Description of Rationale and Scope:

This book will examine the depiction of information, libraries, and librarians in mystery novels from 1970 through 2018 in light of scholarship in both librarianship and in mystery and detective fiction. Mystery novels featuring libraries as settings or that feature librarians as murderers, assistants to the detective, or as victims are numerous. Since the 1970s, the number of mystery series featuring a librarian as the protagonist-sleuth has increased exponentially, to the point where in the second decade of the twenty-first century alone, entries for over twenty different librarian detective series appeared. Many of these series are still running, and more series are promised. Clearly, the librarian as detective and the library as place are interesting to readers, and I propose that this interest is due to the changes in our culture’s relationship with information, libraries, and librarians.

Detective fiction is, ultimately, about information. The sleuth, whether amateur or professional, must know what information to look for, where to find it, and how to apply it to the problem of the crime (usually murder). Fictional librarians have assumed the detective-protagonist role much more often as the definition of library information has changed in the period covered by this book, in part because of the introduction of web browsers and digital information sources, and in part because of the promulgation of unreliable information, or “fake news.” The use of librarians as detective figures indicates a recognition of the need for a professional to navigate the rapidly-increasing amount of information available. However, the
librarian stereotype—the figure of the middle-aged woman in glasses and cardigan shushing unruly patrons—doesn’t, at first glance, seem like the appropriate figure to cast in this role, and most librarian-detective characters do not conform to it. This stereotype is remarkably resilient, and is still a staple in advertising, film, and fiction. Mystery novelists in the period covered by this book must contend with the stereotype as they present librarian-detectives, even in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

The library, while often depicted as the scene of a murder and a threatening place, is just as often depicted as a warm and welcoming community center, and both representations can occur in the same novel. The murder in the library and the subsequent investigation reveal threats to the library, and thus to the community itself. The end of these novels not only reveals who committed the crime, but also how the community has gathered to support its library. Thus, the library, like the librarian, is much more complex than its stereotype.

In surveys of library patrons and environmental scans, people have demonstrated their fondness for actual libraries, but, despite the popularity and ubiquity of electronic information resources, people most positively associate the library with the printed book. However, it is not clear that the book is being perceived as a source of information or as an object of affection, or both. In many of the novels discussed in this book, rare books are stolen from libraries, and the passion that the book as object can inspire is clearly represented; some characters are so passionate about rare books that they will kill to possess them. In some novels, physical books are depicted as supernaturally powerful. Library mysteries also depict the passion that both librarians and patrons have for books as both information sources and entertainment sources.

Library information is seldom the sole source for solving fictional murders, but fictional librarian detectives often consult library materials—both fiction and non-fiction—to verify what
they have learned through other sources. In the 1970s and 1980s, fictional librarians more often played the role of the murder victim or the murderer than the detective or the detective’s assistant. However, by the twenty-first century, the librarian is more often cast as the detective or the assistant to the detective, indicating that the librarian is necessary to locate the best information in a world that is experiencing information overload.

An explanation of how it relates to other books on the topic that have been published recently:

The librarian stereotype continues to be a common topic for non-fiction books about librarians by librarians. In the summer of 2014, *The Librarian Stereotype: Deconstructing Perceptions and Presentations of Information Work* (Eds. Nicole Pagowsky and Miriam Rigby. Chicago: Association of College & Research Libraries), a collection of essays deconstructing the stereotype was published. Few of the essays focused on popular culture, and much of the emphasis of the book was on the lack of diversity among actual librarians, an element that seems to validate the stereotype. Certainly, its thesis is amply demonstrated by the body of work I am studying, in which the vast majority of the librarian detectives are straight, white women. Other recent books on the librarian stereotype merely reinforce the findings of Pauline Wilson’s *Stereotype and Status: Librarians in the United States* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982. Contributions to Library and Information Science. 41): that publications on the stereotype fall into five categories, and that there is really nothing new to say about this topic. Books such as Ruth Kneale’s *You Don't Look Like a Librarian: Shattering Stereotypes and Creating Positive New Images in the Internet Age* (Medford, NJ: Information Today, Inc., 2009) and Ashanti White’s *Not Your Ordinary Librarian: Debunking the Popular Perceptions of Librarians*
(Oxford: Chandos Publishing, 2012) only tend to prove Wilson’s point. Although it covers film
instead of print fiction, Ray Tevis and Brenda Tevis’ *The Image of Librarians in Cinema, 1917-
1999* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2005) provides a useful description of the portrayal of movie
librarians.

Most publications about librarians in fiction or mystery fiction are articles, not books.
Some merely note that librarians are portrayed in fiction, as Christopher Brown-Syed and
Charles Barnard Sands demonstrate in "Some Portrayals of Librarians in Fiction--a Discussion"
*(Education Libraries 21.1-2 [1997]: 17-24)*. Those that take a more theoretical approach, such as
the articles by Gary P. Radford and Marie Radford (“Libraries, Librarians, and the Discourse of
Fear,” *Library Quarterly* 71.3 [2001] 299-329; "Librarians and Party Girls: Cultural Studies and
the Meaning of the Librarian" *Library Quarterly* 73.1 [2003]: 54-69; "Power, Knowledge, and
Fear: Feminism, Foucault, and the Stereotype of the Female Librarian" *Library Quarterly* 67.3
[1997]: 250-66) and Kornelia Tancheva (“Recasting the Debate: The Sign of the Library in
Popular Culture.” *Libraries & Culture* 40.4 [2005]: 530-546), use theoretical constructs to
examine the librarian and the library in popular culture; however, they use only a small number
of works to demonstrate their theses, as John Buschman points out ("Transgression or Stasis?
Challenging Foucault in LIS Theory" *Library Quarterly* 77.1 [2007]: 21-44). Buschmann also
notes that these analyses tend to present both the library and the librarian in a negative light, even
though current surveys consistently show the public’s positive feelings about libraries and
librarians. No work has attempted to deal with the fact that both of these conflicting
interpretations might describe the meaning of libraries and librarians to their communities, as my
use of evidence from a large body of detective fiction (over 250 titles) will show.
The amount of scholarly work on detective fiction has also increased. In 2005, *Clues: A Journal of Detection* published a special issue on Information Literacy in Detective Fiction (24:1), but none of these articles focused on libraries or the librarian, only on the information literacy shown by detective characters in recent detective novels. However, most critical work on detective fiction deals with “hard-boiled” novels that portray a professional detective in an urban area, and another large body of criticism focuses on novels from the Golden Age of detective fiction, which includes authors such as Dorothy L. Sayers and Agatha Christie. Most mysteries featuring a librarian as the detective are “cozy” mysteries, featuring an amateur detective in a small town. Cozy mysteries are quite popular, and part of the difficulty in writing about them as a sub-genre is that there are so many of them.

Despite the growing interest in libraries, librarians, and detective fiction, there is no book that has conducted a thorough study of the intersection of these topics. My book will fill a gap by dealing with a significant number of primary works over a significant period of time.

A breakdown of the table of contents with descriptions of the contents of each chapter:

*Introduction: A brief history of the librarian detective, 1970-2018*

Jacqueline Kirby was the first fictional librarian detective in a series, introduced by Elizabeth Peters in 1972. Fictional librarian detectives followed thick and fast after that, appearing in a variety of libraries and usually solving crimes that had little or nothing to do with their libraries. The number of librarian detective series has increased with each decade. In the twenty-first century, more than one new series featuring a librarian-detective has been introduced each year.
Chapter 1: The library as setting

Libraries in detective novels are often dangerous places. Murder victims meet their doom in these fictional libraries, and sometimes the murder weapon comes from the library itself. Even when no characters die in the library, the library is often portrayed as a place where people do not feel safe. Libraries in mystery fiction are often re-purposed older buildings, which can create a gothic ambience. However, libraries are also shown as places that are valued as community centers and for their service to the community. Often, the library itself is endangered by corrupt civic leaders, censors, and/or budget crises. In these books, the solving of the mystery usually results in the salvation of the library and sometimes the community.

Chapter 2: Rare books and the objectification of information

Rare books are often the motive for fictional murder. These books are not valued as sources of information; indeed, their acquisition and preservation are sometimes achieved at the cost of new information sources. Rare books in mystery fiction can be found in small libraries where their presence doesn’t seem to contribute to the library’s mission. Portraying the library merely as a repository for rare books undercuts its use as a place that promotes community and access to information. Portraying books as material objects also undercuts their value as information resources, and portraying librarians as mere caretakers of rare books often undercuts their value as information professionals.

Chapter 3: Metafiction in library mystery fiction: Fiction as information

Metafiction is, in the most basic sense, fiction about fiction. While non-genre writers might use metafiction to undercut the realism of their fiction, in mysteries, particularly library mysteries, the use of metafiction emphasizes our uncertainty about information sources to the point where
actual mystery fiction is used as a resource to solve a murder. Fictional librarian-detectives are often avid readers of mystery fiction, and, when they are confronted with an actual murder, they use their knowledge of textual crimes to solve the real crimes before them. Thus, they are empowered by their reading.

Chapter 4: The librarian-detective and the librarian stereotype

The librarian stereotype is well-known, and has been repeatedly declared inaccurate, obsolete, and even dead. However, many librarian detectives share a number of characteristics: they are single, usually women in their thirties, who have come to a small community after suffering a romantic disappointment. This repetition does not mean that there is necessarily a new stereotype or that the old stereotype no longer exists. Although these protagonists are younger and better-dressed than the more familiar “old maid” stereotype, they share characteristics with that stereotype. In many library mysteries a stereotypical librarian character is used as a foil to show how different the protagonist is from the stereotype. However, as series become more long-running, the stereotypical foils are given more human characteristics, and even become friends and assistants of the librarian-detectives, indicating that librarians may be able to come to terms with the stereotype or that the stereotype never truly represented librarianship.

Chapter 5: The librarian as librarian: The librarian as information provider

One of the primary sources of information in cozy novels is gossip. The setting for these mysteries tends to be a small town, where everyone knows everyone else’s activities and history—or thinks they do. Often, the librarian-detective is a recent arrival in a relatively closed community, and is thus able to question the histories of residents that everyone thinks that they know. Librarians are also able to conduct research to verify events that again are “known” only
because of local gossip. Some librarian-detectives have supernatural assistance, either because of their own powers or because they have assistance from others who have supernatural powers. However, this information must be verified, using the librarian’s professional expertise. Some librarian-detectives are portrayed as professionals, whose credentials are documented and who activities are governed by the standards of professional associations. Others have taken library jobs because of personal and/or geographic constraints, and do not hold a master’s of library or information science (considered the professional credential for practicing librarians). Still others are portrayed without mentioning a specific credential, and their library work seems more clerical than professional. These representations show the lack of understanding of library work by the public, even while demonstrating the need for someone to verify information and make connections.

**Conclusion**

The increasing depiction of librarians and libraries in mystery fiction since 1970 indicates tensions in the way the public views the library, as well as the way that they view information. With the advent of electronic information, and the concurrent advent of false or misleading electronic information, the need for an information professional or a place where information can be relied upon becomes more important. While there are tensions between the idea of the library as a warm and welcoming space and a space that is intimidating because of its shelves of books and information, the librarian and the library are still considered reliable sources of information—even for solving the crime of murder.
Description of the intended readership:

My primary readers will include scholars of mystery and detective fiction, as well as both academic and public librarians with an interest in mystery fiction. There is overlap between these two groups. Outside of the academy, it is likely that librarians will find it interesting. This book may well have cross-over appeal, since libraries are popular institutions and cozy mysteries are a popular sub-genre.

Details of the proposed length of the book, and intended completion date:

I anticipate that the completed work will be about 90000 words, and that I can deliver the manuscript by May 15, 2019.

Brief credentials of the author:

Mary P. Freier holds a Ph.D. in English and a Master's in Library and Information Science (both from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign). She has presented both nationally and internationally and published on detective fiction since 1985. Aside from the scholarly activity mentioned above, she also served on the team that indexed and collected abstracts for the journal Clues: A Journal of Detective Fiction. Professor Freier has also presented at national library conferences on toxic emotions in library work places, as well as information literacy and circulation and reference services. Her article, “The Librarian in Rowling’s Harry Potter Series,” was published in September of 2014. She is currently Professor and Head of Public Services for the Lydia M. Olson Library at Northern Michigan University in Marquette, Michigan.