

Book Reviews



Baker, Nicholson. *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper.* New York: Random House, 2001. 370p. \$25.95, alk. paper (ISBN 0375504443). LC 00-59171.

Ever since its initial appearance in the *New Yorker*, Nicholson Baker's *Double Fold* has been prompting passionate and partisan debate among professionals and the public on the subject of preserving our documentary heritage. Perhaps now, with the passage of time, there can be a reasoned review of this book.

Or perhaps not. For although the subject is serious and the debate necessary, the objective reviewer can only be struck with the unfair, one-sided nature of the author's arguments. Yet, to dismiss Baker and his work would be to follow the author's own policy—for he sees evil, stupidity, incompetence, fraud, and conspiracy in nearly everyone who holds an opinion different from his. As such, the irony is immense: Baker sees the library world and its "assault on paper" similarly to the microfilm he detests so much. Although he allows for some shades of gray, pretty much everything in his viewfinder is black or white.

For years now, Baker asserts, librarians, preservation administrators, and policymakers have been willfully destroying our paper heritage, changing countless bound volumes (bound newspapers are his special delight) into bad microfilm, and then throwing the originals away, or worse. Baker has a collector's (not a researcher's) reverence for old printed text; he cringes at the sight of bound volumes being guillotined and assumes that the librarians are as delighted as the Paris mobs were during the reign of terror. The wonderful originals vanish, while in their place appear the changeling of bad microfilm—with pages skipped, many frames illegible, and the original format of the materials, contain-

ing some researchable information that is not text, gone forever.

Baker finds blame everywhere. He infers CIA and other conspiracies in those who created microfilm technology; those chemists and paper scientists and conservators who evolved some of our theories on the decomposition of paper were all charlatans and egoists; those charged with charting the course of libraries are mad futurists. But he saves his true disgust and disdain for those who created the film *Slow Fires* and accelerated the call for the preservation of paper through microfilm with grants from the office of Preservation and Access of the National Endowment for the Humanities. He seems amazed to discover that librarians and library directors could take time worrying about balancing budgets and finding shelf space and that librarians could have believed all the wonderful things we all were told about technology before discovering that microfilm was not the panacea it declared itself to be. (Nowhere in this book is this trust in technology begun in the 1950s put in context with our larger culture, and there is no context for anything else, such as discussing the larger issue of de-accessioning.) He nearly shrieks with delight when he gets Pat Battin of the Commission of Preservation and Access to admit that her phrase "books turning to dust" is not exactly true. That librarians and those concerned with brittle paper could have the savvy to come up with an advertising slogan to help catch the public's imagination he finds one of the blackest sins of all. (One can only imagine the scene he'd make exposing the vile coiner of the phrase "Dust to dust.")

However, Baker does raise some very interesting points, leads the readers on some amusing digressions, and makes valid observations in his tour of

microfilm's inferno. He clearly shows that librarians and library directors were too gullible in believing the lure of microfilm and gives some wise warnings against trusting in optical-imaging technology. But he tries to hide the fact that others knew this long before he did. Although he quotes library literature and preservation librarians who concede that decisions were made too quickly, too early on, about discarding original materials, he quickly dismisses those comments as either not enough or not really serious.

Far more distressing than the stupidity and deliberate evil attributed to nearly all of those he disagrees with is the level of invective present in nearly every chapter. For example, he charges Verner Clapp of the Library of Congress of being "besotted with microtext." Clapp, Baker relates, helped broadcast William Barrow's theory of paper durability (the fold test of bent corners, giving the book its title). This, in turn, led to the wholesale pitching of paper-based collections, which, he charges, was "a willed act that has undermined American historiography far more seriously than anything that alum- (the chemical that progressively embrittles paper) tormented newsprint could possibly have done to itself."

On the newspapers that have been guillotined and de-accessioned, Baker waxes eloquent, lovingly describing their appearance and touch. Here, his text reads like a film pitched to appeal to the public—a story in which the little guy wins against all the big evil experts; but he does not appeal to our wisdom or our common sense. For the major argument Baker makes is so seriously flawed that one feels like the child in the tale of the emperor's new clothes. Throughout the book, Baker counterpoises two images—actual newspapers he can touch, those that have been discarded by libraries, with the microfilm that came from them. He argues again and again that the newspapers should have been kept and not filmed at all. But nowhere does he acknowledge the fact that it was *because the paper he holds in his hand was microfilmed*

that it exists at all. For if it had not been filmed and if it had been used by the countless researchers who turned the crank on the microfilm machine instead of the literal page, it would truly have turned to, if not dust, then small brittle pieces. If further proof of the instability of his major argument is needed, just look at the pictures. As a *pièce de résistance*, like an attorney just before the case goes to the jury, Baker saves the best for last. Finally, in the last fifty pages, there is a lovely picture of the *New York World*, in bound format, and there is the ugly picture of it on a microfilm screen. (Let's not pay attention to the fact that Baker chose an image that would be hard to microfilm to show the best of the original and the worst of the filmed format.) But, unfortunately, the images themselves turn against their passionate defender. For the tightly bound format proves that the pages are impossible to read in their bound state. Certainly, they are lovely to look at and a prize for a collector to own and show off, but for the historian or seeker of information, they have to be cut apart to be read. It is sad, but perhaps not the tragedy Baker would have us believe.

On the final page, Baker comes up with four simple solutions to solve the problem; but, unfortunately, they are as impractical and unworldly as some of his arguments. Certainly, it is wise not to discard everything filmed (no library or archives this reviewer has worked in has ever discarded any item it filmed), but Baker is being childish and disingenuous if he believes buying storage space to save all these originals is as inexpensive as he suggests. These simplistic solutions and his insistence on evil in his enemies are the true weights that sink Baker's book, and not just his purple-hued, vein-popping prose. *Double-Fold*, it is interesting to note, is printed on acid-free stock, so its pages will not yellow with time. Instead, it is the yellowness of the author's journalism, quite similar to that of the 1890s newspapers so dear to his heart, that is the inherent vice in this book (a term he ridicules) and which shows the

author's true colors.—*Harlan Greene, Charleston County Public Library, South Carolina Preservation Project.*

Epstein, Jason. *Book Business: Publishing Past, Present, and Future.* New York: W. W. Norton, 2001. 188p. \$21.95 (ISBN: 0393049841). LC 00-60079.

Jason Epstein's brief memoir is part history and part professional autobiography. Best known to readers of this journal as one of the founding editors of the *New York Review of Books*, Epstein gives us a somewhat potted history of the decline and fall of trade publishing in America. According to him, from its apex in the 1920s, trade publishing declined precipitously in the postwar period from a industry dominated by quirky, dedicated missionaries of the word to one enmeshed in, and finally destroyed by, the soulless world of global capitalism. As he looks at the contemporary scene, he sees oversaturated markets driven by the demands of the megabook chains and media syndicates, both of which are staring at self-consuming futures. The prognosis is not a happy one. But it is familiar, nonetheless. We have been here before.

There is more than a little myopia in Epstein's spin on the malaise of the present. He tends to identify big-time trade publishing with all publishing and so conveniently ignores the proliferation of small and niche publishers. These are the people looking for—and finding—those audiences abandoned by the corporate dinosaurs, and their quiet successes make for a very different view of the present state of books and publishing in America.

As autobiography, *Book Business* presents us with the figure of the creative businessman, on the one hand, and his alter ego, the selfless apostle of great literature. As the former, Epstein portrays himself as the master innovator, the editor/publisher with an uncanny sense of time, place, and need. He is not shy about strutting his stuff: Anchor Books, the *New York Review of Books*, and the Library of America, among others. Of Mr. Epstein's

many virtues, modesty is not among them. But that's OK; modesty tends to be oversold these days. The author's achievements are real, so let him crow a bit. As a missionary of great literature, Epstein sees himself as a rescuer of noble traditions in the context of banality and mediocrity. His crusade has been to bring to Everyman the joys of reading serious literature that he experienced as an undergraduate at Columbia in the 1950s. If he made some money along the way (and he did), fine. But he was in the business of culture for the sake of culture.

Book Business is almost totally lacking in personal detail. We learn nothing about young Jason or his family or for that matter from whence he hales. A chapter entitled "Young Man from the Provinces" gives us no information about which particular province the author is alluding to, although I suspect he means anything that is not Manhattan. The chapter titles, on the other hand, are all allusions to the great literature Epstein reveres. Indeed, they are just a wee bit embarrassing in that respect ("Lost Illusions," "Goodbye to All That," "Groves of Academe," et al). Epstein also lets fly his share of howlers, among them, an oddly vitriolic denunciation of the Catholic Church as "that sex-besotted, dictatorial Church" (oh, dear!); a swipe at the Library of America for issuing "a volume of sermons *most of which are without* [sic] literary value or historical interest in themselves" (just give me The Canon, thank-you); or an odd reading of Marx advocating that "technological changes—what Marx called changes in the forms of production—produce changes in consciousness" (which Marx?). But the book does give us some memorable anecdotes, such as Edmund Wilson ordering six martinis for himself at one time, Norbert Weiner lurching on a quart of milk and a bag of potato chips, and Vladimir Nabokov recounting his field work for *Lolita*.

Running through *Book Business* is a strong current of faith buttressed by a bit of naiveté. These rescue the memoir from