

BOOK REVIEW

Phyllis Reeve

Double Fold. Libraries and the Assault on Paper. Nicholson Baker. New York:Random House, 2001, 370 pp.

Nicholson Baker opens his horror story with the tale of how the British Library, having survived Nazi bombs, fell prey at the century's end to managerial policy and trendy technology. In 1999 the BL announced the impending auction sale of its overseas newspaper collection, including eight hundred volumes of the "exuberantly polychromatic" New York World and 1,300 volumes of the "sumptuous" Chicago Tribune whose masthead declared the newspaper "Not Complete Without the Colour Illustration." But surely duplicate runs of the newspapers rested in the great American libraries? Surely not, it turned out. Everywhere - including the NY Public Library, Harvard, and the Library of Congress itself - newspaper collections were being replaced by microforms and discarded, or sold without screening the bidder. A frequent buyer makes his living cutting up old newspaper pages for novelty birthday gifts {What was big news the day you were born?} Baker breaks our hearts with photographs of the World "from a set formerly owned by the British Library" and "possibly the last copy extant," offering in contrast the black-and-white microfilm image which conveys information but suppresses all sensuous attributes of the paper document. As a student in the 1950s, I worked summers in the library of the Montreal Gazette, indexing current news and searching items in the clipping files or in the vault where the pages of past newspapers lay flat and turned readily within

their marbled bindings. I also received the microfilmed papers, ran them through a reading machine, and filed them. Having more than one copy in more than one format seemed like a good idea at the time.

Baker's story set me worrying about those enormous, lovely volumes of old Gazettes. With the help of Joan Waiser of the National Library of Canada, I confirmed my fears: the Gazette Library keeps the original hard copy for three months and discards it upon receipt of the microfilm. The Bibliotheque de Montreal, the Bibliotheque nationale du Quebec, and the National Library itself have extensive holdings of the original hard copy, but in all cases the runs are incomplete. This situation appears to be typical.

But at least microform runs of newspapers are complete? Well, not really. The filming process has lost content as well as form; unexplained and undocumented blanks abound. The film itself has often not aged well. Some news has vanished forever because it appeared in an edition earlier or later than the one filmed. A pity, but after all, we don't have space to store all those newspapers. Yet Baker claims that a year of a daily paper would "occupy less than half the Barbie aisle in a Toys 'R' Us." A warehouse the size of a Home Depot would hold a century of newsprint.

Horror piles upon horror as Baker moves from newspapers to books, exposing the fallacy of brittleness and the Double Fold Test ("utter horseshit and craziness"), the irrational rush to deacidify, the irreparable damage caused during the preparation for filming or, in

ABOUT THE TYPE

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these latter days, scanning. Yet all along librarians have known the usefulness and limitations of non-book formats: their value in making rare materials widely available; for instance, the microfilmed documents from the Short Title Catalogue, and our unavoidable ignorance of their long-term dependability or the validity of developing standards.

The full force of Baker's wrath descends upon the Preservation Microfilming Office at the Library of Congress and some famous librarians. He distinguishes between "preservation" and "conservation," terms now strangely antonymic, and shows great respect for the true conservator, dedicated to "the repair or restoration of the original object, the book or manuscript, the empirical, thumbable, thing." He backs his accusations with 100 pages of notes, references and index. He also leaps into action.

In response to the BL announcement, Baker scurried to form a non-profit corporation, the American Newspaper Repository, and bid on the papers himself. He became custodian of a "majestic, pulp-begotten, ancestral stockpile" occupying 6,000 square feet of space at a cost of \$26,000 a year "about the salary of one microfilm technician." As a long-term solution, more and more book people are noticing and becoming convinced.

Baker informs, infuriates, and takes the first step. We'd better do something to help him save that ancestral stockpile.

Phyllis Reeve is a member of the Alcuin Society and a frequent book reviewer for Amphora. She and her husband operate Page's Resort and Marina on Gabriola Island in B.C.

This issue of *Amphora* is set in the typeface *Bulmer*, Roman and Italic. This typeface was designed around the year 1790. William Martin, who had worked in the Birmingham printing office of John Baskerville, was employed by the English printer William Bulmer to cut a type to be used in a monumental edition of the works of William Shakespeare. Martin's type, with a definite relationship to the structure of Baskerville's noted design, was also influenced — particularly in the stroke contrast and thinning of the fillets of the serifs — by the then popular styles of the Italian printer Giambattista Bodini. This version of *Bulmer* type comes from the Monotype Corporation.

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The word *Amphora* on the cover page and table of contents page is set in the typeface *Alcuin*, from URW Type of Hamburg. This typeface was designed by Gudrun Zapf von Hesse in 1991.

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