

## REVIEW ESSAYS

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# Do Not Fold, Spindle, or Mutilate: *Double Fold* and the Assault on Libraries

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## Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper

By Nicholson Baker. New York: Random House, 2001. xii, 370 pp. Bibliography. Index. \$25.95. ISBN-0-375-50444-3.

If someone had told librarians and archivists a year ago that they and their work would be the subject of a best-selling book, displayed on the front tables at Barnes and Noble or Borders, given valuable column inches in the *New York Review of Books* and the *New York Times Book Review*, the author appearing on C-Span and National Public Radio and lecturing to packed houses across the country—if someone had told librarians and archivists all that, they probably would have thought that they had died and gone to heaven. For decades, members of these information professions complained that the general public had a poor understanding of what they did and why it was important. Stories of public confusion and innocent insult were legion: *American Libraries* ran a regular feature highlighting the latest laughable stereotype; the mistaking of archivists for anarchists became a recurring theme of talk in the bar at professional meetings, a kind of never-ending game of “can you top this?” Wouldn’t it be wonderful, these misunderstood and underappreciated professionals thought, if someone came along who could really make their case to the public at large? And who better for the job than a self-professed lover of libraries?

The adage that counsels us to be careful what we wish for may never have seemed quite so apposite as it has since the publication of Nicholson Baker's *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper*. For a while, Baker seemed to be everywhere, insisting that librarians (he seldom mentions archivists as such and often attributes to libraries functions which are more nearly those of archives) have not only failed to perform the responsibilities society entrusted to them, but they have in fact led a wholesale "assault on paper." Instead of fulfilling their sacred duty to preserve the written materials of culture, they have become "crypto-brutalists" (p. 236), fired by "savage, ungovernable" (p. 183) urges to strip their shelves bare; they have "lied shamelessly" (p. 41) about the physical condition of their holdings, and they continue to do so; they are little better than grifters, shirking "the job we paid them to do, and innocently trusted that they were doing" (p. 13). With lovers like this, perhaps we should prefer celibacy—or maybe we shouldn't be surprised after all, since Baker is careful to point out that he loves libraries, but only "in theory" (viii).

The argument made by this successful novelist and sometime contributor to *The New Yorker* is fundamentally a simple one. Technology has captured the imaginations and the budgets of library administrators, and the resulting damage to our cultural heritage has been staggering. Libraries, especially large institutions like the Library of Congress and the British Library, have been "impetuously technophilic" (p. 83), and this has led them wrongly to replace deteriorating original books and newspapers with micrographic copies of them. Those in charge of our knowledge storehouses have vastly exaggerated the deterioration of their holdings, and they have pretended that micrographic copies are suitable equivalents; they are now in the process of making the same mistake by digitizing collections. Microfilming has been done carelessly, with a massive loss of information, and perhaps worst of all, the original copies of materials once filmed have been discarded, usually furtively, so that the offending librarians can cover their tracks. Programs for the mass deacidification of highly acidic book papers have been similarly misguided. The use of diethyl zinc—Baker says that this is "jauntily" (p. 112) reduced to the acronym DEZ (though how that is any more or less jaunty than any other abbreviation is unclear)—is probably dangerous in its own right. Worse, it is an expression of the same blind faith in technological solutions to problems which are, in any event, not as serious as advertised. What should librarians have done instead, and what should they do in the future to preserve their collections? Baker has an easy answer: "Leave the books alone, I say, leave them alone, leave them alone" (p. 135).

Reaction from the professional communities that Baker criticizes has taken two different forms. Some advise that he simply be ignored, that librarians and archivists not "dignify" his attack with a response. Just as it is counterproductive to attempt a serious intellectual discussion with Holocaust deniers, this view holds, why should we give this book any more publicity than it has received already? If we just keep our heads down and wait a while, *Double Fold* will con-

tinue its inexorable march to the remainder table and life will get back to normal. Others, however, think this an argument that deserves to be joined. A mass-marketed book from a major publisher that touches on professional issues cannot be overlooked: the elephant really is in the room, and there's no use in saying he isn't. This book merits the same analysis and assessment as any other work about archives and libraries—probably more, precisely because it has been so widely distributed and noticed. What follows is a consideration of Baker's argument, critical where criticism is warranted, but recognizing that the issues he raises demand further thought from members of the information professions.

It's the microfilming of newspapers that bothers Baker the most because he is an adoring fan of them. His book contains half a dozen color photographs of pages from the *New York World* (Joseph Pulitzer's paper) from the turn of the century, showing elaborate advertisements and other illustrations. During his speaking tour for the book, Baker regularly showed a larger selection of such pages, all of them pretty, some of them amusing, some of them just curious. These graphics do not reproduce well on microfilm, especially if the filming was done without good quality control, as much early microfilming undeniably was. When reproduced, it is also true, these images do not have the same visual impact as the originals. The effect is rather like looking at art reproductions instead of the real things. A "beautiful" (p. 263) volume of the *Chicago Tribune* from 1909, which has managed to survive in good shape, is undoubtedly nice to look at. But does all that matter? Or, rather, how *much* does it matter? Librarians and archivists are not blind to the aesthetics of the materials in their care, but they cannot make large-scale decisions about the management of those collections on the basis of aesthetics alone. There are other competing demands, at least equal in importance to preserving neat stuff, and, in most cases, the microfilming was done to try to balance those competing interests, each of them commendable in itself. How many uses could that volume of the *Tribune* stand, for instance, before it simply fell apart and was lost to everyone, now and in the future? What of the undergraduate or graduate student who lacks the resources to travel across the country to the library that has a particular run of newspapers? (The "beautiful" Chicago paper was in London, but a trip to Chicago would be no less problematic for many.) *Double Fold* doesn't consider dilemmas of that kind, real dilemmas which librarians and archivists, not to mention researchers, face every day.

The process of microfilming is not like making sausages, but in Baker's view it might as well be. We can almost see him wince, particularly at the disbinding of books and newspapers so that they may be filmed without losing text in the shadow of the gutter. Too many "handsomely bound" (p. 33) volumes of newspapers have been cut open before going under the camera, and this is little short of criminal. (By the end of a lecture of Baker's that I attended, I wished I had been counting the number of times he used the word "guillotined," always

said with a little shudder). Such disbinding is always “abhorrent” (p. 198), something neither collection administrators nor the public at large would have permitted unless “they [were] good and scared” (p. 198). This fetish about binding is odd. The bindings were, of course, not original to the newspapers at all and have nothing to do with their usefulness as sources for understanding the past, which is, I think, why libraries keep them. I like marbled endpapers as well as the next person—I’m less keen on the decaying leather that comes off as brown grit all over my hands and clothes—but they are hardly essential to the research process, a process which Baker does not understand. Historians no longer use newspapers, he says, “because their libraries don’t keep the old papers to read, and microfilm is a brain-poaching, gorge-lifting trial to browse” (p. 39). He is simply wrong. Many historians, myself included, do indeed still make extensive use of newspapers, but they no longer presume them to be, as Baker does, “the single most important hoard of human knowledge” (p. 36). Most probably doubt that there is such a thing. Historians used to think that newspapers were the only way to get at broad social movements and to tap into what non-elite groups (women, blacks, immigrants, workers, etc.) thought and did. The “old social history,” as practiced by people like Arthur Schlesinger Sr., relied extensively on newspapers because they seemed to address otherwise unanswerable questions about silent people from the past. Since the 1960s, however, scholars who practice what is still called the “new social history” have continued to read newspapers, but they recognize how limited they are as sources. They are biased and generally offer elitist views. (You need a fair amount of cash and equipment to go into the newspaper business.) At the same time, historians have come to rely on frankly more informative sources, such as census and other demographic data. Pretty pictures in pretty bindings are pretty nice, but they are pretty much immaterial to most historians.

The drive toward microfilm went full steam ahead, however, Baker thinks, because those who should have been doing “the job we paid them to do,” of preserving newspapers in their original form, were not. Instead, they were secret agents in a vast conspiracy to foist technological solutions on an unsuspecting public and on equally hoodwinked funding sources. The air of conspiracy that pervades this book is thick, even though Baker never actually uses the word and, in public appearances, has denied that he is making this argument. If so, he might consider editing the dust jacket blurb, which promises the reader “a fascinating exposé.” His disclaimers are unconvincing in the face of the constant reappearance in these pages of a familiar cast of sinister characters. Lurking behind it all is—who else?—the CIA. The “enticing sneakiness” (p. 27) of microfilm was right at home among the spooks, and many of those who were active in promoting the use of this technology (Verner Clapp, Michael Buckland, and others) got their start during World War II and afterward with The Company. One “micro-madman” (p. 14) had even worked on the Manhattan Project. Ah, but the perfidy does not end there, for an even

more ominous connection links the old Council on Library Resources, William Barrow, and (you'll never guess, so I'll tell you) Philip Morris (p. 144). Could you find a more quintessentially evil gang of villains to tie into this plot than the tobacco companies? This is all going to be great stuff when Oliver Stone makes the movie version of *Double Fold*.

The need to unmask this cabal leads Baker into a persistent name-calling that seems, frankly, childish. In addition to the “micro-madmen” and the “crypto-brutalists,” many of those who have been working on the problems of library and archives preservation are given Homeric epithets so we will remember them and their caricatures. One is a “lifelong library automator” (p. 70) (that’s not a compliment), while another has “hatchet fever” (p. 219). Someone else is “plummy” (p. 211), and I can’t tell if that’s a good or a bad thing; it’s probably bad, since a few pages later this person is caught exhibiting “cross-eyed logic” (p. 218). The best targets in this sort of game are always the biggest names, and the prize here goes to the former Librarian of Congress, Daniel Boorstin, who is dismissed as “a chronic bow-tie-wearer” (p. 126)—just like, one is tempted to add, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., who endorses *Double Fold* on the dust jacket; apparently, bow-tie wearing is not always bad, even when chronic. Fun is fun, of course, and lively writing about professional topics should, in general, be encouraged. Sadly, it gets entirely out of hand here.

It thereby undercuts an already weak argument. The trinitarian admonition to “leave the books alone” reveals a more persistent bias in Baker’s analysis: that he, or any other amateur, knows what to do better than the supposed professionals. The latter have, for their collection of sinister motives (another of which is simply to make money: microfilmmers “needed a major crisis of paper deterioration” (p. 168) if they hoped to remain profitable) made a complicated job out of one that is really quite simple. I don’t intend merely to harrumph a professional harrumph and assert that credentialed librarians and archivists have the monopoly on wisdom, but Baker’s view is exactly that assumption turned on its head: those who have never had to balance competing interests in managing collections are, in fact, the most qualified to do so. Why can’t these professional incompetents see what’s so plain to see? Libraries have been “stacking [newspapers] in all the wrong places” (p. 13); if they would just stack them in the right places, everything would be fine. “As far as [Baker] can tell” (p. 143), there has been very little deterioration of early-twentieth-century books; why, two book dealers (it’s okay because they’re “learned” [204]) even told him as much over lunch one day. Thus, librarians should stop saying that these volumes are in bad shape. One Midwestern state historical society built “a new building that was smaller than it should have been” (p. 15). That had to have been intentional, right? And so on. It may be reassuring for Baker to believe that when it comes to caring for collections of historical materials, “lack of money isn’t the problem” (p. 36), but to be honest, those words could only have been written by someone who had never managed a library or archives budget.

If the Xerox machine has indeed rendered microfilm “unnecessary to any book-preservational act” (p. 182), if all that’s needed for the continued long-term accessibility of library and archival collections is “a large building” (p. 270)—any Toys R Us or Home Depot (p. 35, 36) will do—then we can disband the library and archival professions and turn the places over to the work-study students and the volunteers. For better or worse, it is not that simple. One appreciates Baker’s passion, but as with anything else, passion will get you only so far.

Of course, he is correct in saying that “mistakes still occur” (p. 45) in all preservation efforts, and the serious issues, buried in this breathless prose thus deserve careful consideration. In that process, archivists and librarians will have to rethink much of what they do and how they explain it to the wider world. Three areas merit particular attention. First, Baker is entirely right that technological solutions to the problems of preserving research collections were seriously oversold by their proponents. I would not go so far as to snipe at these people as “brittle-bookers” (p. 173), and their latter-day successors, “the scan clan” (p. 249). There is little question, however, that those who sought to increase both public awareness of the problems of deterioration and the money available for addressing them often overdid it. Baker has a good deal of fun at the expense of the 1987 movie, *Slow Fires*, “the most successful piece of library propaganda ever created” (p. 184), filled with “Rachel Carsonesque language” (p. 203). This critique is not entirely out of place. The film, shown repeatedly on public television and long a staple of library and archives education, was indeed successful in raising awareness of book deterioration, but from the distance of a decade and a half, its presentation of how old books could be magically saved was too facile. On viewing it again now, it seems to me that the tolling funeral bell and the round tones of Robert MacNeil are a bit much.

What, then, to do in the future? If one believes, as Baker does, that it has all been a scam, that library and archival materials are *not* deteriorating, then the “leave them alone” strategy will be sufficient. For those who know better—that is, those who have on their shelves any number of examples of fragile, embrittled items which they are committed to making available to users of all kinds—a more nuanced approach will be needed. My own view, expressed some time ago in my essay “On the Idea of Permanence” (*American Archivist*, Winter 1989), is that archivists and librarians have too willingly abdicated their responsibility for decision making about preservation to technical specialists. A kind of technological imperative took hold: we *can* wash and deacidify and microfilm and scan and store in acid-free boxes and all the rest—and so we *should*. That framework is inadequate because it reduces to a purely technological question what is in fact a set of larger cultural questions. How do we know the past? What evidence do we need to reconstruct it, and what are the best, most reliable forms of that evidence? What are the circumstances in which we need the actual physical carriers of information, and when do we only care

about the information, however attractive the packages may once have been? What are the responsibilities of those who collect, organize, and manage these sources to make them available to all comers? How can they minimize wear and tear on original sources so that others who follow us will continue to have the use of them? Assuming, pace Baker, that money usually is limited, how do they make choices among equally good things? Librarians and archivists can begin by reasserting their own position in the driver's seat of decision making. Technological wizardry can be a useful tool, but it is not the only one. Just as with war and the generals, preservation cannot be left to the preservation specialists.

Second, members of the information professions have to be clearer about their function and social utility. Is "their primary task" that of being "paper-keepers" (p. 94), as Baker would have it? Are they there principally to guard the "incarnate bookness" (p. 145) of the objects on their shelves? I don't think so. To begin with, such a definition leaves entirely out of the equation any consideration of access, a topic which *Double Fold* largely ignores. In fact, the book's view of the uses which library materials get is shockingly narrow and elitist for the beginning of the twenty-first century. One newspaper (the St. Louis *Globe-Democrat*) is worth preserving in hard copy because Theodore Dreiser wrote for it (p. 22). It is an "interesting idea," the closest Baker gets to commending a library administrator's decision, to preserve every "significant" (p. 98) book in hard copy, as if significance were always apparent and never subject to dispute. Historians and other users of these collections have moved way beyond this kind of "great man" approach to their research. Both the range of topics being studied and the people doing the studying have broadened considerably in the last century, and most people—certainly most archivists and librarians—believe that is a positive development. Years ago, as a young archivist, I was involved in a project to microfilm colonial town records in Massachusetts, with the intention both of preserving them (so the originals could be retired and saved from further damage) and of making them more widely accessible to users, including even grade school kids. When some of us suggested that transcripts might be included to assist those unfamiliar with seventeenth-century orthography, one *very* senior scholar dismissed the idea with a contemptuous puff on his pipe. "Anyone who can't read these records has no business using them," he said. That same attitude seems at work here. Anyone who can't travel to London and devote leisurely days to poring through "beautiful" volumes should apparently find another line of work.

Librarians and archivists thus need to do a better job of articulating the range of tasks they perform. They are not mere "paper-keepers." Rather, they are the people whom society commissions, first of all, to gather and preserve information, regardless of its physical format, and then to make that information available on an indefinite, continuing basis to anyone interested. Both ends of this mission are essential. The gathering-and-preserving stage is more

complicated than it used to be, precisely because we live in a world of information abundance, not information scarcity. When Baker makes fun of librarians' irrational desires "to clear the shelves" (p. 31) or their "fear of the demon Growth" (p. 81), he fails to appreciate the implications of abundance. Curators are not trying to clear the shelves because they like open space. Rather, they face the reality that lots more stuff, equally as valuable and informative as the stuff that's already there, is coming in tomorrow and the day after that and the day after that. This new stuff may even be more important than a comic strip from the 1901 *New York World* (photo in *Double Fold*), even if the latter will always win the beauty contest. Moreover, as the forms of information continue to change, librarians and archivists are less and less in the "thing" business (books, newspapers, whatever) and more clearly in the information business. I suspect that Baker would fundamentally disagree with that statement, and that's where, in my view, he's just incorrect.

The making-available stage is also critical. Baker may think he has solved the problem of preserving newspapers by buying a big warehouse himself in New Hampshire. He has founded the American Newspaper Repository to collect bound copies of selected newspapers. This seems to prove his case that it's all very simple. If he can do it, why can't Dan Boorstin? Since he is eager to tell us how much he paid for this or that item (e.g., p. 265), however, he might reconsider the money-is-no-problem argument. He says nothing about whether and under what conditions that facility can be used by anyone but himself; he does not even tell us where it is. Librarians and archivists don't have that luxury. For them, preservation is not a goal in itself; preservation *for use* must be the governing principle. In the future, they will have to make a more sustained effort to convey to the wider public that these are primarily service professions—the service of making information available.

The third larger question this book raises is the matter of intrinsic value. Librarians and (especially) archivists have long been familiar with the idea that, in some cases, we value the documentary object at least as much as we value the information it contains. The classic case is the Declaration of Independence. The original is now virtually unreadable—if we want to ponder the words of the document we have to go to a published version or a facsimile reproduction—but we value it nonetheless as a relic, a thing which is meaningful in itself simply because it continues to exist. (This was not always the case, of course. For much of its first century of life, the Declaration was carted around in burlap sacks and, for a time, stored in a gristmill.) In the world of information abundance, however, items of that kind are the exception rather than the rule, though Baker may not agree with that measure. He cites approvingly one "scholar" (p. 222) (no insulting descriptor for him—he must wear long ties) who says that "whether they like it or not" libraries "must aspire to the condition of museums" (p. 224). The conclusion Baker draws is that librarians have to recognize that "everything they own is a piece of human handiwork," deserv-

ing of loving care and spared from an “ongoing shrinkathon” (p. 225). In other words, everything has intrinsic value, and everything merits permanent preservation in its original form because it is an artifact.

There are several problems with this analogy. To begin with, it once again leaves out any serious consideration of use. Museums generally do not let you take the mummies or the Renoirs home; they don’t even let you get very close to them, and if you do there’s a guard nearby to enforce the “look-but-don’t-touch” rule. More seriously, while it is true that everything in a library is the work of human hands, it is also true that not all artifacts are created equal. Librarians and archivists cannot make their decisions on this basis alone. Can we really hope to make sense of the masses of information in these collections if our only criterion is that somebody someday somewhere might like to hold one of these things in their hands and admire it? As before, it’s more complicated and worth exploring. We need a great deal more study of the very idea of intrinsic value, especially in archival collections. Why do we esteem some information carriers and not others? What is it, exactly, that we know about documents and their contents when we look at them in their original format that we do not know when we study them in another format, whether photocopy, microfilm, published documentary edition, scanned digital image, or something else? A working group at the National Archives two decades ago produced a short but useful exploration of this whole subject (NARS Staff Information Paper No. 21, September 1980), and the topic deserves more attention. Drawing on such thoughtful, interdisciplinary explorations of “the heritage crusade” as the work of David Lowenthal (whose seminal books do not appear in *Double Fold*’s bibliography), archivists and librarians can bring greater intellectual precision to a concept that remains, for the moment, too loose. Only by pressing ourselves on this issue will it be possible to offer a satisfactory answer to Baker’s simple and perfectly obvious questions: “Why not both? Why can’t we have the benefits of the new and extravagantly expensive [he can’t resist the dig] digital copy *and* keep the convenience and beauty and historical testimony of the original books resting on our shelves?” (p. 67). Quite often, of course, libraries do; but when they don’t, they have to be able to say why.

That great moral philosopher, George Washington Plunkitt, legendary boss of Tammany Hall, is reported to have summarized his career succinctly: “I seen my opportunities and I took ’em.” So it should be now with librarians and archivists. *Double Fold* certainly presents a challenge to their professions, but it is also an opportunity—not just for criticism and argument, but, more importantly, for rethinking some of their fundamental tenets and for communicating to the public a clearer sense of their mission and work. If they can do so, those in the business of helping others find and use the information they want and need might even be able to thank the one who expresses his love for them in such a peculiar way.