Dark Archives: A Librarian's Investigation into the Science and History of Books Bound in Human Skin

By Megan Rosenbloom. New York: Picador, 2020. 274 pp. Softcover. $18.00.
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You probably do not need my help in deciding whether to read *Dark Archives: A Librarian's Investigation into the Science and History of Books Bound in Human Skin*. The book's charmingly gothic cover, with the title nestled among attractively arranged bones and plant life, sets elegantly macabre expectations. It is either your thing or not. As a librarian, journalist, and leader in the death positive movement, the study of anthropodermic bibliopegy—or the practice of binding books with human skin—is undeniably author Megan Rosenbloom's thing. But even if the topic does not immediately appeal to you, archivists and special collections librarians will find that fundamental aspects of preservation work can be interrogated alongside the ethical and moral questions that arise from considering who made anthropodermic books, from whom they were made, and who preserves them.

Part memoir, part historical narrative, part tales of true crime, *Dark Archives* is an investigative journey that Rosenbloom, in one of several affably relatable moments, confesses began with simple morbid curiosity. The joy of curiosity permeates the book, adding an eagerness to the exploration of how and why anthropodermic books were made. Rosenbloom's enthusiasm leaves no dark alleyway untrod, her narrative including turns through the history of medicine, preindustrial tanning methods, the annals of crime and punishment, eugenics, the French Revolution, Nazi Germany, anatomy laws, lifestyles of nineteenth-century gentlemen doctors, and the secret world of rare eclectic book collectors. That is a lot to cram into one book, but the story does not feel overcrowded.

It begins with the Anthropodermic Book Project. A collaboration between the author, a museum colleague, and two chemists, their undertaking identifies books allegedly bound in human skin and uses peptide mass fingerprint (PMF) analysis to determine if the bindings are what they claim to be. Armed with a technique that authenticates anthropodermic books scientifically, Rosenbloom takes on the mission that drives the book: to test the alleged human skin books held by public institutions and learn everything about the manner of their making.

Reminiscent of a high-quality investigative podcast, in which it feels as if you are along for the ride with the host, the book is the story of Rosenbloom's research process, told in personal and historical vignettes. Each chapter builds on a theme, introducing evidence, interviewing experts, and exploring the lives of the people involved in the creation of these books, either willingly or not. This structure keeps chapters self-contained and organized, but while the episodic format allows

for the exploration of many topics, it also leaves room for only so much depth. Often, I would reach the end of a chapter with questions, wanting to know more. Unexpectedly interesting were the chapters on anatomy laws and medical cadaver procurement, as well as a memorable chapter devoted to the tanning process. The most useful parts of the book examine the history of medicine in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, connecting the glut of anthropodermic books with the rise of clinical medicine and the professionalization of the field. Rosenbloom does not sugarcoat the exploitation that flourished during this time in the name of medical advancement, which its victims—often women, people of color, and the poor—aided without consent. Acknowledging that past harm cannot be undone, the author hopes that her work "can restore some respect to their humanity by uncovering their stories" (p. 32).

Dark Archives is persuasive in demonstrating how clinical detachment and relatively modern ideas about consent provide context for the history and proliferation of anthropodermic bibliopegy. Rosenbloom's aim is reparative, focusing on empathy and arguing that "human skin books force us to consider how we approach death and illness, and what we owe to those who have been wronged or used by medical practitioners" (p. 16). She also posits that "artifacts of abominable acts have research value" (p. 28), making the case that books bound in human skin are worthy of preservation and study. For some, this may seem contradictory to the author's justice and empathy-oriented arguments. This tension begs the ethical, legal, and sociological question that goes right to the book's open-minded, curious heart: are these books human remains that should be treated as such, or are they artifacts with evidentiary value, separate from remains? For archivists and librarians, Rosenbloom's is a familiar stance: evidence of horrific events must be preserved for any number of reasons related to accountability, justice, and historical memory. But are these books different? Not all librarians and archivists agree. In recounting her conversation with Paul Needham, a rare book librarian who advocates for the burial of human skin bindings, Rosenbloom respectfully engages with his arguments and considers his point of view. Ultimately, she sees care and preservation working together: to honor those who were harmed, these books must exist as evidence to uncover their stories.

Of course, the book is chock-full of the fruits of archival research, which alone would make it worth your time, but more valuable are its implications for archival theory and practice. Authenticity, inextricable from the context that informs so many decisions we make as archivists, is a major theme. Beyond the PMF testing technique and its subsequent results, Rosenbloom discusses the consequences that arise when provenance is the only manner of authentication and when archival materials are misrepresented. What changes when materials are not what they claim to be? For one book in Harvard's collection whose binding was not authenticated as human, it "suddenly made less sense as a part of the medical collection"

(p. 25). Ethical and legal matters related to collections management also appear frequently. The discussion of differing international laws on human remains and the questions surrounding the status of anthropodermic books can offer archivists a chance to reckon with their own beliefs and examine the collections and policies at their archival institutions. Additionally, the author's methods can inform people-centered archival practices. Often, we must balance the needs of many groups: archives workers, institutional leadership, users, and donors. Only quite recently have we added people represented in collections to that balance sheet. Rosenbloom's human-centered work is a reminder that dignity is owed to all people involved in a collection. Perhaps the book's greatest lesson is a warning not to develop an "archival gaze"[1]—losing our human connection to people intertwined with collections—but to practice archival empathy.[2]

Though the book easily could have been a rigid scholarly tome, its appeal to a broader readership might not have been the only thing lost had Rosenbloom intended it for a purely academic audience. With the work of the Anthropodermic Book Project and its PMF testing protocol, *Dark Archives* represents a leap forward in the small body of scholarship on anthropodermic bibliopegy, moving past the often dwelt upon question of whether the bindings of these books are in fact human skin. But framed around Rosenbloom's personal research journey, the book is public-facing scholarship that cultivates an intimacy with readers, its warm and witty style complementing the gothic flourishes of language and tempering some of the more morbid details. More important, Rosenbloom's approach pulls back the curtain on libraries and archives, revealing aspects of our work that are often unknown to the public. As libraries are increasingly used as political lightning rods, this kind of insider's look is critical in making processes transparent and demystifying the work of librarians and archivists.

In the epilogue, the author concludes *Dark Archives* with a personal reflection on what will become of her own remains after death and a discussion on empathy in the medical profession, calling for doctors to practice clinical empathy. While attending a body donor appreciation ceremony with first-year medical students and donor families, Rosenbloom observes that "some level of discomfort seemed not only appropriate but necessary" (p. 213). I could not help but think that this also describes the experience of reading her book. To study anthropodermic bibliopegy and to confront how and why human skin–bound books were created should be disturbing. However, Rosenbloom largely manages to make the experience a positive one, owing much to her enthusiastic, personal, and approachable style of storytelling. As an archivist, I found her fair-minded, compassionate methods to be not only relevant to my work but also inspiring. Should you decide to read it, *Dark Archives* may haunt your thoughts long after you finish.

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Notes

[1] Kimberly Anderson and Harrison Inefuku, "Focusing the Archival Gaze: A Preliminary Definition and Model" (presented at Archival Education and Research Institute, Kent, Ohio, July 9, 2016), https://dr.lib.iastate.edu/handle/20.500.12876/20688.

[2] Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives," *Archivaria* 81 (May 2016): 23–43, https://www.archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/13557.