

Diane Dias De Fazio

Editor's Note: Organization

Editor's Note: TL; DR—skip to the end for a summary of this issue.

What keeps us together?

Without descending into a paragraph that makes me one of *those* writers, the ones who dissect words, dwell on etymology, fuss over syllables, only then to declare some insight on a topic, solely based on “analysis” of—or, more likely, mild simmering over—word origins, I can only offer this: what keeps us together is community. That seems like the easy way out, the saccharine, the glass-half-full response to a bad situation. And, in the global scheme of things, ALA taking a “RIF”—which, while I’m at it, is clearly some bygone corporate wordsmith’s attempt at gallows humor, transforming “mass layoffs” into a more military-industrial-complex-friendly “Reduction In Force,” one wonders what came first, the acronym, or the action—RIF-ing, if you will, in the fourth quarter of an already dark year seems like a trifle of a “bad situation,” when compared against the daily toll of America’s backslide into autocracy. I digress. In the *Before Times*, an RBMS member might take a stance on their parent professional group’s shearing off staff, and say something like, “It’s right-sizing,” or, “I imagine it’s going to make things more efficient,” or, “I’m not really sure what those people do at ACRL, anyway.” But, this time . . . this time, it’s different, *right?*

To those who are unfamiliar, to summarize: smack in the middle of the production of *RBMS*’s last issue, The Library Association Mothership, the American Library Association, laid off eight percent of its staff. Eight percent, if you don’t do math, may, again, seem trifling, but it amounts to numerous employees, including an important handful who worked for the division that includes the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section—the Association of College and Research Libraries. From what I understand, the decision was not ACRL’s choice. Staff who coordinated Member of the Week, liaised with awards, and performed critical work for this very publication were terminated, leaving their work to be distributed amongst outside contractors and ALA’s remaining employees.

America’s Library Org Sweetheart/ACRL Conference Coordinator Tory Ondrla was among the dismissed, right during the crucial period of RBMS conference planning and future conference site selection. These were people who created our professional

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third space; familiar faces, dependable voices on the other side of Zoom meetings, trusted quasi-colleagues who did the unseen labor that made forging a community possible for the rest of us. They took care of the messy details most of us cannot even begin to have the capacity to do—negotiated contracts with hotels, answered near-endless questions, kept receipts and interfaced with donors past and present, wrote scripts for conference events, managed untold spreadsheets and databases, and ran point on the ground to ensure everyone had a valuable experience. These cuts to our division left RBMS members feeling sad, betrayed, helpless—a whole panoply of emotions, really—but, also, unheard. The age-old cry, “Where does the money [for membership] go?!” rang out. Some expressed themselves—many through silence, mind you—and a few simply continued to bemoan the limits of ALA Connect.

First, ALA Connect is not the problem, and RBMS has the power to change both how we interact there, and how it serves us, but that’s something for another day. Let me be clear: I chose to use my platform here, as editor, to address this situation, because *RBM* was directly affected. Dismissal of Dawn Mueller, the journal’s senior production editor and, apparently, graphic design whiz behind many an ACRL product did, in fact, affect the status quo. Dawn facilitated the 108-page Spring 2024 issue of *RBM*—the longest in years, if not ever—which brought greater representation of authors and institutions. Dawn wrangled author agreements, managed deadlines, and endured the primadonna-iest personalities amongst us. We—that is to say, I, the journal editorial board, and David Free, in his capacity—*will* continue, where we left off, with our goals, and we will deliver on our promises from the 2024–2025 and 2025–2026 work plans, but things have changed.¹

Now, back to the silence: while They say there is value in silence, I don’t know that silence is useful, here. I think we, RBMS—as an organized group of special collections professionals—can do more to defend our needs, interests, and be heard. What we have here is disorganized communication failure—between ALA and ACRL, RBMS and ALA, RBMS and ACRL, and RBMS leadership and its members. Note that I put RBMS first in those groupings, but individual participation is also part of how change is made.

In the fallout, I found myself thinking about other names of ACRL leaders who RBMS worked with, and landed, as one does, on LinkedIn, as a kind of “Where are they now” moment. Interestingly, Kara Malenfant, who led ACRL, parted ways around 2020. Jay Malone? Gone. Mary Jane Petrowski, former associate director of ACRL, retired in 2023, which meant that RBMS lost another longtime advocate from ACRL to sing our praises and worth to ALA. It made me think about a longer-term decline in services and

1. Albeit on a slightly altered timeline. See “On Crafting . . .,” this issue.

support for ACRL sections, not just RBMS. Taking a wider view, it seems that support *for* ACRL and its sections has steadily decreased for years, but I could be wrong. I am also a member of ACRL Arts, and it would be interesting to see what their leadership/membership committee chairs are experiencing in terms of loss of support. The ACRL Publications Coordinating Committee seems generally unfazed. Does RBMS need to care about what's happening with our peer ACRL sections? I'll argue that we ignore them at our peril. If RBMS leadership has the opportunity to network with and learn from their peers across the larger libraries universe—and they do, through ACRL Communities of Practice Assembly—why do the folx who participate not feel seen?

Speaking of participation, the last RBMS Exec meeting—the one that takes place biannually and is free, on Zoom, where major decisions are publicly made—had fewer than sixty attendees. —About 4% of RBMS's membership showed up to an open online meeting, scheduled at a mutually agreeable time for all continental time zones! Information Exchange, for that matter, can't seem to get an audience, despite all of RBMS's leadership being present to provide short summaries of their work. RBMS has just over 1,800 members, but until recently, our election results regularly clocked in with around 400 votes. That's 22% turnout, just under a quarter of RBMS membership, for online-only voting. And, in the 2026 election, a mere 172 members—fewer than 10%—selected the next RBMS Chair. That's right: it's the lowest turnout we may have ever had. Over the last decade, having co-chaired the Membership & Professional Development Committee, serving on Conference Program Planning and Development, and as Member at Large from 2020–2023, the one thing I observed is: participation is not high. What does this say about the voices of our organization?

But, we don't have opportunity or time, Diane; we have a Board Liaison for that, you say. Well, how could our ACRL Board Liaison better advocate for RBMS, now, and going forward? Our most recent liaison regularly attended RBMS Exec, but never attended Information Exchange, and not only missed all the ACRL Section Membership meetings when I was Chair, but also never communicated with me or my predecessor on that committee, despite the fact that it includes Chairs from all sections of ACRL. While I appreciated hearing from her during RBMS meetings, I wonder if the board liaison—whoever they might be—might do more for the Sections in the future. Again, it would be interesting to hear from other ACRL sections as to how they feel about their representation on the Board and these recent staffing “reductions.”

Personally, I found I had a lot of questions—but, mostly, they were for *you*, dear reader: What organizations/groups were you a part of in library/info/grad school? How did you feel about those experiences? What did your mentors do? Are you involved at the state or regional level? To what degree, and why or why not? Are you a part of any other ACRL Section or ALA Division? Do you serve or consider yourself “involved,” there, and why? Have you ever attended an ALA town hall or

ACRL session? Did you get anything from it, or why did you not attend? Did you ever notice if RBMS Executive Committee members go beyond RBMS Chair, and serve on ACRL or ALA committees?

Have you ever found yourself thinking, How do they pick candidates for Exec?, Who/What is Exec? or, I don't know that person/these people; should I know that person/these people? What would you like from your leadership? What do you think would strengthen this organization?

And to the other questions that may roll around in your head—Can I protest? Should I withhold my dues?—I offer only this: if I withhold my dues, and others also do the same, then the Library Mothership will read that as a decline in interest. This is not hyperbole: it may interest you to know that, if membership falls below a certain number for three years, a Section will be dissolved. RBMS is nowhere near in danger of this; don't panic. But also consider the literal cost of starting an organization from the ground up: a reborn and rebranded RBMS will need hundreds of thousands of dollars to operate, somewhere around \$25,000 annually for IT/accounting/insurance alone, and most of that future Archives, Rare Books, and Manuscripts Org—or whatever it's called—will draw its revenue from “programming,” i.e., the conference experience will be more expensive. (Just a thought.) More to the point, though, the annual RBMS budget depends on membership numbers, and—small as that fund is now—it will only exponentially shrink, as members flee, thereby allotting fewer funds to significant yet marginally mundane things, like the website.

It's been just over eleven (*gasp*) years since I joined RBMS, taking a plunge into a professional world for which I'd previously only danced at the margins. I am grateful for and hope that I have contributed as much as what the Section provided me. That's what this is about, I think: we want an organization we give to *and* receive from, but organizing anything takes more than just annual dues.

Now, about this issue. The STEM theme of Fall 2025 continues, with Lucy Perrin's case study from Pepperdine about an algae press collection. Judy Silva brings us perspective from Western Pennsylvania's Slippery Rock University, and the real-world challenges of toxic materials mitigation at a non-Big-10 institution with limited resources. For those of you who crave theory in this journal, Susana Sanchez-Gonzalez celebrates the Ordinary Numinosity of materials, focused on the potential of the exhibition setting. Power of New Voices 2025 panelist Indica Mattson showcases cataloging challenges related to a collection of James Baldwin materials. As ever, there are book reviews to round things out, and, this time, the Generative AI Policy subcommittee presents a tale of creating a framework in unsteady times. Stay tuned for an update on rbms.info on the *RBM* Editorial Board's Work Plan, and other announcements about our new publication timeline!