

Book Traces: Preserving Bibliodiversity

GRANT HURLEY reveals details about a project that aims to preserve the annotations, insertions and variations that make individual copies of books unique.

“WHAT DEGREE OF BIBLIODIVERSITY as a culture can we afford?” asks Andrew Stauffer, an associate professor of 19th-century British literature and digital humanities at the University of Virginia, and the director of the Networked Infrastructure for Nineteenth-century Electronic Scholarship (NINES) project.

We’re discussing Book Traces, a project he launched in early 2014 to recognize and preserve the unique traces that 19th-century readers left in their books. It’s a question that keeps resurfacing as we discuss the project, which I’ve been assisting as editor of its blog (BookTraces.tumblr.com), which features some of its more interesting and unique submissions.

As libraries of all types make crucial decisions about how to manage their print collections, Stauffer hopes that Book Traces will add to the current discussion about what our libraries should keep for the future.

Nineteenth-century readers scribbled in and annotated passages of their books, giving their responses to the texts, or sometimes just writing grocery lists and other sundry ephemera in the margins. They also pressed notes, photographs, flowers, locks of hair and other objects between their pages, leaving a tantalizing record of individual experiences, relationships and readings.

Between the 1900s and the 1950s, many of these volumes were donated to augment the collections of the growing number of university and public libraries. And with the books, of course, were the annotations and notes of past readers left for future users in the circulating stacks.

PROJECT DOCUMENTS VARIABILITY OF COPIES

The Book Traces project uses a crowd-sourcing approach to get users to collect and submit scans and photographs of books published before 1923. It restricts itself to circulating materials only, as books in rare book rooms and special collections have already been set

aside for long-term preservation and access.

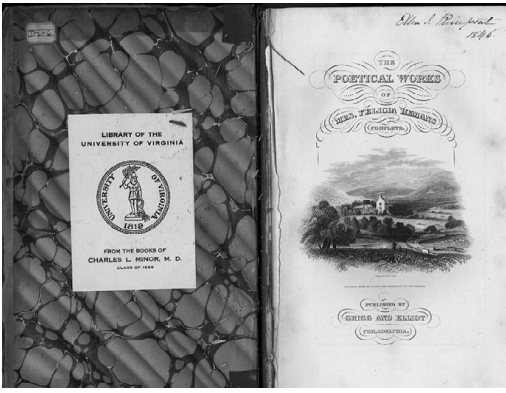
The cut-off date is also significant: 1923 is the date from which books are protected by U.S. copyright legislation. Pre-1923 titles are consequently in the public domain, and have been made available online through such resources as Google Books and HathiTrust. The online availability of their content has prompted libraries to begin deaccessioning physical copies of these items or moving them to off-site storage in favour of leaner print collections or more current editions of content.

However, Stauffer argues that libraries are forgetting the fact that a book’s content may be the same from copy to copy, but individual copies may contain a great deal of data that can tell us much more about 19th- and early-20th-century reading practices, audiences and reception, not to mention some incredible personal stories.

“It’s a project about the individual variability of copies,” Stauffer notes. “All the ways that books differ both from the moment they come off the press and in their long reception history. If you look at 10 copies of any 19th-century book, they’re all going to be slightly different.” These differences can range from differences in paper and bindings to the many annotations and notes that Book Traces collects.

The project’s origin was a class Stauffer gave on 19th-century poetry. Before a class on the poet Felicia Hemans, Stauffer asked students on a whim to each bring an older copy of a Hemans book from the stacks at the University of Virginia to see “what forms and formats did she circulate in, what [was the] sort of trade dress, what did the interface look like.”

When the class examined the copies, one volume contained a poem written by a grieving mother named Ellen Minor after the death of her seven-year-old child, Mary Montague Minor. Ellen adopts the style of Hemans in her response, writing such lines as “Sing mournfully, sing mournfully / Our dearly loved is gone.”



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An inscription on Felicia Hemans' Poetical Works, gathered as part of the Book Traces project.

“The book suddenly came alive in a different way as a scene of reading and of mourning,” Stauffer reflects. “This is a window into a culture of book use and poetry use that fell into my lap.” From this discovery, Stauffer was inspired to search further. A second Hemans volume turned up yet “another mother mourning another child in the margins” and a whole new way of thinking about the author and reader responses to her works.

As Stauffer and his students began to identify more and more interesting examples at their home university, he began to wonder if there could be a more systematic way of collecting these examples from libraries across the country. After toying with the idea of visiting libraries himself, it dawned on him that the project could be crowd-sourced, using the “power of people who are already in libraries.”

Now the task is to survey libraries that have 19th- and early-20th-century holdings to see what can be found, take photographs of the notes, annotations and other objects, and upload finds to the site.

EARLY POETRY BOOKS RICH IN MARGINALIA

Within six months of its launch, the site received approximately 100 submissions; two months later, the number had increased to 300 as the project became integrated into class activities at universities in the U.S. Additional submissions continue to arrive. As the project grows, Stauffer

hopes it will inspire broader conversations about 19th-century print collections that he sees as crucial to have before these collections disappear.

“This is the moment. If we don’t do this kind of digging now, we’re going to shed a lot of that data; a lot of those volumes will go away.” Stauffer recognizes that not every 19th- or early-20th-century book can or should be preserved, but thinks libraries should be integrating a process into deaccessioning books from their collections that takes the uniqueness of individual copies into account.

As he notes, “We need as many samples as we can, going forward, but it always comes down to resources. How do we crunch the priorities and budgets of institutions going forward to make room for an acceptable number of print objects?” Ideally, Stauffer hopes the project will inspire informed policy decisions about these books to encourage the maintenance of bibliodiversity into the future.

Readers are encouraged to visit their local libraries and seek out pre-1923 volumes for annotations and notes. They can then photograph them and upload the photographs and some basic notes about the book at BookTraces.org. Stauffer suggests that individuals start in library sections heavy with poetry, as readers were more likely to annotate poems than prose. Look at the front and the back first, he says, as this is where most annotations are located, before giving the pages a quick flip for other notes and inserted items.

Having recently spent an hour in the Canadian poetry stacks at UBC’s Koerner Library, I can testify that I found some great examples quite quickly, including an 1870 copy of James De Mille’s *Lady of the Ice* in which one reader had written comical subtitles under the illustrations.

Similar examples no doubt abound in libraries across the country, the continent and the world. With more and more disappearing each day, time is running out to hear what past readers had to say. As Stauffer notes: “This is our moment . . . because we’re only going to get one shot at it. They aren’t making any more 19th-century books.”

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