack an alternative action hero. Whether we like it or not, we’re stuck in Indy’s shadow and nothing short of a fridge surviving a nuclear explosion is going to get us out of it.

¹⁶ Alan Galey, *The Shakespearean Archive: Experiments in New Media from the Renaissance to Postmodernity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 19.

¹⁷ Jonathan Paul Eburne and Judith Ann Roof, *The Year’s Work in the Oddball Archive* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), xv.