

Rare Books and Special Collections

By Sidney E. Berger. Chicago: Neal-Schuman, 2014. Softcover. 560 pp.
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Many of us in the field of rare books and special collections have often reached for a quick reference volume on our shelves, hoping to find both succinct and reliable content such as a description of a deed of gift, advice on how to deal with security concerns, or an explanation of a particularly obscure bibliographic term. Unfortunately, there always seems to be an empty space on that shelf. Sidney E. Berger's comprehensive work, *Rare Books and Special Collections*, seeks to fill that void and is largely successful in doing so. Practitioners in the rare books and special collections field will find this an extremely useful go-to volume, as it will help save time spent in searching the field's exhaustive, but sometimes dated, published literature, scanning online resources, and/or surveying peers at other institutions for best practices. Though not the book's primary audience, archivists will also find much of practical use in this volume, especially those who may have been trained as traditional archivists but are now in administrative positions overseeing combined special collections and archives departments. The author also identifies booksellers, historians and other scholars, and collectors, as his target audiences. Students in rare books and special collections librarianship courses are also potential readers.

The author's credentials in the field are many and varied. Berger is currently the Ann C. Pingree Director of the Phillips Library at the Peabody Essex. His previous positions include head of Special Collections at the University of California, Riverside, and curator of printed books and curator of manuscripts at the American Antiquarian Society. He has also served as a faculty member in the Communications and English Departments and the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at Simmons College and as an adjunct professor in the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. He has lectured and published widely and is coproprietor of the Doe Press, which hand prints books of poetry and other works. Sidebars throughout the extensive text feature stories from his own and others' experiences in the field. Alternating between entertaining and cautionary, these anecdotes liven up what might have been a relatively dry text.

In his own words, Berger has written an "overview of the realm," essentially creating a textbook for the field, with the basic premise that "a person working in rare books and special collections must know a certain body of information." He also states that one of his goals is to correct common inaccuracies about how we as a profession talk about aspects of the history of the book and printing.

The volume attempts to be comprehensive, but not definitive, and encompasses only the basic foundational knowledge that one needs to know about the profession to do one's job in an informed and competent manner. Organized into fourteen chapters, with lengthy notes and works cited at the end of each chapter, and seven substantial appendixes, the volume begins with an overview of what normally constitutes a rare books and special collections department and its primary constituencies, as well as sections discussing the meaning of the terms *rare* and *scarce*, the importance of first editions, and the role of professional organizations, such as the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section (RBMS), and continuing education in shaping today's professional. The importance of maintaining collegial and productive relationships with others within the department's institution and beyond is highlighted here and throughout the text. This cannot be overemphasized, considering how many institutions have started paying much closer attention to their special collections, to what makes their holdings unique, and to how those collections can be used to demonstrate the institution's value on campus and beyond. Chapter 2 delves deeper into how a special collections department is managed and how it functions, examining the diversity of functions within a department, all of which should support the ultimate goal of providing access to the materials. Recommendations range from high-level, strategic exercises like the creation of a collection development policy and the cultivation of relationships with book dealers, to the more mundane, like the expeditious shelving of books and the creation of loan and patron policies. He also introduces the critical functions of cataloging and processing without going into too much detail. Berger threads a discussion of the ethical issues that should be considered when undertaking many of these departmental functions, from deaccessioning to charging fees for services, throughout this section and the text as a whole. Appendix 6 includes a practical and convenient description of all of the major departmental forms that can be found in the special collections setting.

Archivists will be curious about this author's take on archives and their functions in relation to and independent from the rare books and special collections world. Referring to archives as a close relative to rare books and special collections, Berger spends time describing the institutional archives and emphasizes the differences in training between archivists and record managers and rare book and special collections librarians, focusing on how they conduct acquisitions, collection arrangement, and outreach, as well as on their professional service and continuing education opportunities. He is also quick to direct his readers to Laura A. Millar's *Archives: Principles and Practices* published in 2010 by the same publisher for a "complete course" in managing an archives, which in his opinion are often misunderstood, underfunded, and understaffed. Berger is effective in describing how collection practices, especially selection of

materials, can sometimes overlap in both areas. He also takes a strong position on the pitfalls of having the two departments administered by the same person, as librarians trained in the rare books and special collections fields placed in charge of archives often “look the other way” and pay little or no attention to archives and vice versa.

In chapter 4, by far the longest chapter in the volume, Berger tackles those canonized inaccuracies about the history of the book and printing that partially motivated this volume and writes an impressive and detailed account of the varied physical materials in rare books and special collections. Those librarians used to consulting Carter and Gaskell¹ for their bibliography questions can add this resource to their list. Berger is clearly passionate about this topic and could go on for pages about early writing surfaces, the history of papermaking, the intricacies of printing types, illustration processes, bookbinding, and the various parts of a book. Especially pleasing and important to note is the inclusion of numerous pages of glossaries for some of these topics, including type, bookbinding, and the general parts of a book. A later chapter expands this discussion of the book as physical artifact into a discussion of the various disciplines within bibliography. It is obvious that the author feels that the knowledge and skills needed to understand the subtleties of enumerative, historical, descriptive, and textual bibliography are being lost in the profession today. This is indeed a valid point, but the chapter would benefit from a shorter section on textual editing and a longer section on the basics of paleography for librarians, especially for those cataloging rare materials or interpreting provenance evidence.

Returning to the management of a rare books and special collections department, Berger covers the physical operations of a department, including advice on dealing with departments whose physical space has evolved, sometimes problematically, alongside its collections and the department’s needs, presenting solutions for reconfiguring old spaces. Those librarians fortunate enough to actively participate in the renovation of their spaces or the design of a brand new space would also benefit from Berger’s expertise in this area, especially the checklists he shares for project planning. The author readily draws upon years of experience in other areas as well: fund-raising and donor relations in a discussion of the benefits and pitfalls of working with administrators, development officers, and donors, and security and legal issues, including those dealing with donors, appraisal, and personnel. The author stresses the importance of designating a library security officer, of being aware of security standards, of the importance of marking books (though he doesn’t go into much detail about marking manuscripts or other materials in the department), and of reporting theft when it happens. The requisite section on copyright in the digital age is also included.

Having attended a discussion at this year's RBMS Preconference where participants lamented the lack of knowledge of the antiquarian book trade among younger professionals, it is not surprising that Berger also stresses the importance of understanding the book trade to better perform collection management responsibilities. Chapter 10 covers strategies for collection building, including negotiating with booksellers, understanding how dealers determine selling prices, purchasing materials on the Web, and buying at auction. The section on buying items at auction is a little long considering how uncommon this practice is outside of the premiere institutions in the field. A rather cursory section on outreach, including exhibitions, publications, public programming, and social media, follows this chapter. Relatively absent from the outreach chapter and this volume is a conversation about the growing significance of instruction in the special collections environment (it is addressed in one paragraph in this section and less than a page in a closing chapter). While Berger understandably cannot provide an in-depth treatment of every subject he touches on in this volume (nor does he claim to do so), this oversight is somewhat disappointing considering so many special collections departments are prioritizing the integration of rare books and special collections materials into undergraduate classrooms.

In one of the last chapters, the author provides an instructive overview of activities surrounding preservation, conservation, and disaster planning in the field. He excels at describing a variety of concerns in these areas, such as care and handling (i.e., the "white-glove controversy"), environmental controls, encapsulation, preservation and conservation treatment, and digital preservation, without relying too much on scientific or technical jargon. The last two chapters outline the current trends in special collections departments and provide an opportunity to include content that didn't naturally fit elsewhere in the volume, including discussions of how digital technology and digitization have made linking researchers with information easier, but the age-old tensions of preservation and access remain. Other trending topics included in the closing chapters are open access, assessment, linked open data, RDA (resource description and access), and digital humanities. Berger makes no obviously provocative statements about any of these topics, and this seems appropriate for a text that is meant to be a general summary of the subjects of interest to the rare books and special collections professional today. The following passage best illustrates Berger's perspective on the current state of the field:

Those dealing with rare books today have seen immense change in their worlds in some areas of action, while other areas remain fixed and seemingly immutable. One reason for this is that their basic missions, goals, and responsibilities have not changed, and many old methods of operation cannot be improved upon. . . . Another reason for this continuity in practice is that the

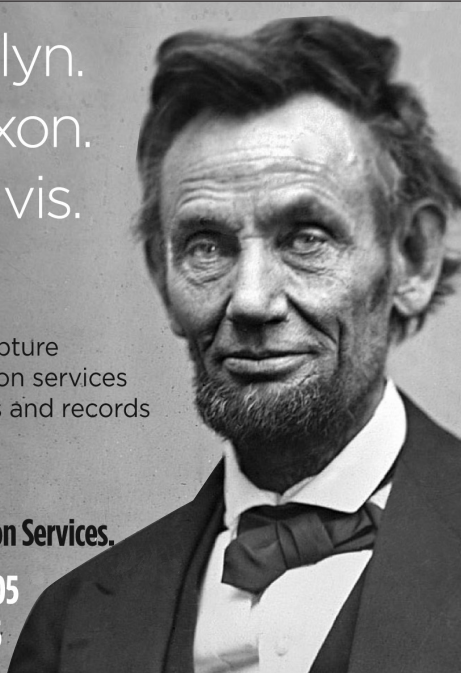
basics of research are still the same: scholars need information and seek it in the traditional places. Knowing this, librarians and archivists make it available by employing all tools at their disposal. (p. 449)

Overall, *Rare Books and Special Collections* is most successful as a reference text of foundational knowledge of the history of the book and printing *and* as an entry point for best practices in the management of special collections departments. It is also decidedly rare-book-centric in its treatment, and the length of each section sometimes seems arbitrary (or at the very least dependent upon the interests and experiences of the author). Nevertheless, Berger excels at presenting a streamlined treatment of an impressive number of topics, drawing on a variety of print and online resources in addition to his own experiences.

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NOTES

- ¹ John Carter and Nicolas Barker, *ABC for Book Collectors*, 8th ed. (New Castle, Del.: Oak Knoll Press, 2004); Philip Gaskell, *A New Introduction to Bibliography* (New Castle, Del.: Oak Knoll Press, 1995).



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