

**Final Report to SEAC Public Outreach Grant Committee for
“Kentucky Public Libraries, Summer Reading Programs,
and an Essay Competition for *Creekside: An Archaeological Novel*”**

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We've all heard the saying *you can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink*. I now know that sentiment also holds true for public essay writing. The first part of my funded proposal was easily achieved: send one gratis copy of *Creekside: An Archaeological Novel*, to each of Kentucky's 192 public libraries. In the mailing I included a polite letter of introduction and thanks (to SEAC, to University of Alabama Press [who provided the books at discount] and to EKU [who paid that portion not covered by SEAC, approximately one third the cost]). I also included a poster/flyer for bulletin boards and front desks announcing this exciting opportunity to engage in an archaeological essay competition. The mailings went out in early March. The essays were due to me, via email or snail mail, on September 1. *You can lead a reader to a great archaeological novel but you can't make him/her write a 500 word essay on it*, or at least apparently not with the enticement of a personally author-inscribed copy of the book they've already read. Yes, you've guessed it: I received not one single essay!

Unfortunately, the essays – sorted via a content rubric into strong, average and weak categories – were to form the basis for my assessment of this project. Upon discussion with the chair of the committee, we agreed that a reasonable assessment path forward would be identifying how many times the book was checked out of a sample of Kentucky's public libraries, as of September 1, 2011.

The sample I chose is part judgmental: I wanted to include Lexington Public Library because Lexington has received the lion's share of my publicity efforts (including a book review in the Lexington Herald-Leader), and Louisville Public Library, because that city has received virtually none (although a book review did appear in the Courier-Journal). The sample is also in part random: I randomly selected 22 additional public libraries (total libraries sampled is 24 or about one eighth of Kentucky's Public Libraries). Table 1 provides these data.

As can be seen, at a check-out count of 53, Lexington indeed saw the lion's share of *Creekside* readership. At 29 check-outs, the Louisville count was not bad, although since Louisville is about triple the population of Lexington, the per capita check-out count for Lexington is certainly much higher. Bluegrass Counties such as Mercer and Montgomery Counties are generally strong, although the low Bourbon County showing, also in the Bluegrass, is disappointing. Then there are some interesting surprises, such as Wayne County Public Library at 15 check-outs, just a bit behind the 20 for Mercer County. Other, smaller, libraries

only had one or two check-outs. For the 24 libraries in the sample, the book was checked out 231 times. To get an estimated check-out count for all of Kentucky, the average for these 24 libraries is 9.6 (rounded to 10). If that rate holds constant, *Creekside* has been read (or at least checked out) by 1,920 Kentuckians. Although I am not necessarily unsatisfied with these check-out rates, it would certainly be preferable to have them higher. As can be seen by the Lexington example, publicity does make a big difference, but it is also very difficult and time-consuming.

Even though no public essays were written, the data indicates that people *are* reading the book. Although I cannot offer SEAC members a public essay, I provide here a student essay, as I assigned the same prompt to an upper division archaeology class in Spring 2011 (see Appendix A). I admit I did not randomly select this essay, but rather chose one of my favorites, as I really had the sense that reading *Creekside* really did bring this student (an anthropology major but not someone who plans to pursue archaeology as a career) to a different place in her archaeological understanding. In my view, it is this enhanced – perhaps more emotional and not only intellectual – understanding of the lives of past peoples that has been lacking in the majority of our public outreach efforts. And yet I believe the public hungers for this personal connection, perhaps in a way that some archaeologists no longer do, if they ever did.

I close with mention of a commercial I recently saw on PBS, for Pacific Life (which offers a variety of financial services). The visuals are of humpback whales breaching in the ocean, accompanied by a soundtrack of whale vocalizations. The message is that once scientists recorded whale vocalizations and shared them widely, public sentiment toward whale hunting changed, resulting in whaling bans that are now leading to the recovery of the ocean's decimated whale populations. Thus, it was forging personal connection with whales, rather than solely intellectual reasoning that made a critical difference. It is my belief that archaeological preservation efforts might also benefit from the forging of a reasonable, not-overly-romanticized, personal public connections to peoples of the past and their material remains. I also believe that soundly-written, archaeologically-informed, quality fiction is one means of doing exactly that.

Table 1. Selected Kentucky Public Library Checkout Rate for *Creekside: An Archaeological Novel*.

Public Library	Checkout Count as of September 1, 2011
Allen County	8
Bath County	1
Blackey	2
Clay County	2
Garrard County	3
Kenton County	17
Lexington/Fayette County	53
Louisville Free	29
Madison County	14
Marshall County	3
Martin County	3
Mercer County	20
Montgomery County	11
Nelson County	5
Nicholas County	19
Oldham County	5
Paris/Bourbon County	2
Perry County	1
Pike County	10
Rowan County	4
Russell County	2
Shelby County	4
Warren County	8
Wayne County	15

Appendix A
Student Essay: *Creekside: An Archaeological Novel*

Essay prompt: “How has reading *Creekside* changed your thinking about archaeology and the importance of archaeological sites in today’s world?”

The primary, if not intentional, objective of archaeology is simply obtaining awareness. Archaeologists uncover material items and reconstruct lifeways in attempt to gain some worthwhile understanding of a past that may still hold significant pertinence in the present. Achieving such awareness may prove difficult as archaeology involves expiring sites and sometimes-undesirable work conditions. Even once archaeologists are able to overcome the work environment and succeed in unearthing material remains of the past, understanding the lives of the previous owners beyond their subsistence strategy and social status is not an easy task. However, all archaeologists attempt and are determined to gain that type of awareness. *Creekside: An Archaeological Novel*, by Kelli Carmean allowed me to understand these common concepts and ambitions in the field of archaeology. Reading this book provided me with some insight into a common workday at an excavation site as well as shed light on the reality of archaeological discoveries.

Archaeology, as I feel is expressed in the novel, is not entirely demonstrative of the personal lives of those who lived before us. However, it is able to supply us with the factual knowledge to reconstruct those lives to the best of our ability. The character Estelle, for example, cherished the locket uncovered by Meg roughly two centuries later, with every fiber of her being. A gift from her precious sister whom she’d never see again, Estelle expressed interminable love for the object. Although Meg could conclude that it may have been a treasured gift or heirloom through evidence and pure instinct, archaeology itself cannot uncover the true emotion or complete lives of past people. It is up to the archaeologist to do so. They must keep in mind the fact that *real* people exist behind the material objects found, an idea that I will always consider because of this novel.

The historic fiction within *Creekside* allowed me to gain my own awareness of the importance of archeology. I have come to realize that I have personally been stuck in the technical aspect of reconstructing the past. In reality, the lives archaeologists continue to uncover are those of real people who once lived, struggled, loved, and died, creating an everlasting legacy within the earth, of which we continue to exhume. Archaeology surpasses facts and figures and provides a window into the souls of past humans, a feat I was not fully aware of prior to reading *Creekside*. It is because of this book that I will forever be conscious of the unearthed history resting beneath my feet, under each building I enter, below every street I drive on. And through this awareness, I have grasped the importance of discovering and preserving the seemingly mundane in order to continue tradition and stimulate awareness.