

## REVIEWS

## Curiosity's Cats: Writers on Research

Edited by Bruce Joshua Miller. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2014.  
300 pp. Softcover. \$18.95. ISBN 978-0-87351-922-9.

One of the joys of being an archivist is knowing that researchers solve mysteries using materials in our care and that our assistance can make a difference. Bruce Joshua Miller's edited collection, *Curiosity's Cats: Writers on Research*, takes the reader on journeys of investigation—not all of which succeed—and provides personal reflections on the role of research in several authors' lives. Many of the thirteen essays in this volume—written by historians of culture and science, novelists, a historian and anthropologist for a research firm, a scholar of American literary and cultural studies, an essayist and professor of literature, a critic, and a filmmaker—tell the compelling tales of what was found, what was missed, and the turns—often plain wrong or serendipitous—these journeys took.

Archivists are not the intended audience of *Curiosity's Cats*, and the book does not attempt to inform archival practice. Miller is neither an archivist nor a librarian, but rather a book marketer and writer whose own research project led him to explore the topic of research further. His introduction to the volume shows his enthusiasm for research and the professionals and institutions that help bring about discoveries: “*Curiosity's Cats: Writers on Research* is a book about contexts, primary sources, and the indispensable value of libraries and archives as repositories of original books, documents, manuscripts, newspapers, periodicals, photographs, and tracts” (p. 5). Although the book's aim is to share stories of research undertaken in different contexts, Miller offers another agenda: “The cats of this volume provide a healthy corrective to the presumptions of the wired world” (p. 4). This “corrective” is noticeable throughout the essays; although the writers are appreciative and astounded at what the wired world can do, they all recollect the era of paper-based, in-person research. Each writer echoes Miller's belief that a lost world exists in the gaps between what can be known about a topic and what can be discovered online.

The first essay, Ali Selim's “Stay Here as Long as You Like,” details the world-building the author undertakes as he adapts a short story about Norwegian and German immigrants in post-World War I Minnesota into a film (*Sweet Land*). Selim acknowledges how a librarian shaped his search and makes a statement repeated through each essay in this collection: to get what he needed (in one

case a Sears kit home with no power lines to serve as the movie's setting), his greatest successes came from speaking to people.

Several essays authored by historians, such as Alberto A. Martínez's "Dating Albert Einstein" and Theodore Kornweibel Jr.'s "Prospecting the Past" read like mysteries, as does Miller's "The Mad Bomber Guy," albeit with different missions: pinpointing the exact date Einstein conceived of the theory of relativity; writing a definitive history of African Americans, slave labor, and railroads; and piecing together the story of a disgruntled worker who took revenge on his former employer one bomb at a time over sixteen years. These are fascinating accounts of what it takes—patience, luck, and the resources of time and money (not to mention supportive families)—to solve a mystery. Martínez's painstaking research into Einstein, which hinges on—of all things—weather reports in a Swiss newspaper, also shows the missteps and myths that can enter the historical record and how poring through original sources can shed new light. In Kornweibel's astounding and ultimately heartbreaking essay are the words, "If scholars have unsung heroes, they are archivists" (p. 104), but he also does not spare those archivists who failed to meet his needs. He mentions that some archives did not know what they had and admits that he was barred from the archives of one museum when his research placed him in the middle of the controversy surrounding reparations. Miller's essay demonstrates how larger societal movements—in this case, the campaign for fair labor practices and workers' compensation laws—can impact the individual, while showing how a company's lack of transparency about its records may have kept "mad bomber" George Peter Metesky on the streets to bomb again. Every archivist, from fledgling to seasoned, should read these essays for their grasp of how different primary sources provide information, how researchers piece it all together, and the stakes that can be involved in the process.

Miller's journey was inspired by a newspaper clipping. Similarly, historian and anthropologist Bruce White's "A Good Turn Every Day: A Boy in Duluth in 1926" tells of a personal research project he took on with the purchase of a boy's diary from the 1920s. Piecing together the diary's terse entries with his knowledge of the location along with research into school and census records and a news item about Babe Ruth visiting Duluth, White successfully identifies his boy. Similarly, historian Philip J. Anderson wanted to investigate the story of the homesteader who, in 1915, built the house Anderson worked to salvage in the 1980s. While detailing his search, Anderson weaves in his experience as a researcher and appreciation for how "the voices can only be discerned from the sources" (p. 253). In contrast to Miller and Anderson, novelist Margot Livesey knows her subject—her father—well, but finds it difficult to trace him. In the end, she is inspired to follow the thread of a tangential fact she learns during her search. More disappointment is apparent in Annette Kolodny's "Curious

Encounters in My Search for Vinland.” In her search for proof of Vikings in America, she finds that the local historical societies she visits are more interested in promoting false versions of history.

Some writers, such as novelists Steve Yates and Katherine Hall Page and essayist and English professor Ned Stuckey-French, focus on the wonder and nature of research. Stuckey-French offers nine reasons for doing research which range from the mundane—fact checking—to the pleasurable—having fun, as he does with his family when he makes research trips during vacations. Theater critic and columnist Marilyn Stasio writes about the role the New York Academy of Medicine Library held for her decades ago during a “feeling lost” period of her life. When she tries to revisit the library in the digital age, she finds much has changed, but that pieces of the place that “saved” her remain. I found such essays less compelling; the lack of a central mystery on which their research was focused took away some of the urgency conveyed in the other essays. Even so, like the other authors in this volume, they make the case for the impact research has had on their personal and professional lives.

I have always loved a good tale of falling down the research rabbit hole and enjoy it when I can cheer a heroic archivist or librarian along the way. Beyond that, I appreciated that this volume shows how valuable research is to the person undertaking it, no matter the reason. In doing so, it serves as a reminder that researchers have different needs; where one researcher is looking for “the truth” another might be looking for background and details to get the feel of his or her work “right,” but not to exhaust all ends. It demonstrates the ripple effect and impact of successful searching and how helpful archivists and librarians play a role in these victories. Unfortunately, less helpful colleagues figure in these essays as well. One example is a librarian depicted in writer Jan Reid’s “Comanches, Cowboys, and a Political Rock Star” who was “snippy and haughty” (p. 183) and, worse than that, wrong.

The concern the writers express about the lack of personal connection and reliance on the digital world is understandable, and without a doubt they prove their point about the value of speaking to people. Trying to retrace his own research path electronically, Miller notes, “While I was occasionally surprised at what I found, I was more surprised by what I found no trace of” (p. 5). In reflecting on the sometimes heavy-handedness of these passages, I found it necessary to remind myself that *Curiosity’s Cats* is not an “archives” book. Archivists *know* that not everything can be found online; Miller’s concern (and ours) is how many people do *not* know that. In that light, I hope this book helps us form our arguments about the necessity of archives and that its essays find their way into schools and colleges (perhaps via library- and archives-driven instruction sessions). But, I also felt some concern at how much the value of “presence” is often mixed with nostalgia in these essays. It would have been

interesting and useful to read about research from the perspective of a “digital native”—someone who had no recall of doing research without first checking online. The authors also little acknowledge that many people—especially those with a passion project rather than a professional mandate—rely on the digital world because they cannot afford the time or money to take research trips such as the ones described in *Curiosity's Cats*.

As an archivist who does reference, I appreciate that this book is not meant to be instructional—it is not about how to provide good assistance—but rather shows a user-side view of the joys and frustrations of trying to find information, of suspecting that a fact is floating out there that you have not quite managed to pin down yet. Archivists can learn lessons from it, particularly about how researchers look to us for guidance but can easily lose faith in our abilities. It is also instructive to remember that displaying enthusiasm for a researcher's work can help him or her along. Perhaps most important, *Curiosity's Cats* underscores the relevance of archives.

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## **The Evolving Scholarly Record**

By Brian Lavoie et al. Dublin, Ohio: OCLC Research, 2014. 25 pp. Freely available at <http://www.oclc.org/content/dam/research/publications/library/2014/oclcresearch-evolving-scholarly-record-2014-5-a4.pdf>. ISBN 1-55653-476-0 (978-1-55653-476-8).

## **Stewardship of the Evolving Scholarly Record: From the Invisible Hand to Conscious Coordination**

By Brian Lavoie and Constance Malpas. Dublin, Ohio: OCLC Research, 2015. 33 pp. Freely available at <http://www.oclc.org/content/dam/research/publications/2015/oclcresearch-esr-stewardship-2015.pdf>. ISBN 1-55653-498-1 (978-1-55653-498-0).

**I**n the predigital era, archivists may have felt alone on an island advocating for the preservation of the cultural record. Archival programs were often marginal to the mission of the institutions they were charged with documenting. In recent years, however, the increase in born-digital content has come together conveniently with users' growing demands for ways to leverage data sets and other products that aid in scholarship and research. Librarians who are liaisons