

2022 Fellowship Recipient

Dr. Julia Randel

*Reading Lillian Sommers Billman (1866-1957):
The Novels and the Life of a Working Woman*

Project Abstract: The novels of Lillian E. Sommers (later Billman, 1866-1957), forgotten today outside a few broad surveys of women's fiction, drew attention on their first appearance particularly as portraits of Chicago. *For Her Daily Bread* (1886), an autobiographical account of a young woman working in the city, and the gritty yet fanciful *The Unpopular Public* (1889) were selected for a display of Illinois women writers at the 1893 World's Fair. An introduction by "the great agnostic" Robert G. Ingersoll doubtless helped make *Daily Bread*, as a Tribune editorial put it, "the most successful story ever written in Chicago, judged from sales," and encouraged Sommers to tackle controversial subjects in *Jerome Leaster* (1890). The latter caused a stir, according to a Kansas newspaper, by "deal[ing] with the Church and the priesthood too vigorously." The novels shed light on their author's extraordinary life, otherwise little documented, as a stenographer, journalist, and, later, theater manager in Grand Rapids, Michigan. An understanding of her life, before and after she wrote them, illuminates the novels, not just as artifacts of their time, or the admittedly flawed works of a young writer, but as the work of a real woman of humor, insight, and deeply held principles. The novels and life together open multiple windows on American cultural history: Chicago and the midwest in the late 19th-early 20th centuries; Chicago's emerging literary identity; discourses around religion, social service, and mental illness; German immigration, journalism, the theater, and the representation and experiences of working women. My primary goal is to bring Lillian Sommers Billman to life for the general reader, through a narrative that blends biography, literary analysis, and cultural history. Designed to accompany republication of the novels themselves, this will also facilitate their use by scholars and students in a variety of fields.

Dr. Julia Randel is an Associate Professor of Musicology at the University of Dayton.