

Denis Johnson:

An Inventory of His Papers at the Harry Ransom Center

Descriptive Summary

Creator:	Johnson, Denis, 1949-2017
Title:	Denis Johnson Papers
Dates:	1939-2009 (bulk 1995-2008)
Extent:	46 document boxes, 4 oversize boxes (osb) (19.32 linear feet)
Abstract:	The Denis Johnson Papers consist of the professional and personal papers of American writer Denis Johnson. The papers document Johnson's diverse writing career and range of creative output which includes poetry, short stories, novels, essays, journalism articles, screenplays, and scripts.
Language:	English, Arabic, French, and German
Access:	Open for research

Administrative Information

Acquisition:	Purchase, 2010 (10-05-001-P)
Processed by:	Amy E. Armstrong, 2011
Repository:	The University of Texas at Austin, Harry Ransom Center

Biographical Sketch

Denis Hale Johnson was born in Munich, Germany, on July 1, 1949, to Vera and Alfred Johnson. His father was in the U.S. Information Service, and Johnson and his brother, Randy, spent their childhoods living in Japan, the Philippines, and the suburbs of Washington D.C. While Johnson was an undergraduate at the University of Iowa, the *North American Review* published three of his poems in their November-December 1968 issue. His first book, a collection of poetry called *The Man among the Seals* (1969), was published to great acclaim when he was only nineteen. Johnson was briefly married during this period and had a son. He received a B.A. in English (1971), and went on to earn an M.F.A. in poetry and fiction (1974) from the Iowa Writers' Workshop.

After graduating, Johnson taught for one year at Lake Forest College. He spent the next several years moving around and working a series of jobs in the Seattle area. He published his second poetry collection, *Inner Weather*, in 1976. In 1979, the Arizona Commission on the Arts and Humanities awarded him a fellowship, and he taught creative writing at the state prison in Florence, Arizona, from 1979 to 1981. This life-changing experience, in particular his work with two death-row inmates, impelled Johnson to finish *Angels*, a novel he had started years before.

In 1981, Johnson was awarded a fellowship to the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts, where he met his second wife, Lucinda, a sculptor and painter. While living in Cape Cod, he completed *Angels* (1983) and his next two novels, *Fiskadoro* (1985) and *The Stars at Noon* (1986). In 1986, he moved to Gualala, California, and in 1989 settled in the remote wilderness of northern Idaho. During this period he published a third poetry collection, *The Veil* (1987), and a fourth novel, *Resuscitation of a Hanged Man* (1991).

Johnson's stories and novel excerpts appeared in *Esquire*, *McSweeney's*, the *New Yorker*, the *Paris Review*, and numerous literary journals. In 1992, he published *Jesus' Son*, a collection of semi-autobiographical, interconnected short stories about a drifting addict, set in the 1970s. The book was enthusiastically received by readers and critics, who appreciated Johnson's realistic and nightmarish portrayal of addiction. The stories were adapted into a screenplay of the same name, and the film was released in 1999. Johnson appears in a brief, but memorable cameo role as Terrance Weber, the hospital patient with a knife stabbed in his eye.

Similarly to his fiction, Johnson's essays explored curious people and desperate situations. As a correspondent for *Esquire*, *Harper's*, *Rolling Stone*, and *Salon* magazines, he traveled to war-ravaged Liberia, Afghanistan, and Iraq, as well as to America's backcountry to report on, among other things, the Liberian civil war, a Christian biker rally, and a Texas execution. Eleven of his essays were re-edited and collected into a published volume, *Seek: Reports from the Edge of America and Beyond* (2001), which was nominated for the PEN/Martha Albrand Nonfiction Award.

In addition to his success as a novelist, poet, screenwriter, and essayist, Johnson was also an accomplished playwright. He was Playwright-In-Residence for San Francisco's Campo Santo Theater Company at Intersection for the Arts, which premiered each installment of his Cassandra family trilogy, *Hellhound On My Trail*, *Shoppers Carried by Escalators Into the Flames*, and *Soul of a Whore*. His other plays include *Des Moines* and *Psychos Never Dream*.

Johnson's works frequently appeared on "Best of" lists, and he received numerous grants, awards, and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Guggenheim, Whiting, and Lannan Foundations, and the American Institute for Arts and Letters. In 2007, he was awarded the National Book Award for *Tree of Smoke*, an epic novel about the Vietnam War that he worked on sporadically for over fourteen years. The novel features characters from previous Johnson novels, most notably *Angels'* Bill Houston.

Critics and readers regard Johnson's "stories of the fallen world" as honest, human, and compassionate portrayals of fictional and real characters that are isolated and searching on the fringes of society. Both his fiction and nonfiction works explore themes of forgiveness and redemption. Publications not mentioned above include: *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium Assembly* (poetry, 1995), *Already Dead: A California Gothic* (novel, 1997), *The Name of the World* (novella, 2000), *Nobody Move* (serialized in *Playboy* and published in 2009), and *Train Dreams* (novella, 2002).

In addition to the creative writing programs already listed, Johnson taught at Columbia University, the Writer's Voice program (New York City), the University of Iowa's Writers' Workshop, and on several occasions at the University of Texas Michener Center for Writers.

Johnson died on May 24, 2017.

Sources:

In addition to material found within the Denis Johnson Papers, the following sources were used:

"Denis Johnson." *Contemporary Authors Online*, <http://galenet.galegroup.com> (accessed 30 June 2011).

"Denis Johnson." *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, <http://galenet.galegroup.com> (accessed 30 June 2011).

"Denis Johnson." *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, <http://galenet.galegroup.com> (accessed 30 June 2011).

Scope and Contents

The Denis Johnson Papers consist of manuscript drafts, notes, notebooks, research material, screenplays, scripts, poems, publication proofs, clippings, scrapbook material, correspondence, printed material, photographs, posters, and childhood papers belonging to the American writer Denis Johnson. The professional and personal papers document Johnson's diverse writing career and range of creative output which includes poetry, short stories, novels, essays, journalism articles, screenplays, and scripts. The papers are organized into two series: I. Literary Activities, circa 1970s-2009, undated; and II. Personal and Professional Files, 1939-2009, undated.

Series I. Literary Activities makes up the bulk of the papers and includes materials associated with Johnson's writings. It is arranged into four subseries: A. Novels and Collections, circa 1975-2009, undated; B. Short Stories and Essays, circa 1970s-2008, undated; C. Poetry, circa 1980s-2008, undated; and D. Film and Theater Projects, circa 1980s-2009. Materials in each of these subseries are arranged in alphabetical order by title, and within each title, the material generally follows the chronological order of literary production, from research and notes to publication drafts. When applicable, related material such as book dust jackets, reviews, publicity material, and/or adaptations follow the drafts.

Johnson created extensive notes, drafts, and outlines for most of his works. He apparently wrote on whatever was at hand, and his notes appear as full-page, typed sheets, as well as writings on the back of checks and receipts, paper coasters, a paper plate, a paper towel, and envelopes. Johnson often inserted the handwritten material in with his typed notes and draft fragments, making it sometimes difficult to discern if the intended order remains intact. Much of the material is in chronological order, but page numbers are not always sequential, and the notes and drafts sometimes stop and start, even in mid paragraph. Furthermore, the notes and draft fragments are heavily revised and indicate a constant re-working of the material. As a result, no attempt was made to arrange these materials within folders, and they remain foldered as they arrived at the Ransom Center, with all original folder titles created by Johnson indicated by single quotes in the container list.

Subseries A. Novels and Collections represents most of Johnson's novels and collections; however, some important works are not represented, including Johnson's first poetry collections, *The Man among the Seals*, *Inner Weather*, and *The Veil*, and his first three novels, *Angels*, *Fiskadoro*, and *The Stars at Noon*. Johnson has said that earlier in his career, he often did not keep working drafts because he found it necessary to "shed them" in order for his writing to evolve.

Johnson often worked on multiple pieces simultaneously, as in the case of three novellas, *The Name of the World*, *Door in a Blank Wall*, and *Train Dreams*. Johnson planned to publish these together in a single volume titled *Name of the World*. As a result, some drafts and notes are filed with material from the other works. Ultimately, Johnson published *Name of the World* and *Train Dreams* separately (first in the *Paris Review* and in Europe, then later in the U.S.), and aspects of *Door in a Blank Wall* appear with material from *Tree of Smoke*.

Johnson frequently referred to previous ideas or notes as he worked and sometimes re-filed them with subsequent projects. For example, Johnson's work *Seek*, a collection of essays previously published in *Esquire*, *Harper's*, and other popular magazines, includes materials from his two articles "Civil War in Hell" (1990) and "Small Boys' Unit" (2000). Because Johnson used his original notes, research, and cassette tapes to write these essays, as well as a screenplay about Liberia, and then later referenced this combined material during the editing of *Seek*, the material was filed with drafts of *Seek*.

The first segment of *Seek* is arranged in alphabetical order by published essay title or by Johnson's original folder title. Following the essays are pages used specifically for the publication of the final *Seek* manuscript, such as drafts for the piece called "Three Desserts" (which is a combination of three separate essays) and proofs of the completed manuscript. Correspondence indicates that Johnson added and deleted essays during the editing process, and some of these discarded essays remain filed with this work. Series I., Subseries B. Short Stories and Essays contains additional files related to the original Liberian magazine essay, and Series II. Personal and Professional Files contains materials related to the screenplay.

Tree of Smoke, which won the National Book Award in 2007, is represented by the largest volume of material in the collection. Johnson worked on this novel for almost fifteen years, and the research and notes show his frequent starts and stops. These notes, outlines, and draft fragments date from 1993 to the book's publication in 2007. Included are research files containing notes, travel photos, and ephemera from trips to the Philippines and Malaysia, as well as previous writings used for reference, and internet research about Vietnam, military operations, and other topics. Also present are chapter draft fragments and note files, organized by story timeline and labeled using Johnson's original folder titles. The bulk of the manuscript material for the book is comprised of loose drafts of undated and unnumbered pages. These fragments were very much working notes and drafts and contain Johnson's frequent handwritten edits throughout. The pages were, for the most part, left in their original order as it is difficult to discern a clear arrangement.

Following the loose manuscript material for *Tree of Smoke* are six binder notebooks, many with embellished covers, corresponding to the chapter years in the book. These appear to be the final versions of the working drafts of the novel. For preservation purposes, the contents were removed from the binders, and in cases where the binder was decorated, the pages and corresponding binder were filed together. In addition, Johnson's *Tree of Smoke* materials include one complete, near-final typescript, one typescript with typesetting marks, two sets of page proofs, and an advanced reader's copy of the novel that includes a sample of the audiobook.

Subseries B. Short Stories and Essays contains Johnson's shorter fiction and non-fiction works and is arranged in alphabetical order by work title or Johnson's original folder title. The *Seek* material in Subseries A. Novels and Collections also includes magazine essay drafts.

Subseries C. Poetry contains working and final drafts of Johnson's poems. Of particular interest is the 'Slide Show' file, which contains material Johnson wrote for Sam Messer's art show in 1982. Johnson and Messer were frequent collaborators at different points in their careers, and Series II. Personal and Professional Files also includes Messer-related material. Of additional note in Subseries C. are drafts for Johnson's poem "The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly." Subseries A. includes material related to Johnson's published poetry collections.

Subseries D. Film and Theater Projects contains correspondence, reviews, publicity material, and scripts for some of Johnson's screenplays and theater productions. Johnson did not retain many of his screenplays, but his papers do include materials for his adaptation of his own novel *Angels*. Most of the material in this subseries pertains to public readings and the theatrical productions of *Hellhound on My Trail*, *Shoppers Carried By Escalators into the Flames*, and *Soul of a Whore*; however, only *Soul of a Whore* is documented with a play script.

Series II. Personal and Professional Files contains papers and documents related to Johnson's childhood, family life, and writing career. Awards, book jackets, contracts, correspondence, ephemera, identification cards and passports, photographs, printed material, publicity clippings, reading and workshop materials, report cards, research files, scrapbook material, and travel files are found in this series.

Of particular interest is the scrapbook material, apparently assembled into notebooks by Johnson's mother, Vera. The first notebook contains Johnson's birth certificate, school report cards, and letters to his parents while in college. These letters are very personal and candid, with Johnson describing daily happenings, his home life with his wife and baby, and the progress of his writing. The other notebooks contain clippings and printed material that document Johnson's writing career, his awards, and readings. Due to preservation considerations, these materials were removed from their original binders and rehoused, but their original order was maintained.

Overall, there is relatively little correspondence in Johnson's papers. What is present includes letters from publishers, professional associates, other writers, and writing program requests. The material is arranged chronologically, with a separate segment of 'Prison Correspondence' from two death row inmates, Charlie Doss and Robert Smith, whom Johnson taught while working at an Arizona state prison. A few of these letters include some of these inmates' writings. Scrapbook notebooks in this series contain letters Johnson sent to his parents during the 1970s and 1980s.

In addition to the photos in the scrapbooks, there is a small amount of loose candid and publicity photographs of Johnson. Many of these are reproduced prints of Johnson while in college.

Publications and journal issues containing Johnson's short stories, essays, and poems are also located in this series. One copy of each title was retained.

Related Material

The Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. Records at the Ransom Center contain additional material related to Denis Johnson.

Separated Material

Copies of Johnson's novels and other bound volumes were transferred to the Ransom Center Library. The prosthetic eye and prop knife Johnson wore in the film *Jesus' Son*, as well as dreidels and Buddha statuettes from the New York opening of this film, were transferred to the Ransom Center Personal Effects Collection. Computer disks, CD-ROMs, and components from an Apple computer were transferred to the Ransom Center Electronic Records Collection. A note with these disks indicates that they contain the only copies of Johnson's pre-1992 drafts. Unpublished, non-commercial audio CDs and cassette tapes were transferred to the Ransom Center Sound Recordings Collection. Unpublished, non-commercial moving image VHS tapes and DVDs were transferred to the Ransom Center Film Collection.

Index Terms

Subjects

Authors, American--20th century.
Dramatists, American--20th century.
Literature--20th century.
Motion Pictures, American.
Novelists, American--20th century.
Poets, American--20th century.

Document Types

Clippings.
Correspondence.
Electronic records.
Ephemera.
Essays.
Manuscripts.
Novels.
Photographs.
Poems.

Johnson, Denis, 1949-2017

Publications.

Scrapbooks.

Scripts.

Serials (publications).

Short stories.

Sound recordings.

Series I. Literary Activities, circa 1970s-2009, undated

Subseries A. Novels and Collections, circa 1975-2009, undated

Already Dead: A California Gothic (novel, 1997)

Loose notes, outlines, and draft fragments

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'Africa 92,' research articles, 1992 **Container** 15.7

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- Your Eyes--36.4
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- Untitled film treatment (based on The Civil War in Hell)--16.1
- Untitled/Unidentified--1.7, 22.7, 36.4-5