

Richard Saunders

## Editor's Note (this is to you)

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The journal approaches something of a milestone with this issue. The current iteration of ACRL's professional journal of special collections librarianship practice began publication as *Rare Books and Manuscripts Librarianship* in 1986. When I was in library school a few years later, the only access points to content in the field was the library's local card catalogue and the *Library and Information Science Abstracts* (LISA) index. For those of you competent, working professionals young enough to be my children, research was a matter of looking through print volumes—*print*, mind you—of annual issue after annual issue for citations appearing under index terms, then pulling the bound volumes from the shelves on another floor. The current title *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* was adopted upon acquiring and moving to a digital platform in 2000. Since that time, all ACRL journal content has been available digitally, creating a backfile of material accessible for the asking. In 2014 ALA enacted a platform migration to OJS (Open Journal System) software. *RBM* content also moved to the OJS platform.

The digital platform provided editors and readers with a download count, the first hard look at how the journal contents reach readers. No, a mere number is not absolutely accurate, but it is a bellwether as we make publishing decisions. Since becoming editor, I have become fascinated with the journal's figures. In the intervening two decades (well, almost two decades; the volume 21 fall issue will conclude two decades), readers have found opportunity or need to download digital journal contents thousands of times. Of volumes published prior to 2017, *RBM*'s most-downloaded article has thus far been supplied to readers more than 600 times since 2000. I'd be thrilled if my scholarly books sold like that, but that figure is merely fractional (and a small one, at that) if compared to download counts from other ACRL journals. Nonetheless, I mention the *RBM* figure with a bit of specific and explicitly intended braggadocio, for, as of December 31, 2019, the top-of-the-list article of the current journal has been downloaded more than 2,500 times and does not seem to be losing readership. Three other recent articles have more than 2,000 downloads each, and five additional articles have been downloaded by readers more than 1,000 times apiece. As of today, each of those figures is appreciably greater. Considering just the content in issues published in the past two years, *RBM* readers have made nearly 15,000 content downloads. I highlight these numbers because (besides bragging) the figures emphasize that *RBM* is a vibrant, viable platform for our professional community. It gets read. Its content gets noticed.

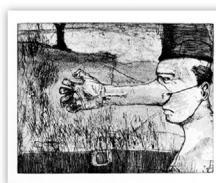
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Part of the credit for its success is due to Amy Cary, stepping down after two terms as reviews editor. I, a new and chronically disorganized editor, was fortunate from the beginning to have Amy acting as a patient, dependable sounding board. Her good humor and graces are appreciated and will be missed. As you may recall, the journal advertised the pending vacancy and invited applications last summer. After a genuinely open search, a committee of editorial board members interviewed all of the applicants. Before a successor for Amy was approved, the nature of reviews and their place in determining the direction of the journal was discussed at length. ACRL's Publications Coordinating Committee approved the editorial board's recommendation, and I am pleased to welcome back to the journal as reviews editor my predecessor in the editorial chair, Dr. Jennifer Sheehan. The board also approved the appointment of an assistant reviews editor in Kathryn Puerini. I look forward to working with both of them.

Change seems to spark reflection, and it has held true in this case. At the same time that I am confident the journal is on good ground, I recognize that the journal cannot rest on its laurels. As things presently stand, *RBM*'s regular publication is hard evidence of ACRL's institutional commitment to our branch of the larger discipline. Should disaster strike (present coronavirus disaster excepted),

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ACRL could cut its overhead costs by ending *RBM*'s publication, though I have no concern that it actually would. Nevertheless, while the journal is viable, it is also stable to the point of complacency. Present arrangements mean that the journal reaches only a fraction of those who would profit from its contents. The crux of the matter is therefore not accessibility but, rather, awareness. If *RBM* is to further improve service in the field it addresses, it must reach more readers. That means enacting carefully considered change, for by definition *stability* cannot be a step upward or forward.

At its meeting in January 2020, I shared the download figures cited above and the editorial board discussed the journal's readership. Out of that discussion rose a recommendation that we change the journal's distribution from essentially a commercial product to one that reaches more deeply into the community. Its status as an open-access publication would not change, but there is hope that its readership would broaden. The board is preparing to ask ACRL's Publications Coordinating Committee to back a formal proposal to the ACRL Board of Directors making *RBM* a benefit of membership in the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section. There will be fiscal matters to work out related to printing and distribution, surely, but the editorial board believes that the journal and its content need to "up the game" and reach more deeply into the special collections community as a venue for professional communication in the field.

Since you are already reading this editorial, please take a few minutes to improve your skills and knowledge, encouraging others in your professional circle to do the same. The URL to the journal's OJS front end is <http://rbm.acrl.org>. See what *you* can find—and what you might add.