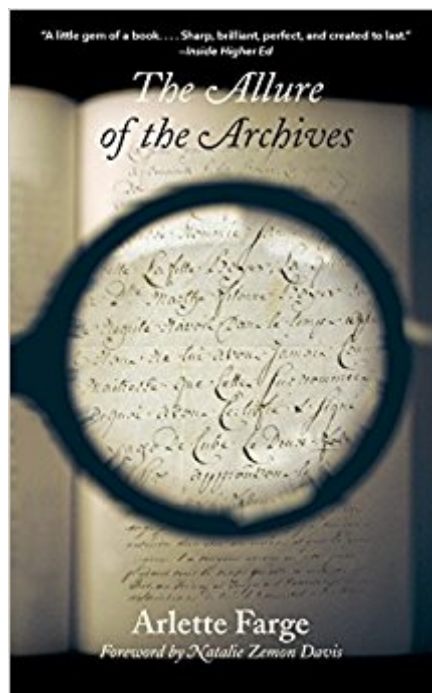




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# The Allure Of The Archives (The Lewis Walpole Series In Eighteenth-Century Culture And History)



## Synopsis

An exquisite appreciation of the distinctive rewards of historical research and a classic guide to the personal yet disciplined craft of discovery, now in its first English translation. Arlette Farge's *Le Goût de l'archive* is widely regarded as a historiographical classic. While combing through two-hundred-year-old judicial records from the Archives of the Bastille, historian Farge was struck by the extraordinarily intimate portrayal they provided of the lives of the poor in pre-Revolutionary France, especially women. She was seduced by the sensuality of old manuscripts and by the revelatory power of voices otherwise lost. In *The Allure of the Archives*, she conveys the exhilaration of uncovering hidden secrets and the thrill of venturing into new dimensions of the past. Originally published in 1989, Farge's classic work communicates the tactile, interpretive, and emotional experience of archival research while sharing astonishing details about life under the Old Regime in France. At once a practical guide to research methodology and an elegant literary reflection on the challenges of writing history, this uniquely rich volume demonstrates how surrendering to the archive's allure can forever change how we understand the past.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Farge's work is an eloquent testimony to the materiality of the archive and its power to astonish and delight." —Arnold Hunt, *TLS* "[Farge's] description of a personal, physical

relationship to archives resonates more than ever as the essence of curiosity, an existentially fulfilling act in which the historian can literally touch the past."

— Jacob Soll, *Chronicle Review* "A little gem of a book. A diamond, perhaps, given both its clarity and the finesse with which it's been cut and set. It is an unmistakable classic: one of the great memoirs of the silent, day-to-day drama of research . . . Adamantine: sharp, brilliant, perfect, and created to last."

— Scott McLemee, *Inside Higher Ed* "Lyrical, suspenseful and humorous in turn. Farge has created a fascinating account of how historians work that will appeal to scholars and history buffs alike . . . [This] classic intellectual memoir, finally translated into English, elegantly re-creates the thrills and (literal) chills of a historian's archival treasure hunts."

— Shelf Awareness, *Starred Review* "In this elegant and captivating (and admirably translated) account . . . we gain an appreciation of historical research as a calling, an obsession, and an insight into how our ideas about the past might be shaped."

— Los Angeles Review of Books "A unique, lyrical paean to historical research. . . now superbly translated into English. . . The kick of research is not self-evident, by any means is the subject of Farge's marvelous book. Behind it lies the goal of history, which is the understanding of a time and a world. . . [But] *The Allure of the Archives* is more than a reflection, however evocative, on the seductive joys and travails of research; it is a methodological handbook . . . [containing] several chapters with subheadings that read like guidelines for the would-be historian."

— Brenda Wineapple, *The Threepenny Review* "This long-awaited translation is a welcome addition to a small but growing body of literature exploring encounters with archives. Many of the observations and insights are applicable to archives and archival research . . . an intriguing case study. . ."

— Archival Issues "Richly evoke[s] the experience of being in the archives. . . [Allure] should inspire scholars . . . to reengage with the intriguing sense of the probable in their own ongoing dialogues with texts."

— Kathleen Wellman, *Early Modern Women Journal* "This is a book to be cherished, to be handed on from generation to generation, preserving as it does the thrill of each new reader's encounter with the fragmentary written remains of the past. Arlette Farge captures with extraordinary vividness the obscure beauty of archival records, and the passion and exhilaration that handling centuries-old documents can stimulate."

— Lisa Jardine, University College London "The *Allure of the Archives*, available at long last in a marvellous English translation, is a profound and moving work about archives, about history and the law, and about women in history."

— Emma Rothschild, author of *The Inner Life of Empires: An Eighteenth-Century History* "In *The Allure of the Archives*, one of France's leading historians offers the reader a stunning phenomenology of archival practice. Arlette Farge

combines an unparalleled account of the immediacy and excess of the archive with a profound meditation on converting archival research into historical narrative and argumentation. This book is essential reading for anyone seriously interested in the production of historical knowledge. Its translation is long overdue." — Kunal Parker, University of Miami School of Law "This reflexive, gendered ethnography of the historian's craft is already a French classic — it delicately explores what the author calls the organized topography that lies beneath the archives. Every student of history should read this book." — Richard Price, author of *First-Time*, *Alibi*, *World*, and *Travels with Tooy* "Deciphering nearly illegible texts, recopying them endlessly, passing from document to document, each day burrowing deeper into the archives in order to retrieve the words of the past: these are the historian's tasks that Arlette Farge brings to life with a touch that is both tangible and subtle. Her book illuminates the strange task that is the historian's, whose aim is to enter the past, find the long lost and the long dead, and listen to their reasons, their misfortunes, their words." — Roger Chartier, Collège de France

Arlette Farge is Director of Research in Modern History at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris. Natalie Zemon Davis is Professor of History at the University of Toronto. Thomas Scott-Railton is the translator of several books, including works by Étienne Balibar, Michel Foucault, and Slavoj Žižek.

For historians, the archives are definitely alluring. And poetic. The ritualistic process of signing in, filling out the call slip, patiently and reverently waiting, the burgeoning excitement as the archive box nears, the sheer thrill of opening it and viewing the aged and browned leaves of paper covered in ancient scrawls of ink, reading the personal communications of people long dead, holding a letter signed by a president or other person from the history books and the Hollywood movies, the reading of thoughts, the lines of reasoning, the pleas of time or feeling or rationality, the adrenaline-brain rush of a discovery or connection of significance to your research, your theory, your writing. [The bad attempt at poetry is mine, not Farge's.] It is alluring. At points Arlette Farge's language, ably translated by Thomas Scott-Railton, aspires to the heights of poetry. This 1989 French work is considered a classic. Today it is a bit dated, but not much. This is no guidebook or how-to for archival research, but a poetic and philosophic paean to archives and their usage. There are definitely some things to think about. Farge intersperses her vignettes on visiting and working in the archives with vignettes of her researches and findings into pre-1789 police files in Paris. She shows how to read the sources to divine and define the lives of ordinary Frenchmen of the ancien régime.

All of this is neat enough and interesting enough, as well as short enough, to keep the reader's opinion. Of course, there is the strange habit of French historians (plus most historians of Europe, European or American, especially those of a Marxist or progressive bent, i.e., most of them) to absolutely love the French Revolution and think it was the greatest thing since sliced bread. (The American Revolution and the Glorious Revolution are the best, in my humble Whiggish-Tory opinion.) Thus, a strange interlude (pp. 98-101) about a historical dispute from the 1980s on whether the War in the Vendée was, in the words of Reynald Secher, a genocide. Well, good Marxist and progressive French historians could never besmirch the good names of France or THE Revolution with the epithet of the ever so German-sounding "genocide." Basically (look up "War in the Vendée" on Wikipedia), the French Revolutionary government warred on, killed, and massacred hundreds of thousands of rebels and civilians in the Vendée region of France. Why? Because the people of the Vendée happened to think the king was better than the Revolution's tyranny and that Catholicism was better than the gussied up atheism of the Revolution's Cult of Reason. Farge might be right to conclude that the War in the Vendée wasn't a genocide, per se, but she proceeds to try and justify the rampant, injudicious, and downright evil killings because, well, the events in the Vendée region "traumatized the members of the revolutionary government." Ooh, the poor, sad, petty dictators of the revolutionary government, so down and traumatized by people who don't agree with them. Boo hoo little revolutionary babies. Downright tripe. But what is so sad about this short digression, aside from the French Revolution worship of the academic left, is that it comes during a discussion on how the archives can't really provide a definitive truth. Farge warns historians (pp. 97-98) not "to press events from the past into the service of ideology" and praises the relativistic idea of "'plural' truths (and not 'the' truth)." Farge then tries to provide the French Revolution as a whole, and this War in the Vendée in particular, with a definitive truth. Farge contrasts Auschwitz, which she calls a "negative foundational event," with the French Revolution, calling the latter "also a foundational event, although a positive one, and its presence is felt up to the present day." Maybe so (though with Burke, I'd call the French Revolution a net negative), but this comes right after she warns against truth finding. Pot, meet kettle. Oh, and the worship of Foucault. Eh. But, all-in-all, a book good for an upper-level historiography class and one aching with love for archival research and the art of history.

A charming book of essays, surprisingly lyrical, about 18th-19th-century police archives from Paris and the social experience of working with them now.

Product as described.

The great book!

In 1989 the French historian Arlette Farge published an elegantly-written small book on judicial archives and the ways in which historians can engage the documents those archives contain. The book was titled *\_Le Goût de l'archive\_*, a play on words implying both the taste of & a taste for the archive. Insightful, witty, and erudite, the work became a classic among readers in France, and was translated into Spanish and into Portuguese. Farge vividly evokes the vision of life in ancien régime Paris that emerges from police records and the archives of the Bastille, while warning of the traps that archives have laid for us, the illusions of immediacy that can lead us astray. In short, astringent chapters she reflects on the difficulty of confronting "Traces by the Thousands," and the lure of finding "Captured Speech." For years no publisher took on the task of translating Farge's (nearly poetic) prose into English. So aficionados of the book who wanted to teach it had to try to coax students into reading it in the original French, or attempt to convey Farge's brilliance in paraphrase. But this September the book appeared from Yale University Press, under the title *THE ALLURE OF THE ARCHIVES*, translated by Thomas Scott-Railton, with a forward by the distinguished historian Natalie Zemon Davis. [Full disclosure: the translator and I are kin.] The early reviews (including one in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*) have been admiring. The book can be read for pure pleasure, but is also appropriate for use in courses on methodology, on legal history, on historical writing. . . or any course exploring what it is that historians do and how they do it. (I am assigning selections, for example, in a seminar on law and slavery, by way of preparing law students to use raw testimony from U.S. court records in developing their own analyses.)

First rate.

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