

The Audience of *Perry Mason*, or, the Case of What People Write to Famous Authors

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Abstract:

This essay surveys what audience members of the US television series, *Perry Mason* (1957-1966), wrote to Erle Stanley Gardner, creator of the character of Perry Mason, during the lifetime of the program. The study reaffirms and extends our knowledge of audiences (only some of whom might be considered 'fans') of primetime television. It focuses on approximately 130 letters and serves as a comparison with other studies of correspondence from TV viewers such as audiences of general news, the fans of *Cagney & Lacy* (1981-1988), and Internet exchanges between the creator of *Babylon 5* (1994-1998) and its enthusiasts. The *Perry Mason* correspondence is less fraught with specific goals (altering perspectives on news programs, saving a cherished program, enjoying interactions with a famous writer) and, thus, likely displays more routine letter writing. Indeed, typically these audience members write that they like the program, they want Raymond Burr to continue on the program, and they question legal procedures, plot points, and choices of actors. However, among other points, they also tell Gardner their views on favorite (or not) recurring characters and trends in plot construction, and three spontaneously complain about 'incidental' (non-diegetic) music. Audiences seem to write creators of fiction television programs in order to maintain or alter the narrative formulas that give them pleasure. This practice appears to be a constant across historical periods of commercial US television.

Keywords: audience letter-writing, television series, audience preferences, *Perry Mason*

What do audiences do when something goes 'wrong' with their favorite characters or much loved serial narratives? One reaction is to discuss this with other audience members or friends who know the stories. Sometimes individuals or even groups of people will contact by mail, phone, or, now, twitter the narrative's makers to demand an explanation or even changes or, in worse case scenarios for television programs, to try to 'save' the story from

cancellation. More devoted audience members, ‘fans,’ of narratives have been studied, especially their creations of new extensions to stories, ‘cos-play’ at conventions, and other assorted amusements with the ‘imaginary world’ they so enjoy.¹ Researchers have tried to look not only at the somewhat atypical behavior described for fans but also at the ‘average’ or ‘normative’ activities of ‘regular’ readers and viewers of stories.² Also of concern is whether or not the easier means of communication among people and with producers of documentaries and fictional narratives in the recent couple of decades is changing anything in these dynamics.

This essay is focused primarily upon the first of these two types of audiences before the rise of the internet – regular audience members – in order to try to establish a sort of base for audience engagement with media. What is the behavior for people who might be described as regular and ordinary consumers of a narrative or an author but who, for some reason or another, are moved to contact the narrative’s makers without yet displaying the intensity of what would be labeled full-fledged fandom?³ What reasons might induce individuals to make that rather energetic move? This case provides some illumination into these questions. Erle Stanley Gardner’s papers for his ‘Perry Mason’ stories contains nine boxes of correspondence from readers of his 82 novels, listeners of the 3,221 radio episodes, and viewers of the 271 television episodes.⁴ These letters are quite entertaining in of themselves. For instance, one correspondent of the fiction wrote back to Gardner’s secretary regarding her answer to a plot question for ‘The Haunted Husband’:

Dear Miss Lyon,

It was very kind of you to get Perry Mason [sic] to explain to me the events at the hotel. Mrs. Greeley certainly had an active life in her thirties, doing two murders and her own suicide to cover her affair with Homan. But it was nice of her to hide Mrs. Warfield instead of murdering her too.⁵

Such a typical sardonic tone, and play with the fictional figure of Perry Mason, permeates the letters to Gardner from his audience. In turn, Gardner responded. From all accounts, during Gardner’s lifetime he not only kept his correspondence from his audiences from at least 1932, but he and his up-to-eight secretaries answered most of their letters.

This study will focus on the letters from the 130 writers⁶ who wrote to Gardner about the first *Perry Mason* television series (airing in the U.S. from 1957-66). It will serve as a comparison with other examples of routine correspondence from audiences to begin to build a picture of typical contacts as well as to provide a touchstone to determine whether the recent intensification of audience-celebrity exchange as a consequence of the Internet and social media marks any transformation in this behavior. Some research has already considered how people connect with authors, musicians, actors, and other celebrities,⁷ and people have written to famous individuals from at least the 1700s.⁸ However, the growth of academic analysis of this behavior has given us more detailed information from the perspectives not only of audiences but also of those contacted.

Two early studies have focused on letters to news organizations and anchormen. In 1977 Bernadette McGuire and David J. LeRoy surveyed previous reports of who contacted media by writing letters to newspaper editors. The research was contradictory, indicating writers were either older than average or were young adults. Also, some studies showed that writers expressing public policy opinions were more educated than average while other research indicated that those in lower socio-economic brackets who felt alienated politically were more likely to write letters or contact radio programs. To resolve these contradictions, McGuire and LeRoy took a sample of the population that included people who had contacted television and radio stations to compare them with the rest of the general population. Overall, they concluded that those who had contacted the media outlets were 'generally older, better educated, higher incomes, more likely to be alone or widowed, perceptive of more community problems, belonging to more clubs, more interested in public affairs, less alienated from society, [and] more likely Caucasian.'⁹

Herbert Gans also looked at routine audience mail in 1977. He had access to all of the letters sent to television anchorperson John Chancellor and NBC's *Nightly News* during October 1975, for a total of 351 letters from 285 viewers. His analysis indicates that approximately 25% of the writers asked for an autograph, a job, facts or an opinion for a student paper, or a transcript or further information on a news story, or they offered a story idea. Twenty-seven percent of the letters were reactions to the news stories, and 12%, reactions to Chancellor (both positive and negative). Of those expressing opinions, men wrote two thirds of the critical letters, and their dominant ideological position was conservative. Gans concludes that earlier research as well as his study suggests that people write news organizations when their 'political goals are endangered, or [they] believe the news media to be liberal' (e.g., not on their side).¹⁰

The recent growth of studies of audiences and fan culture has produced more analyses of the multiple sorts of person-to-person relations between audience members and art workers ranging from audience members to fans. For example, Peter J. Krämer has studied a group of letters to Stanley Kubrick in the late 1960s about *2001: A Space Odyssey* and categorizes the writers' responses as 'rejection, dialogue, celebration and appropriation' of the film.¹¹ In a case closer to the *Perry Mason* situation (an on-going serialized fictional television program), Julie D'Acci had access to about 500 letters from the producers of the primetime drama, *Cagney & Lacy* (1981-1988). However, many of these letters were written during the 'save-the-show' period, and the letters in particular involved women who articulated the 'impact of the series on their lives; and the terms in which they understood themselves and constructed their experiences.'¹² In 2006, Lincoln Geraghty examined letters within fan magazines and on-line chat rooms (fan-to-fan correspondence) about how letter writers say *Star Trek* 'helped them in daily life.'¹³ The *Perry Mason* correspondence is less fraught with such specific goals and, thus, likely displays more routine letter writing to a creator of an on-going television program.

One additional significant question about these everyday audience-celebrity exchanges is whether recent television industrial practices or the ease and speed of contact

with Internet and social media have altered any of this behavior in recent years. Derek Johnson writes that from about the 1980s, U.S. television producers began actively to invite audiences to provide feedback to the program producers.¹⁴ Maintaining this engagement with the audiences and fans is now nearly a major sub-field of production work as Sharon Marie Ross has detailed.¹⁵ An important example of the amplification of this dynamic is show-runner J. Michael Straczynski's use of Internet conversations with fans to promote *Babylon 5* (1994-1998).¹⁶ Apparently Straczynski interacted with enthusiasts on early computer networks from about 1984 onward and is considered the 'first' to use such forums to 'directly engage with fans.'¹⁷ Over the five years of *Babylon 5*, he posted some 17,000 answers to queries, usually positively but occasionally with a bit of frustration as Kurt Lancaster emphasizes about Straczynski's 'performance' as an online celebrity.¹⁸

The new variety of places to engage with authors of stories needs consideration. Ian Christie has provided an historical analysis about audiences which includes useful information as of 2011 about where people view films (mobile devices, television sets, theaters, DVDs/Blue Rays, or computer screens). He reports on a survey that indicated that about 85% of people 'did' something about the observed film such as talk with friends about it; 'substantial minorities' (those whom might be labeled 'fans' rather than audiences) went further, joining a club or writing a letter.¹⁹

Unfortunately, the most obvious consequence of the Internet and, now, social media in general is that the increase in (apparent) access to famous people has also ramped up expectations. In fact, the Internet has pages explaining how to write letters to improve chances of receiving a reply. However, while television programs and film production companies can employ workers to create these sorts of engagements, individual artists may have less time and fewer facilities or funds to do this. In *Playing to the Crowd*, Nancy K. Baym details the overwhelming demand for musicians being 'constantly accessible, especially on social media.'²⁰ This requirement of access becomes an intense second job.

Thus, looking at what was occurring in the late 1950s and early 1960s for a routine television program and a normal audience – albeit noting that Gardner was particularly diligent about his correspondence – can provide a benchmark by which to compare other cases before and after that period. I will show that in this case study people write in to comment on the narrative formula either to retain or 'improve' on it and to question the program's makers about real-life matters. Both these textual and extra-textual drives animate the motivation to contact the creators of the fictional stories.

Erle Stanley Gardner and the *Perry Mason* Program

In general, a fictional primetime television program does not threaten viewers' sense of security like news show might. So, what stimulates audience members to write to the makers of routine serialized entertainment programs?²¹ To answer this requires, first, some background on *Perry Mason* and what is available to be known about those who wrote to Gardner as the individual primarily promoted as its creator.

Gardner began his writing career in 1923 when he produced a novelette for a pulp magazine. At the time he was a lawyer, but the story goes that his law practice interrupted his hunting trips so he turned to fiction for a career. He published the first of the Perry Mason novels in 1933, and that series as well as several others produced an extensive, as he put it, 'fiction factory.' By the mid-1940s, he had three secretaries who took dictation from him and answered correspondence; during the era of the television program he was up to eight.²²

The character of Perry Mason was rapidly and highly successful, with great longevity in the market. In 1984 *Perry Mason* books were 12% of the top 200 best-selling titles.²³ Beyond what I am about to describe, Gardner's firms produced or sold rights to Perry Mason comic books and board games, swiftly spreading the franchise across media. As quickly as 1934, Warner Bros. optioned titles for movie adaptation. These films appeared between 1934 and 1937, and four of the six movies produced starred Warren William. In 1943, CBS inaugurated a fifteen-minute weekday radio serial drama that ran through 1955. At that point, Gardner's company, Paisano Productions, developed a proposal for the television series. William Paley reviewed the initial scripts, and CBS finally bought the series in 1956. The wife of Gardner's agent, Gail Patrick Jackson (a former silent screen actress), took on the executive producer's role. Gardner seems to have checked adaptations and scripts although the contractual arrangements were such that the production staff was not obligated to follow any suggestions he made.²⁴

The program was fairly successful, landing in the top twenty-five shows for the first five years or so, and Raymond Burr, playing Perry, won Emmys as best dramatic actor in 1959 and best actor in 1960, with Barbara Hale playing Perry's faithful secretary, Della Street, securing an Emmy as best dramatic supporting actress in 1959. The show continued through May 1966 with new episodes and has had a remarkable syndication career thereafter. Although a new version of the program with Monte Markham had one season in 1973-74, Burr's association with the star character was extremely strong, and ultimately NBC produced made-for-television movies with Burr and Hale from 1985 on. Gardner died in 1970, prior to both the second series and movies.

Gardner seems to have kept most of his audience letters and copies of replies. In part this was important as a protection: people sent in story ideas which his secretaries dutifully explained to the submitters that Gardner could not see them because of possible intellectual property lawsuits. For the rest of the letter writers, however, Gardner replied personally to significant parts of the mail, or his secretaries crafted a rather detailed response. In looking through the correspondence for the television program, I saw routine answers to some questions (which I will discuss below) but never a stock paragraph. Gardner particularly respected the audience contact, it appears.²⁵

Routine Audience Letter Writing

The correspondence for the television program was almost solely addressed to Gardner as creator of Perry Mason. Audience letters also went to Jackson as producer of the program,

CBS, and various stars of the program, especially Burr. The collection involves 130 writers of which six were letters written by couples (although several other letters from women implied they were writing on behalf of both themselves and their husbands). Of that 130, seventy-nine (61%) were females; fifty (38%) were males; and one was unclear. Twenty-eight of the fifty states were represented, along with writers from Washington, D.C., Canada, Mexico, and Burma. The states with most representation were eighteen writers from California and seventeen from New York – hardly surprising given the general population. The rest of the states dribble out in numbers symptomatic of U.S. residence. Dates of the letters were also predictably distributed. During the months up to and the first year of the program, twenty-four letters arrived. In the second season, twenty-three came in, and the numbers trickle down thereafter.

Obviously determining the age of writers is not possible. However, those who were young or elderly often mentioned this either indirectly – ‘now retired,’ in grade school – or directly. Such comments indicate that at least six of the writers were in high school or younger (I shall discuss one such letter below). Occupations mentioned were predictable. Gardner notes that his public appearances and correspondence indicate that lawyers were usually very pleased with the verisimilitude of the program (although more on that below). Internal evidence points toward at least six lawyers, two pre-law students, one judge, one private investigator, two court workers, and one member of the ACLU writing Gardner. Also contacting him were the chair of biology at the University of Dallas, a faculty member in Pathology from Columbia University, an engineer, an accountant, a minister, and a ‘church-goer.’ Also included was one person who may have had mental delusions. Other writers included the editor and the associate editor of the *Saturday Evening Post* (where Gardner often published work in serialization), the President of Cargille Laboratories, and the President of the American Academy of Public Affairs.

This data suggests that this collection presents no significant anomalies. Although a couple extra-textual events produce a ‘bump’ in the correspondence, these events – to be discussed – do not distort significantly the typicality of this collection, and it can thus be used as one site for answering the question, what stimulates audience members to write to the creators of these sorts of programs?

Quite predictably, a major reason to write Gardner was to comment about the basic content of the program. Forty-three (35%) of the letters fall into this category. Obviously these are often people who are enjoying the program. One writer indicates that her pastor had mentioned during Sunday’s church services that the program was ‘clean,’ and she hopes the show remains so. Another writes of her pleasure that the protagonists are ‘all such clean people, no swearing, chasing women, and drinking at every chance.’²⁶ A third person writes,

We wish to defend Perry Mason who can be depended upon to be the hero and come out with a happy ending. The world is an uncertain place in which we are living today, and this program brings pleasure and enjoyment in being

able to depend upon seeing a program with an ending which we know will be favorable.²⁷

Two writers do complain about the presence of Blacks on the program. One individual states that young Black men visible in the time of Black revolution is upsetting; the other objects to a 'Negro' judge. Gardner replies to the latter that Negroes are on the Los Angeles Superior Court (where the fictional story is set). Also, however, he is not responsible for casting the program. He concludes that he recognizes 'geographical conditions complicate the problem tremendously.'²⁸

These letters seem to wish to provide validation or caution to Gardner to insure that *Perry Mason* will continue in a way that will provide the viewers with pleasure. In fact, if the program veers somewhat from its formula, Gardner hears about it. One writer admonishes that he does not like the recent trend in season four to spend more time in pre-court events; rather he wants more courtroom scenes. Additionally, writers let Gardner know what they think about the characters as characters and in relation to the plots. A writer during the first season thinks that Della should be less 'hard-boiled and cold.' Writers want more of Della or Paul Drake (Perry's private investigator) – although Paul is too serious on the TV show compared with the novels. And one correspondent states that while *Perry Mason* is her only "must' on T.V.," she is glad that Perry is romance-free and wins all of his cases.²⁹

Not everyone agreed with those preferences. Some viewers clearly want to fine-tune the formula. Several urge a romance between Perry and Della, two appealing to the novels as justification. One writer provides a broader narrative in which 'Della Street is held on suspicion of murder and Perry Mason defends her. In the end he asks her to marry him.' Gardner answers that Perry is always so busy that he does not notice 'What a beautiful, sweet girl Della is.' Someday he may notice and propose on the spot.

Not all writers approved about Della. A fourth season writer suggests putting Della behind her secretarial desk rather than 'rolling those 'cat eyes' in [Perry's] direction and saying something she thinks is cute.' Long-time Gardner assistant, Jean Bethell (who married Gardner after Gardner's wife passed away³⁰), responded to the writer that 'the several Della Streets who work with Mr. Gardner (there are seven of us) thought we might answer your letter'; when someone who has worked with Perry for many years, a bit of 'light hearted joking' seems appropriate.³¹

The other set of objections about the plot involves its predictability. Many writers – over 6% of them – propose that Perry lose one case to District Attorney Hamilton Burger. Several reasons for such a plot outcome are suggested. One writer indicates that he is starting to feel sorry for the luckless D.A. A secretary replies that Perry will lose when he represents a guilty client. Other reasons for proposing this is that it will surprise the audience, and it will improve verisimilitude. According to another writer, in October 1961 at the start of the fifth season, she had read in the *T.V. Guide* that the California State Bar was also urging this; she disagrees, quoting *The Writer's Handbook*, edited by A.S. Burack, that

characters need to remain consistent. She reasons that viewers understand this is a show, not reality.³²

Mail also predictably involves questions about the law practices or the facts of the plot. One observant viewer notes that witnesses sit in the court while other witnesses give testimony and asks if this is usual. The University of Dallas chair of biology thinks the representation of loss of patent rights is not correct, and a chemical analysis could not be done overnight. A third viewer questions why Burger was not allowed to rephrase a question that was judged to be leading. About the latter query, Gardner answers that some judges have held that the harm was already created, but more significantly, television production conventions and the short time for an episode were more crucial in this legal gap – an answer often provided correspondents. One writer on behalf of her husband and herself says that a big fight between them ensued after a show about who killed whom. The secretaries re-read the script and give them an answer. And another objects to condensing the plots of novels into an hour; at the letter-writer's age of sixty-two, it is hard to follow. Two people complain about violations of civil liberties. One of these who is a member of the A.C.L.U. writes a three-page letter of concerns, noting that television should not promote justifications for such civil liberty violations; the other writer implies that the Perry of the novels is much more incautious in the literary stories about violating the law compared with the T.V. show.³³

As I have mentioned, writers suggest ideas for the programs – some of which the secretaries explain cannot be passed along to Gardner because of concern about intellectual property lawsuits. One fellow who was a court stenographer apparently met Gardner at Sun Valley and sends along ideas for making the roles of court stenographers more prominent and realistic. Plot ideas come from real life, and others use variation on the roles of the characters to propose that Drake, Burger, and Police Lt. Arthur Tragg variously be accused of murder, with Perry defending them. One writer, however, does the reverse. A Phoenix, Arizona, lawyer tells Gardner that a legal action finding that he heard about on the program was useful to him for a murder case he was defending.³⁴

The sorts of comments about program content strike me as well within the bounds of audience and fan behavior, asking for stories that give pleasure and cautioning against plots that are less than satisfying. *Perry Mason* was not unusual but was somewhat constricted since so many of its viewers came to the program with intense knowledge of the characters from the novels, movies, and radio series. Mostly at the start of the program but throughout its run people would comment on how suited (or not) actors were to the roles they played. Fans liked to provide suggestions of alternative actors. For Perry, who was viewed as too heavy,³⁵ deliberate, and, as one writer put it, moved like he would 'drop dead any moment' and was like a 'mortician directing a funeral,' proposed instead were Gregory Peck or Richard Denning. Deborah Kerr should play Della. One person suggested that Burr and William Hopper, the actor playing Drake, switch roles. Others disagreed. Wrote one person, '[Raymond Burr] IS Perry Mason.' And of course once viewers became familiar with the actors, they tell Gardner that now when they read the novels, they picture the

characters as the actors on T.V. While Gardner is not a recipient of fan mail for Burr, he did receive one letter from a woman who says that a news story about Burr indicates he is lonely. She has prayed about this, and God has told her to act on her belief that Burr is to be her husband. She asks Gardner to be a go-between for her.³⁶

Many writers explicitly indicate familiarity with the books but also with the movies and radio serials as points for comparison. Beyond the differences in characters between the books and television series, writers felt uneasy with stories reduced to sixty-minute plots. Contrarily, others sought out the books and, even, the radio scripts after being introduced to Perry Mason from T.V. Two writers had remarks about the movie Perry Mason (Warren Williams) in comparison with Burr, and a third was surprised that Burr could equal radio-lead John Larkin.³⁷

One unexpected finding is that three individuals write in to complain about the non-diegetic music on the program. One calls it 'atrocious.' A second says that the background music makes it hard to hear the dialogue and questions, 'Are you being coerced by the musicians to buy their services?'³⁸ The third writes,

In the interest of approaching television in a more adult manner – PLEASE give that [sic] and use your influence in STOPPING the use of 'incidental music' on these shows.

Stupid, silly, obnoxious, distracting 'music' does nothing to enhance the illusion that you are trying to create – it DOES constantly remind the viewer that it's just a far fetched picture. Music while gliding down the highway – music while creeping in the shadows – music while the body is discovered – Bah. Why can't the producers of TV *imagine* they have intelligent adults (now and then, any way) and permit the picture to tell the story by acting and appropriate conversation.

... I have read dozens of your books – all without any musical background ...³⁹

Again, a major reason for audience members to write to Gardner was to ensure and even fine-tune a program they enjoyed.

Audience Communications and Extra-textual Life

The other sorts of reasons to write Gardner involve not the content of the program but various extra-textual matters. These letters were far fewer in number, about 20% of the whole. People like the show and want to read the books. Where can they find them? One junior high school girl wants to be an actress; how can she secure a small role on the program? Another young woman explains, 'I wouldn't miss [*Perry Mason*] for the world. Though I'm a girl, I'm thinking of becoming a lawyer.' People already lawyers declare that the show has been very valuable to the profession. An elderly couple hears the show may

be cancelled, but they like it; they promise to buy the products of any sponsor. When Burr's contract is being renewed, several letters remark on how important he is to the show. When the series is ending, people declare their sorrow. One woman writes that she has created two scrapbooks dating from the start of the program, has joined the Barbara Hale fan club, has seen Burr twice in personal appearances, and has a complete set of the Perry Mason books.⁴⁰ Another remarks that the characters are her friends, displaying parasocial behavior.⁴¹

People also contact Gardner for commercial reasons, but rarely. The head of Cargille Laboratories sends him circulars about ultra violet lights and suggests that a plot use these. In reverse, another writer sends Gardner a sample of his perfume, 'Til Eternity,' in appreciation for hearing it promoted in an episode. This is obviously a case of the *Perry Mason* staff using the name of a real product (probably accidentally), and the writer is clearly just enjoying that.⁴²

One major extra-textual event did occur during the run of *Perry Mason* that produced seven responses from eight viewers: police arrested William Talman, the actor playing Burger, on marijuana charges when they entered a noisy party. All of the guests were nude. Eventually the courts dismissed the marijuana charges. For a while CBS dropped Talman from the program, but after the charges were dismissed, Burr argued successfully for Talman's return. Gardner and his staff too seem to have supported Talman.

This event produced a diverse response. One person complained that it was only 'another legal technicality which again set free some Hollywood scum.' Or, Talman may have been cleared of any legal wrongdoing, 'but he gleefully and gladly proclaimed that he was completely nude at the party!' Gardner replies, 'And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.' In another exchange, the writer responds to suggestions not to be so harsh by asking if Talman is repentant. Otherwise he is a menace to the youth. Yet, other writers state that they are pleased Gardner and Burr are standing behind Talman and threaten to stop watching *Perry Mason* if Talman does not return. An irate fan supporting Talman sends in multiple letters and newspaper columns and writes that the apparent backing down of NBC to hire Talman for an episode of another show is a possible case of anti-trust violations.⁴³ While my sample is way too small to make any generalities, I would note that these letters came from six women and one couple. Three women wrote against Talman's re-hiring; three women and the couple wrote for it.

As mentioned above, people have written authors since at least the 1700s. By the early twentieth century, film (and later television) studios supported audience contact and helped organize fan clubs for stars. Certainly Gardner was savvy in his relations with those who choose to contact him. Except in the instance of the Talman case, most of Gardner's letters in reply are conciliatory and encouraging to those who have taken the effort to contact him directly about the T.V. series. While this study cannot reveal much about the meanings of *Perry Mason* in the lives of these individuals, it offers an introduction into the general picture about audience behaviors.

What then likely stimulates people to write creators of fiction programs on television? People who enjoy a program become quite involved in detailed analysis of the content of that program; they notice changes in the formula for a T.V. series; and they pay attention to extra-textual events that may affect that content. They make things connected to the program, they view characters parasocially, and a small few may alter their life choices as a consequence of watching.⁴⁴ Did the young woman, I wonder, become a lawyer? I hope so. At any rate, typical reasons to contact the creators are predominantly for the purpose of maintaining or altering the program's formula to insure continued pleasure in viewing.

As we study audiences, then, I think realizing that people – whether everyday folk or fans – writing letters (or texting) to creators and celebrities is not a new activity (it is centuries old). Nor, from what is visible in the studies that we have is any transformation occurring in audience behavior or its focus for commentary (plot, characters, music, etc.). What may be different in the era of the Internet and social media are the speed and amount of communications as well as the increasingly public nature of such communications. Now these changes may have consequences, particularly to the creators and celebrities. Since writers (as well as the creator or celebrity) can often see and read other writers' messages and the creators' and celebrities' replies, important new dynamics such as negotiating social hierarchies and power amongst members of a social exchange need consideration with a research project.⁴⁵ What may seem an innocuous question about a story to a narrative-maker may also be an act of making the writer visible to many other audience members. What this means to the histories of audiences is that contacting creators operates within large social and cultural circumstances that also play a part in the implications of the actions and their meanings. Although never entirely innocent of self gratification and motivations, *public* audience and fan communications require even more complex psychological and sociological analyses.

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Notes:

¹ Although I disagree with the notion of his implied 'prime' creator, see Mark J. P. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (NY: Routledge, 2012). On general fan behaviors see Janet Staiger, *Media Reception Studies* (NY: New York University Press, 2005), pp. 95-114. For distinctions between 'audiences' and 'fans,' see pp. 95-6 where I note that Henry Jenkins argues that a 'person is a fan' not by being a regular viewer of a particular program but by translating that viewing into some type of cultural activity, by sharing feelings and thoughts about the program content with friends, by joining a community of other fans who share common interests'; Henry Jenkins, 'Star Trek Rerun, Reread, Rewritten: Fan Writing as Textual Poaching,' *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 5, no. 2 (June 1988): 88. As well, Lawrence Grossberg distinguishes between audiences and fans; 'Is There a Fan in the House? The Affective Sensibility of Fandom' in Lisa Lewis (ed.), *Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 56-7. Regarding how to characterize fan behavior, see Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750-1990* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 290-94. Fan studies has increased significantly in the past two decades. A good entry into the research besides standard databases is through the Fan Studies Network at fanstudies.org.

² See, for instance, Bruce A. Austin, *Immediate Seating: A Look at Movie Audiences* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1989) or David Morley, *The 'Nationwide' Audience: Structure and Decoding* (London: British Film Institute, 1980) and David Morley, *Family Television* (London: Comedia, 1986).

³ Most of the letters that I am studying here are not likely from 'fans' but from ordinary audience members; I deduce this from the address and language the writers employ as they write to Gardner. The sample may contain some fans, but the letters themselves do not reveal the sort of information I would want to have to suggest that the writers are intensely engaged with the Perry Mason world to the degree Jenkins and Grossberg expect for 'fandom.' And, of course, trying to draw a very distinct line between the two categories would be foolish. A person likely starts as an audience member, developing into a 'fan.' Still I want to be clear that the letters are insufficient evidence to claim anything about the writers as fans, at least as routinely argued in fan studies.

⁴ For a study of the Perry Mason multi-media franchise, see J. Dennis Bounds, *Perry Mason: The Authorship and Reproduction of a Popular Hero* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996).

⁵ Dr. Charles G. Abbot to Thelma S. Lyon, n.d. [ca. 1 November 1964], Box 163, Erle Stanley Gardner papers (hereafter ESG), Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, Austin Texas.

⁶ The correspondence includes several married couples for a base of 124 sets of letters.

⁷ For a review of this, see Staiger, *Media Reception Studies*, 95-114.

⁸ Daniel Cavicchi, *Tramps Like Us: Music and Meaning among Springsteen Fans* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 5.

⁹ Bernadette McGuire and David J. LeRoy, 'Audience Mail: Letters to a Broadcaster,' *Journal of Communication* 27, no. 3 (Summer 1977): 84.

¹⁰ Herbert J. Gans, 'Audience Mail: Letters to an Anchorman,' *Journal of Communication* 27, no. 3 (Summer 1977): 91.

¹¹ Peter J. Krämer, "Dear Mr. Kubrick': Audience Responses to *2001: A Space Odyssey* in the Late 1960s,' *Participations* 6, no. 2 (November 2009): 240-59. 'Rejections' were complaints about the film, 'dialogues' were questions, 'celebrations' were discussions of personal positive impact, and 'appropriations' of it were for mind expansion, possibly with the use of drugs (Krämer found no

instances, however, of confessions of using drugs while watching the film). Also see his 'A Film Specially Suitable for Children': The Marketing and Reception of *2001: A Space Odyssey*,' in Noel Brown and Bruce Babington, eds. *Family Films in Global Cinema: The World Beyond Disney* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015), 37-52.

¹² Julie D'Acci, *Defining Women: Television and the Case of Cagney & Lacey* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 219n18.

¹³ Lincoln Geraghty, 'A Network of Support: Coping with Trauma through *Star Trek* Fan Letters,' *Journal of Popular Culture* 39, no. 6 (December 2006): 1003.

¹⁴ Derek Johnson, 'Inviting Audiences In: The Spatial Reorganization of Production and Consumption in 'TV III',' *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 5, no. 1 (April 2007): 61-80.

¹⁵ Sharon Marie Ross, *Beyond the Box: Television and the Internet* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing 2008), 5-6.

¹⁶ Henry Jenkins, 'Forward,' to Kurt Lancaster, *Interacting with Babylon 5: Fan Performances in a Media Universe* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), xv-xvii.

¹⁷ 'Straczynski, J. Michael,' *Wikipedia*, accessed 23 July 2012. 'Firsts' are always a problem historiographically, but clearly he was an early and avid promoter of social media to reach his audiences.

¹⁸ Kurt Lancaster, *Interacting with Babylon 5: Fan Performances in a Media Universe* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 20-30. Also see Bertha Chin, 'The Fan-Media Producer Collaboration,' *Science Fiction Film & Television* 6, no. 1 (2013): 87-99; Lori Kido Lopez, 'Fan Activists and the Politics of Race in *The Last Airbender*,' *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 15, no. 5 (December 2012): 431-45; Rebecca Williams, 'Good Neighbors? Fan/Producer Relationships and the Broadcasting Field,' *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 24, no. 2 (April 2010): 279-89.

¹⁹ Ian Christie, 'What Do We Really Know about Film Audiences?' in *Audiences: Defining and Researching Screen Entertainment Reception*, ed. Ian Christie (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 225-34.

²⁰ Nancy K. Baym, *Playing to the Crowd: Musicians, Audiences, and the Intimate Work of Connection* (NY: New York University Press, 2018), 1. Also see Angela McRobbie, *Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Culture Industries* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2016) and Laurent Jullier and Jean-Marc Leveratto, 'Cinephilia in the Digital Age,' in *Audiences*, ed. Christie, 143-54.

²¹ Although this applies primarily to radio, television, or podcast/digital programs, with film franchises becoming financially exceptionally important to companies, it would be valuable to compare that correspondence as well.

²² Alva Johnston, *The Case of Erle Stanley Gardner* (New York; William Morrow, 1947), 9-12.

²³ J. Kenneth Van Dover, *Murder in the Millions: Erle Stanley Gardner, Mickey Spillane, Ian Fleming* (New York: Frederick Ungar Press, 1984), 6.

²⁴ Bounds, *Perry Mason*, 105-14.

²⁵ On the fan mail for the prose fiction, see Francis L. Fugate and Roberta B. Fugate, *Secrets of the World's Best Selling Writer: The Storytelling Techniques of Erle Stanley Gardner* (New York: William Morrow, 1980), 121-23.

²⁶ ESG, Boxes 161-174; letters are arranged alphabetically by last name in the boxes, and I have numbered them sequentially to retain anonymity. Letters #s 114, 78.

²⁷ ESG, # 1.

²⁸ ESG, # 98 and ESG's reply.

²⁹ ESG, #s 40, 54, 62, 120, 110.

³⁰ Fugate and Fugate, *Secrets*, 225.

³¹ ESG, #s 5, 80, 38, 52, 108.

³² ESG, #s 10, 26, 27, 30; also 31, 34, 82, 111.

³³ ESG, #s 42, 39, 91, 103, 122, 9, 79; also 102, 105.

³⁴ ESG, #s 118, 59, 97; also 6, 18, 21, 32, 48, 50, 73; for the reverse, see: 23.

³⁵ ESG, # 11's reply: Gardner indicates that Burr took off 100 pounds to play the role.

³⁶ ESG, #s 11, 124, 65, 64, 40, 72, 115; also 17, 29, 44, 45, 60, 66, 78, 80, 81, 86, 95, 109, 112, 113, 119. Gans, 'Audience Mail,' 88, indicates that two of his letter writers reported they were 'in personal touch with God.'

³⁷ ESG, #s 28, 22, 86, 120; also 13, 15, 25, 101, 117, 119. This might sound as though these writers are 'fans.' However, as I note above in footnote 3, the distinction between a regular audience member and a fan is not a rigid boundary. People move along a continuum. As well, following Jenkins and Grossberg, knowledge about something does not necessarily equate to these authors' more stringent definitions of 'fandom.'

³⁸ ESG, #s 20, 96.

³⁹ ESG, # 8. Emphasis in the original.

⁴⁰ Here is good evidence of someone who could be labeled a 'fan.'

⁴¹ ESG, #s 100, 107, 49, 2, 41, 72, 84, 7, 40, 87, 16, 19.

⁴² ESG, #s 21, 75.

⁴³ ESG, #s 69, 76, 83, 79, 56, 82.

⁴⁴ Staiger, *Media Reception Studies*, 96-109.

⁴⁵ See, for instance, Janet Staiger, 'The Revenge of the Film Education Movement: Cult Movies and Fan Interpretative Behaviors,' *Reception: Texts, Readers, Audiences, History 1* (Fall 2008): 43-69. <http://receptionstudy.org/files/Staiger.pdf>.