

Assistant Editor: Meredith Lowe, University of Wisconsin–Madison.

Contact Meredith at mclowe@wisc.edu if you would like to guest author a column or have a good idea to share.

A Life in Art, Literature, and Libraries: Processing the Sandra Kitt Collection

By Tyne Lowe, Bowling Green State University



Tyne Lowe

My career in libraries can be traced, perhaps, back to an unhappy occurrence: my rejections from four MFA programs in 2012.

I felt a bit lost after graduating from college, unsure how to translate my academic and personal interests in the arts into a career. I loved reading and drawing comics, but the opportunities to make a living in such fields

seemed elusive. Like many self-publishing comics artists/enthusiasts, I wondered if I should interpret this facet of my life as a potential “career” or if it could ever surpass the status of “hobby.” My first postcollege job was in a retail art gallery, which I quickly realized was a poor fit; with some desperation, I applied to those four MFA programs in illustration in hopes of escaping to a more rewarding career. Those subsequent, painful rejections seemed to answer the “career versus hobby” question, but they did not quash my desire to draw altogether. I resolved, instead, to find what I then considered a “day job” so I could draw and participate in the comics community when I was off the clock. In retrospect, I am thankful that my path from the MFA rejections eventually led me to my earliest positions in libraries, such as my role as a library assistant at the Newberry Library in Chicago. Such work in archives and special collections grew into a passion instead of simply serving as a means of supporting my artwork.

I spent the next several years pursuing my MLIS and MA in art history, taking every opportunity to study with comics scholars and to see if my worlds of “hobby” and “career” could intersect in a new way. Entering the job market, I was initially drawn to the Browne Popular Culture Library at Bowling Green State University for its remarkable collection of comics. It is one of three libraries in the Midwest with particularly strong holdings of comic books

and comic art, alongside The Ohio State University’s Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum and the Comic Art Collection at Michigan State University. However, when I accepted the manuscript archivist position at the Browne Popular Culture Library (or BPCL), I knew I would be responsible for archival collections that represented many fields of American popular culture far beyond the comics world. Established by Ray and Pat Browne in 1969, the BPCL serves as a resource for popular culture scholars in many disciplines and, locally, as a resource for the popular culture studies program that Ray Browne had established at BGSU. The library serves as a repository for popular media that has traditionally been excluded from academic inquiry; BGSU’s popular culture program was one of the first of its kind to interrogate and celebrate such media for its merit and cultural significance, and the BPCL shares this value. Comics, as I knew, still struggled to achieve widespread academic and cultural recognition, but they were certainly not alone in this struggle. The library’s greatest collecting strengths include such materials related to popular television, movies, comics, and genre fiction, including—perhaps above any other genre—romance fiction.

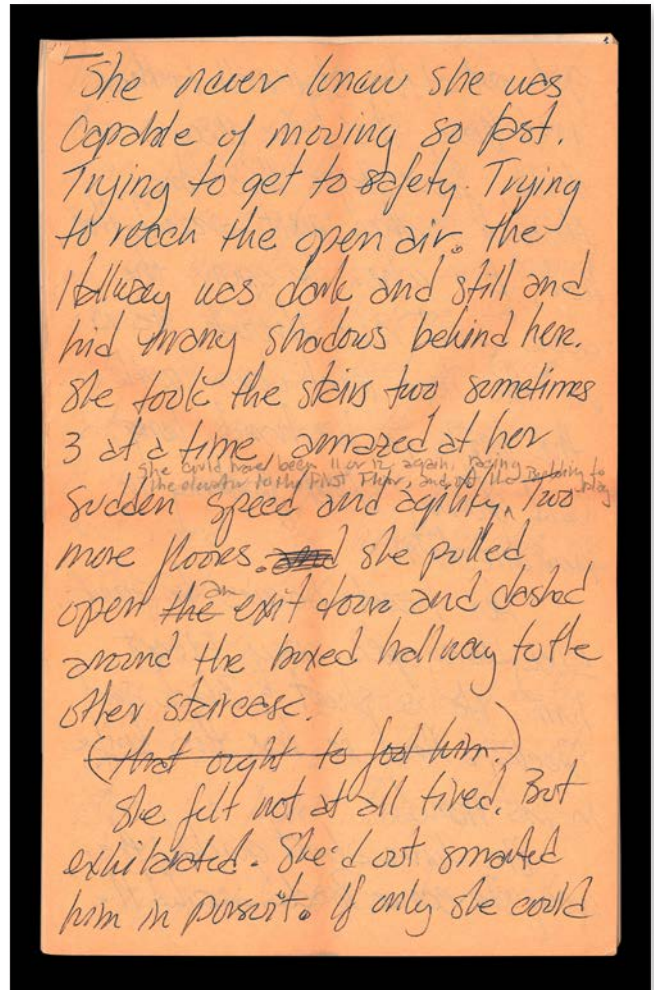
Educating myself about the field of romance fiction, a genre with which I had almost zero prior reading experience, immediately became a crucial part of my job. The BPCL is a destination for the growing community of romance researchers for good reason: our collection of historical and contemporary romance novels is one of the most comprehensive in North America, and our archives includes the papers of over 50 prominent romance writers. We also serve as the repository for the papers of the Romance Writers of America, one of the largest organizations of romance authors and publishers in the country. In the first four months in my position, I had already worked with two researchers who traveled to our library specifically to examine these archival collections. Additionally, my first major project as manuscript archivist was processing an acquisition of romance-related materials that had not been touched since their donation during the pandemic: the Sandra Kitt Papers.



Contact sheet of headshots of Sandra Kitt, undated. The Sandra Kitt Papers (in process), MS 0235, Browne Popular Culture Library.

Despite my initial unfamiliarity with the romance field, I immediately understood the significance and future research potential for the Sandra Kitt Papers. Kitt is a widely respected, best-selling romance author who has been active for nearly 30 years; she has published dozens of novels, short stories, and other literary works throughout her long (and ongoing) career. She is a Black writer who began her career in the 1980s, an era during which few writers of color found success in mainstream North American romance markets. (To be clear, this lack of racial and ethnic diversity remains a major problem in the romance field to this day.) Kitt was one of the first Black American writers to publish with Harlequin; her 1985 novel, *Adam and Eva*, was the first Harlequin romance novel that explicitly explored the relationship of a Black couple. In 1995, Kitt finally published *The Color of Love*, a story she had originally written in the 1980s; it is considered one of the first and most groundbreaking interracial romance novels published by a major press. Kitt was instrumental in the launch of Arabesque, the first major publishing line dedicated to Black American

romance novels (later absorbed into Harlequin's Kimani Press). She has received the 2002 Service Award from the Romance Writers of America, the 2010 Zora Neale Hurston Literary Award, and much more recognition than I can include in a brief essay.



Handwritten manuscript for *The Color of Love*, page 1, c. 1980s. Sandra Kitt Papers (in process), MS 0235, Browne Popular Culture Library.

Much of Kitt's archival donation represented her long literary career, capturing many aspects of the writing and publishing process. She donated 25 manuscripts of her novels and about a dozen manuscripts of shorter stories published in anthologies as well as some unpublished works. Many of her older manuscripts, including *The Color of Love*, were written and edited by hand. She often included multiple edited drafts, synopses, chapter

(Continued on page 18)

UP-AND-COMERS—Continued
Meredith Lowe, Assistant Editor

(Continued from page 17)

summaries, character studies, and/or publishers' galleys for any given title. Kitt also sent us promotional materials for her published works, as well as press clippings with reviews, samples of her author headshots, snapshots from promotional book signings, and even printed samples of her author website as it appeared throughout the past decade. Future researchers will be able to trace every step in the development of many of Kitt's books, from conception through multiple modifications and working titles and into the literary market and fan communities. I chose to organize these literary materials into series according to their type or their stage of the literary process (writings, promotion, press features, and so on), and then by title, allowing future users to easily examine the progression of any given work as it moved between these stages or to examine each aspect of Kitt's literary career as a whole.

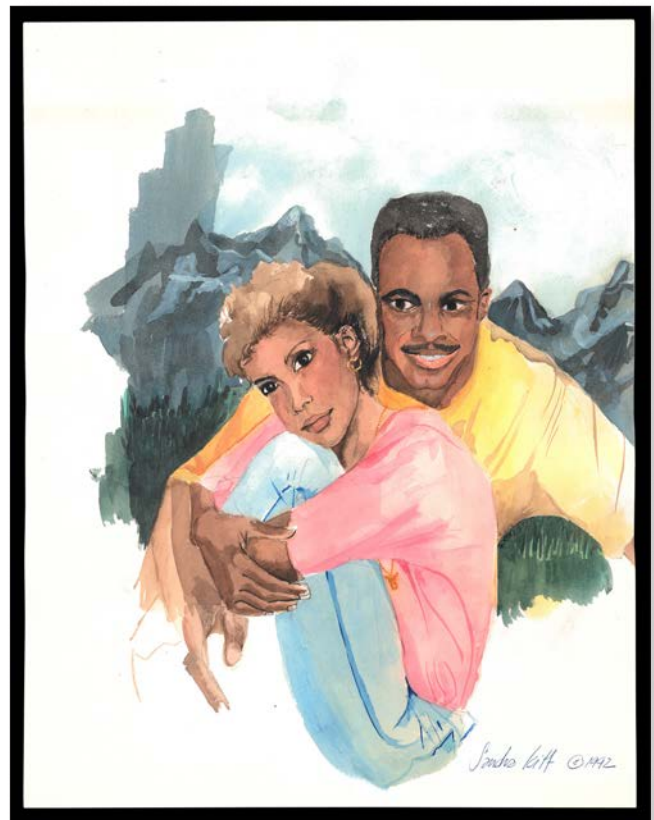
Like many of our other archival donors, Sandra Kitt chose to donate many personal materials that are not

directly related to her literary career. Unlike many other donors, however, these nonliterary facets of her life were unusually rich and well documented. Kitt was already an established library professional before she began publishing romance novels, working as an information specialist at the Hayden Planetarium of the American Museum of Natural History in New York since the early 1980s. (The meticulous organization of her donation is no surprise given her library background.) Her donation includes library-related articles she published, ephemera from events and conferences in which she participated, and even an interview she conducted with former planetarium director Neil DeGrasse Tyson.

Kitt is also a gifted artist; after receiving her MFA in visual arts, Kitt worked for several years as a freelance graphic designer and has created greeting cards for UNICEF. Her donation includes a wonderful sample of her visual art: she sent multiple portfolios of works on paper in her donation, personal items like crocheted Christmas ornaments, and even two original paintings used for book cover illustrations (including a painting for her own novel, *Love Everlasting*).



Sandra Kitt and anonymous guest, book signing, *Black Books Plus*, c. 1995. *The Sandra Kitt Papers (in process)*, MS 0235, Browne Popular Culture Library.



Love Everlasting, 1992, cover. *Pop Cult PS 3561 .I86 L79* 1993, Browne Popular Culture Library.



Untitled cover illustration for *Love Everlasting*, 1992. Watercolor on paper. *The Sandra Kitt Papers (in process)*, MS 0235, Browne Popular Culture Library.

As an archivist, I was often challenged by the need to separate many of her materials into categories, particularly when I attempted to divide them along the lines of Kitt's highly varied areas of expertise. I encountered myriad objects that defied such easy classification. Plenty of Kitt's correspondence discusses her life as a romance author as well as her life as a librarian and, therefore, did not fall easily into the literary correspondence subseries or the library correspondence subseries. (I am particularly grateful for ArchivesSpace's notes fields to explain such anomalous items.) Some of Kitt's artwork is directly relevant to her career in the romance field, including her original painting for the cover of her novel *Love Everlasting*. The varied pursuits of Kitt's life, after all, could not be as easily disentangled as an archivist might prefer. Despite some organizational complications, I believe it is important to feature these materials from Kitt's other careers, demonstrating the collection's importance in *and* beyond the romance field. I chose to keep the materials that have little or nothing to do with Kitt's romance career in their own series and subseries, carefully storing her artwork and ephemera in flat and/or uniquely sized containers in our oversize shelving.

After having several Zoom meetings and email exchanges with Sandra Kitt herself while processing her donation, I have come to see her collection as a poignant representation of her as a person: detailed, thorough, passionate, and well

rounded. It is a rich record of her many contributions to the field of romance literature, particularly as she made history breaking racial barriers. However, it is also a living biography celebrating the many facets of her life in which she flourished, including many beyond her literary career. As a library professional who also identifies strongly as an artist, I have particularly enjoyed the opportunity to treat the materials from her many different creative and professional pursuits with equal importance. I not only identify with Kitt's interdisciplinary life, I also aspire to be more like her: the divisions between "career" and "hobby" seem rather meaningless when examining her past accomplishments because she has been able to achieve such success in so many fields. I am thrilled to finish processing her remarkable and diverse collection and publish its finding aid in February 2023.



Sandra Kitt at the American Museum of Natural History Library, undated. *The Sandra Kitt Papers (in process)*, MS 0235, Browne Popular Culture Library.

Sources

"About the Collection: Browne Popular Culture Library," Bowling Green State University: University Libraries, <https://www.bgsu.edu/library/pcl/about.html>.

"Romance Collections: Browne Popular Culture Library," Bowling Green State University: University Libraries, <https://www.bgsu.edu/library/pcl/romance.html>.

"About: Department of Popular Culture," Bowling Green State University College of Arts and Sciences, <https://www.bgsu.edu/arts-and-sciences/cultural-and-critical-studies/popular-culture/about.html>.

"Sandra Kitt: Home," <https://www.sandrakitt.com>.