
*Rare Book Librarianship: An Introduction and Guide* aims to provide a holistic view of the duties of the rare book librarian. The intended audience is students wishing to pursue rare book librarianship as a career as well as librarians (or archivists) who are new to the field. The authors acknowledge that many issues addressed in the book are applicable to the wider field of special collections, but argue that rare book librarianship is a specialization that requires specific attention. While this volume does contribute many words of wisdom specific to rare books, librarians or archivists already working in a special collections environment may not find anything new (or different enough for rare books) on several of the topics. This volume could be helpful for those who manage or supervise people managing rare book collections.

Both Steven K. Galbraith and Geoffrey D. Smith have experience as rare book librarians. The authors think the most exciting thing about the profession is the opportunity to work hands-on with rare books. They advocate that balancing the needs of access and preservation requires bibliography skills. Throughout the book, there is a strong focus on documenting your work with the rare books in your care, as these actions will add to the books’ history and provenance as well as assist future custodians of the materials.
The volume is organized by type of activity, with heavy emphasis on general information about rare books and rare book libraries. The sequence of chapters to some degree is odd, as it does not follow the logical progression of activities. For example, the chapter on digitization comes before the chapters on accessioning and cataloging and collection development.

Overall, those new to the field of rare books (no matter their previous background) will likely find the first three chapters the most useful and beneficial. Chapter 1, "A Brief History of Rare Book Libraries,” provides a broad overview of collecting institutions from the 1400s to the present. The second chapter, "Rare Books as Texts and Historical Artifacts,” is the most useful chapter for getting readers familiar with rare book terminology, the anatomy of a book, and basic bibliography. This chapter also covers how books are constructed and how the techniques and materials have changed over time.

The topics covered in chapter 3, “Getting to Know Your Collections,” are helpful for getting the specifics of the rare books in your care. Information about book provenance, different characteristics of book copies, and book-specific information is covered in an approachable way. Building off that information, chapter 4, "Caring for and Preserving Rare Books,” contains basic handling tips (perhaps a good reminder for all librarians), ways to physically examine a book to assess its condition, housing recommendations, and specific common actions to take to repair rare books. There is detailed information on housing types and repair measures that will be useful for those unfamiliar with conservation terminology. The rest of the chapter focuses on high-level preservation activities that can be applied to all collections in your care, not just rare books.

The chapters on digitization, security and disaster preparedness, collection development, copyright, and outreach largely do not provide new information for those already familiar with a special collections environment. Each chapter gives a broad overview of the area and focuses on the same techniques and strategies you would use for other primary or unique materials. The collection development chapter does provide some information specific to the rare book collection, mainly about the book trade and auctions.

The topics of accessioning and cataloging in chapter 8 receive the barest minimum treatment of any topic in the book, especially for such a large and complex topic. The authors advocate that rare book librarians should work closely with catalogers in their institutions but do not provide any substantial information on how to manage cataloging of rare books. They do provide brief information about the use of collection-level records for what they call "nonprint collections” (in other words,
archival collections), but they do not reference basic archival literature or standards on archival processing; nor do they suggest working with an archivist for these collections.

The book concludes with two short chapters dedicated to continuing education and selected reference resources for those looking to dive deeper into specific areas of rare book librarianship. Overall, the work is well written and concise, and it provides basic information to those completely unfamiliar with the field. Those who are entering from a related position may want to pick and choose chapters to supplement their current knowledge.—Cassandra A. Schmitt, Head of Access for Special Collections, University of Maryland, College Park.


In February of 2012, more than 80 participants from thirteen countries converged at the University of Antwerp for a two-day conference to discuss essential competences for cultural heritage professionals and how these competences can be transmitted through education and training. Ambassadors of the Book is the published compilation of proceedings that emerged from the conference. Providing the perspectives of practitioners as well as educators, the book offers a theoretical approach to the topic that reflects the viewpoints of both groups of stakeholders.

The conference was organized in two distinct parts, dedicating the first day to exploring competences and then progressing to a discussion on the second day about how education and training can develop these competences. However, these published proceedings do not appear to follow the same format. The book begins with a discussion by Jan Bos of the nature of special collections, identifying precisely what these collections are, before the later papers explore the competences necessary to work within them. The included papers are not grouped into any topical subsections, and there is not a clear sense of the method employed in sequencing them within the book.

It is worth making a note about terminology present in the title and throughout the book. In the United States, we more often use the term “competencies” rather than “competences” to discuss necessary knowledge and skills, but Deirdre Stam establishes a distinction between the two terms in her paper. She suggests that “competence” is a more general term, appropriately applied to general understanding and proficiency, and “competency” is actually a subtopic of the former, used to discuss the demonstrable ability to perform specific tasks (32). The competences discussed in the book include a wide range of knowledge and skills required to