Sidney E. Berger. *Rare Books and Special Collections*. Chicago: Neal-Schuman, 2014.

xxii, 537p. ISBN 9781555709648. \$129

When a review copy arrived in my mailbox,¹ my first thought was, “Heavens, a monster!” Rescued from its wrappings, this proved accurate: 8½x11 inches, the book is 1⅞ inches thick, weighs 2.8 pounds on my kitchen scale, perfect-bound in wrappers. It is not a tome that invites a cuddle. It is, in fact, too heavy to hold while reading more than a page or two.

The main text is double-column with headings in bold. Less formal comments on the main text, drawn from Berger’s work experience as department head, student, teacher, writer, printer, and collector, are in grayed balloons scattered through the pages. They help considerably to break up what would be, without them, an unrelenting mass of text. Nearly all the illustrations (b&w) are in chapter 4 (The Physical Materials of the Collection), but a variety of other unobtrusive typographic embellishments keep the pages visually lively throughout. Berger’s background in printing and typography shines.

With a brief introduction and afterword, the text is divided into 14 chapters, followed by seven appendices and an index. The index is useful since topics tend to repeat from chapter to chapter, putting the same or related information in different locations. The chapters are themselves divided into subunits (whose arrangement seems often arbitrary) and some of the longer subunits are again divided into sub-subunits. Complicated, but in a straight readthrough it is not difficult to keep track of where you are. The book feels (and looks) like a manual—the book you seek when you want to swap out your transmission or brush up on physiology.

What, then, is its subject? ALA’s press release proclaims it “[shows] readers everything they need to know about rare books and special collections.” At the end of the foreword, Joel Silver writes, “...while we can’t foresee exactly what libraries of the future will look like, for those of us who work with special collections today, this book provides needed and thoughtful answers to the question of ‘what are librarians supposed to do now?’” (xii) Berger characterizes the work many times,

1. Its arrival was not by chance. Advance publicity in 2013 regarding its publication caused no one to step forward (as I confirmed with Christine DeZelar-Tiedman, then *RBM* Book Review Editor, who apparently had not sought a review copy to place herself). It seemed to me important that it be reviewed in *RBM* of all places (not least because of Berger’s contributions 1992–1998 and later, as he described them in the last issue [“Editing *RBML*” 16, no. 1: 68–70], generously recognizing my own role as Book Review Editor during those years). If not the first book on the subject (which arguably this is), Berger’s seemed (and is) unquestionably the most ambitious attempt ever to define and describe the operations of a special collections department, thus more than deserving expert review on its merits in the closest thing to a professional journal for the field. Though Berger’s firm friend, I felt myself a sufficiently independent-minded curmudgeon, retired from the fray, to do so impartially. Yes, I’m quoted, once (pages 420–421), and the quote is accurate—though Berger places it in a context somewhat hostile to the one I intended.

many ways, but says this early on: “The basic premise of the present volume is this: a person working in rare books and special collections must know a certain body of information. This book aims to supply that body of knowledge—as least as much as can be recorded in a single volume.” (xvi) He quickly walks this back with: “... no handbook or textbook or compendium of information can fully cover the needs of all who work in [rare book and special collections departments]. Therefore, along with much specific information that will be useful to anyone working with rare books, this text also offers a general approach to the field.” (xvii) These formulations suggest that the text will be a mashup between book lore and Berger’s approach to and observations about tasks and needs; and so indeed it is.

Berger made the odd decision to use “rare books” to indicate “Special Collections.” Failing to indicate when “rare books” means rare books and when it means a “department” (or one of several operations collected in a department) makes the term frequently ambiguous. Chapter 2 (Running a Rare Book Department), for example, which presumably means a Special Collections Department, has subunits on “Collection Development Policy” (an explanation of “collection depth indications,” that is to say: Conspectus Levels 1–5); “Selection and Acquisition” (of books); “Vendors and Approval Plans”; “Cataloging” (RBMS thesauri); and “Transferring Books from the Stacks to Special Collections.” Only one of the 32 pages in this chapter is given over to “Creating Finding Aids for Manuscripts and Other Nonbook Holdings” (in which we learn it is important to properly arrange collections [though what this might mean is not explored]; that inventories are typically done at the folder or box levels; and we must report them to the [dare one say? moribund and obsolete] National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections). Berger writes, without apparent irony, “The aim here is not to give a full explanation of the disposition of manuscripts.” (36)

In addition to scattered references, there is one chapter (3) on archives, alas apparently much influenced by an assistant Berger allowed to weigh in on content. We march through the standard fare of “Ethical Conduct,” “Appraisal,” “Collection Arrangement,” “Provenance,” and so on, with much discussion that would, in most institutions, be more illuminatingly considered in a context of Records Management policy. At “Outreach,” for example, we’re told, “If it is possible and with administrative approval, all online activity of every employee should be captured in the organization’s digital archive.” (73) A CEO receiving this recommendation would likely blanch, see *overreach*, perhaps irredeemable incompetence. As proposed policy, it does neatly avoid the dreaded responsibilities of appraisal and considered collection development.

Much of each of the remaining chapters is focused on books: chapters 4 (Physical Materials), 9 (Bibliography), 10 (Book Collecting), much of 12 (Preservation, Con-

servation); Appendices 1 (RBMS Thesauri), 4 (Booksellers' Catalogs), and 5 (Paper Sizes) concern paper, printing, and books exclusively. These total 250 of 520 pages (48%). Only chapters 4, 6 (Fundraising), and 9 have bibliographies. Adding the bookish units and subunits in other chapters, at least 75%–80% of the text is book lore.

Large parts of this are spot-on, particularly the chapters on Physical Materials and Bibliography. These are subjects near Berger's heart, and the writing is expert—though even here there is the occasional anomaly. Berger warns us repeatedly (here and throughout his book—"rants" at us may be the more appropriate description) that we should spell words right, use terminology correctly, cite completely, and not repeat myth; however, on pages 204–206, he unreservedly credits Gutenberg with three "inventions": (1) the adjustable mold in which to cast type; (2) the correct alloy to cast; and (3) an effective ink. For more than a decade, however, the world of printing history has been roiling with the implications of Paul Needham's and Blaise Agüera y Arcas' research, which suggests that Gutenberg may have cast his alloy (whatever it was) into a mold, perhaps a sand mold, which produced individual types with characteristics and variability inconsistent with those of adjustable mold-cast types. The mold (and type) would have been cruder, casting more time-consuming, and the process quite different from that Berger illustrates.² Does Berger disagree with Needham? Is he unaware of Needham's work? Is he merely repeating myths of yesteryear? I don't *know*; but something doesn't compute: at a minimum, Berger seems not to model the behavior he urges on others.³

Obviously, any book of this length and complexity will include many statements reflecting a "general approach" and world view that readers may not share, as well as others that deserve deep thinking but may warrant criticism, fresh thinking, modification, or rejection. I collected dozens of notes that could be worked into examples. In general, where "Rare Books Department" *can* be read as "Special Collections Department"—for example, in many essays related to security, conservation and preservation, fundraising, legal issues, and some routine activities—Berger seems to live

2. Needham and Agüera y Arcas first uncorked their work in a talk at the Grolier Club during Bibliography Week in late January 2001, though it has been repeated in many venues and widely discussed since. Wikipedia in its Gutenberg article (accessed 23 August 2015) gives a judicious account of where things stand: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johannes_Gutenberg#Printing_method_with_moveable_type. It appears that Needham is reserving publication as he continues to use the methodology the pair developed to investigate when type clearly made with a break-apart mold was first used.

3. Berger has an ambiguous comment in a balloon on page 104: "If we assume, as most people do, that Johannes Gutenberg invented the tools that made Western printing possible,* ...". The asterisk leads to a note citing his own 1998 article, "Reconsidering Gutenberg," in *Biblio: The Magazine for Collectors of Books, Manuscripts and Ephemera* 3.2, for a sentence that reads "There ... is evidence that the Dutch printer Laurens Janszoon Coster (c. 1370–1440) developed a method of printing from moveable type before Gutenberg perfected his techniques and equipment." Method? Perfected? Techniques? Equipment? 1430s versus 1450s? Did/does Berger believe, for instance, that Coster sand-cast and Gutenberg then invented the variable mold?

in constant awareness of thieves and intentional harm-doers. Perimeter security is of course a fundamental need, but in daily practice I would give priority to preventing unintentional damage, a topic not much discussed. He favors forms (and gives lists and sample texts) in the belief they do much more work than my experience suggests. He recommends many on grounds that they guide as well as document processes; I agree some are required, but I find that many simply encourage staff to neglect underlying and essential principles that may require circumstance-specific interpretation. He promotes written policies, and a readiness to thrust them at patrons, when I have found there are usually more subtle ways to finesse bad actors (such as confronting Named Professor who insists she *must* take away a book for a week with, “Of course we’ll consider loan—but you do understand that University policy makes you responsible, as does any library loan, for damage or loss—in this case liability to the tune of \$10K.” Takes a hardy lady who fails to wilt).

Berger trots out eloquently many twentieth-century practices and prejudices, with occasional useful forays into those of the twenty-first: chapter 13 (Special Collections Departments Today), which seems to argue that most everything is now just as it was 25 or 30 years ago and will (largely) stay that way, seems also occasionally to suggest a willingness to modify or reinterpret advice and recommendations in earlier chapters; for example, that more active collaborations may (and should?) influence access policies (perhaps permitting actual loan of a particular book or the taking of a tour group into the stacks?). In this sense, Berger’s work is a particularly useful compendium—a set of benchmarks—from which the future can and will be seen to diverge, slowly or rapidly as the case may be, as Silver suggests. If divergence is swift (as I suspect it will be), then this book is not, as Berger hopes it will be, so much useful for today’s students (who may, however, if encouraged to read *very* skeptically, profit from it) as for tomorrow’s historians.—*Sidney F. Huttner, Senior Librarian Emeritus, Special Collections & University Archives, The University of Iowa Libraries*

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