

June 12, 2017

Ms. Candice Grant

Chair of Saskatoon Library Board

Dear Ms. Grant:

My name is Guy Vanderhaeghe. I am a Saskatoon writer and former Writer-in-Residence at the Saskatoon Public Library who is writing to you because I have recently learned that the position of coordinator of the Local History Room may be facing elimination. This deeply concerns me. My disquiet about this possibility arises from two different perspectives. The first is based on my experience when as a young man I was employed as an archival assistant at the Saskatchewan Archives and later as an archivist at the University of Saskatchewan Archives and Shortt Library. This, for lack of a better term, is the “insider’s view,” arrived at by working in institutions that, like the Local History Room, are dedicated to the preservation of our history. The other is from the “outside in” and relates to how the Local History Room has assisted me as a writer. For a historical novelist like me, places like the LHR are storehouses that I loot to supply the details and textures of early times, details that help me put clothes on characters’ backs, words in their mouths, and portray them living particular lives plausibly rooted in the past.

As a young man working in specialized collections, it was brought home to me that the usefulness of material is dependent on two inseparable elements, the quality and extent of the research holdings and the knowledge about such resources possessed by the staff. I was taught that not only did I need to know how to access what was on the shelves, I also needed to recognize how all that material informed and illustrated the era, place, people, etc. that had produced it. I was encouraged by more experienced staff to immerse myself in the collections and to work hard at supplementing the training and information I had absorbed as a graduate student in history. The goal was to become more expert so that I could be of real assistance to the public. Given what I learned in those years, I strongly believe that specialized collections require a specialist staff. If such people are not available to users the value of a collection, no matter how comprehensive it may be, is vastly decreased. This is why I am so alarmed that the position of coordinator of the Local History Room may be cut. If it were, a long tradition of training new and inexperienced staff to continue the essential work of preserving the heritage of our city and allowing us to acquire a sense of who we are and where we came from would inevitably be broken.

I have already touched briefly on how important places like LHR are to writers like me. I have turned to it often over many years and have always received generous assistance from those who worked there. I am an admirer of people who have a passion for local history, so much so that one of my novels bears a dedication to local historians. I believe that collections like LHR nourish our rich, diverse, and complex cultural heritage.

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Sometimes small jewels shine the brightest and the LHR is just such a small jewel. That is why I am respectfully writing to you to ask that you do not diminish its lustre.

I am well aware that the library system of Saskatoon faces very hard decisions, especially in light of current budget constraints. Nevertheless, some steps are difficult to recover from and I am convinced that cutting the position of coordinator of LHR is likely to be one of these, a step that may result in irreparable harm.

Yours sincerely,

Guy Vanderhaeghe, O.C., S.O.M. F.R.S.C., St. Thomas More Scholar