



## Reader Policies in Rare Book Libraries

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EVERY RARE BOOK LIBRARIAN encounters resistance and even hostility over security policies in the issuing of rare books. Legends of inaccessibility have an astonishing life and for years at faculty gatherings edged jokes about the velvet ropes and searching by electronic eyes have greeted the rare book librarian. So-called inaccessibility is given as a lame excuse for not using the library, and there is little compunction in using it as an unthinking, but devastating, criticism of the administration of the library. And occasionally, rebellion is voiced at the point of entry into the collection.

The librarian patiently, but to no avail, explains the necessity for the protection of valuable books which are irreplaceable. Since conservation is his first concern, immediate convenience of the reader seems to come second. The extreme position is that readers have no rights, only privileges.

There are, of course, explanations for lack of understanding by the inexperienced user of rare book facilities. The present generation is far removed from the early days of library history when only the paid up members of a subscription library were permitted to borrow the books in the society's library. Today, the tax supported public library emphasizes service and circulation, and properly so, and little is made of the unique value of a book, unless it should be in a collection of rarities within the public library. Though not intentionally, free libraries foster the idea of expendable books and readers with inalienable rights.

Modern living too, with its assembly line production and abundance of disposable items does not imbue us with the concept of cherished objects. There are always more autos and more television sets (provided one can pay for them); one can always "get another" or "trade it in." Planned obsolescence is a catch-phrase; no one creates an advertising slogan about revered retention of the unique and fine. Even connoisseurs of paintings, gems, and ivory do not inevitably regard

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a rare book as a precious object. Subconscious attitudes are picked up in colleges, too, where students are encouraged to underline texts, and allowed to return library books in a drop box. Paper back books, with all their advantages, add one more unconscious bit of propaganda against recognition of rarity in printed pieces.

Added to these trends are the natural hostility of the individual to quizzing and blank-filling and his instinctive aversion to declaration of intentions, often unformulated, when the custodian of rarities confronts him. For some reason, one accepts filling out forms when mailing packages, or borrowing money, but not for borrowing books. There is no comprehension that risks are involved in giving out books. Democracy and the rights of the individual become highly important at the charging desk. An unfortunate encounter with an attendant not too skilled in tactful questioning may make the rules seem indeed severe and arrogant.

The average person is not aware of the facts of book life: that natural oil from his hands may be good for leather bindings but injurious to the pages: that a drop of ink may obliterate a highly important bit of text, and a deluge of ink will destroy it irrevocably; that fragile bindings break under careless usage; that numerous small injuries are cumulatively ruinous; and that rare books are becoming scarcer and more expensive.

Human nature is not going to change, and even scholars are all too "human" in their relationship with librarians. If the librarian needs to justify this bothersome phase of his profession he may search intrinsically within the walls of his world and with his professional peers, not extrinsically in public vagaries or misconceptions. With criticism so frequently experienced, it is reassuring for the rare book librarian to know that there is a professional consensus of practices. Answers to a questionnaire sent by the writer to well-known rare book libraries and departments in university libraries reveal wise prudence gained over many years of trial and error experience.

The summary which follows does not enumerate all the replies to each question. It is the writer's own compendium of the replies and cannot of course do justice to flexibility of policies in particular instances within the libraries. Rules are made to be broken when circumstances justify. It should be kept in mind, too, that libraries revise their procedures from time to time, and the information given here is not necessarily permanent policy.

In answer to the inquiry regarding admission to the rare book room a majority of libraries replied that an interview, formal or informal,

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with a member of the library staff is customary. Often the purpose of the interview is to aid the reader in his research, even directing him elsewhere if he can be better served by materials in another library.

Only a few of the libraries require in addition a letter of introduction with credentials satisfactory to the director. The Pierpont Morgan asks that this application should be made if possible one week in advance. The Folger and the Huntington while requesting credentials "from two persons of recognized standing" permit the applicant to present them personally. The Houghton Library at Harvard advises "strangers to bring letters of introduction from persons known to the officials and to write ahead of time stating what it is they wish to see." Whether it is required or not, the scholar desiring to use specialized materials will find his path smoothed if he writes before his arrival.

In libraries which have rather formal requirements for admission, reader intention is closely scrutinized. The Huntington and the Morgan libraries want to know the specific purpose for which readers' privileges are requested. It must be "a project within the field of our collections." Readers are refused admission on the grounds of insufficient preparation; undergraduates seeking general reference works are regularly referred to other libraries. At the Library of Congress, no one under sixteen is admitted; at Morgan, eighteen is the minimum age.

Rare book libraries incorporated in the library system of state institutions are more liberal, while privately endowed libraries with prestige histories are more formalized. In the former, quite often, serious reader intent is sufficient criterion; no credentials are required. Rarely is an individual refused admission. The curators of some of these will display famous books simply to satisfy a sightseer's curiosity. However, it must be remembered that those requests are few in the stricter libraries because some of the highly publicized items are kept on permanent display for public view. But in most collections, even the most liberal, there is no hesitation in guiding the reader elsewhere if a reprint or modern edition, for example, seems more suitable.

Of the libraries sampled, the Folger, Clements, Morgan, New York, Newberry, and Harvard libraries require the applicant to fill out an admission card or form. Some of the more detailed ones, such as that of the Library of Congress, are full page questionnaires. The Huntington and the Clements ask the reader to state that he has consulted general library sources where reference material is more available. These forms bear the signature of the approving officer and are kept on permanent file.

Once the reader has fulfilled the entrance requirements, he ordinarily

makes out a call slip for each book as is the practice in any library with closed stacks. Some libraries, notably the Library of Congress, the John Carter Brown, and the Clements, have a double call slip; the original is kept at the charging desk and the carbon remains on the shelf until the book has been returned. Occasionally, libraries retain the call slips as a permanent record of a reader's visit. The number of rare books issued at one time varies from one at the Morgan, three at the John Carter Brown and the Library of Congress, to six at the New York Public. Others such as the Historical Society of Pennsylvania permit any number within reasonable limits. At Illinois it depends on the reader and the use he is making of the books. In practice, few libraries enforce severe limitation as an undeviating policy when the reader needs to exceed the limit. The maximum number is set low for the convenience of the staff and the patron, and according to the reading space available, as much as by the desire to limit opportunities for the book thief.

Virtually all libraries provide a printed leaflet of rules governing the use of materials. Some have cautionary signs on the tables. Even when directions for handling the books are stated precisely in the printed instructions, special cautions are pointed out orally to the reader in four of the libraries, and under special circumstances in seven of them. A warning regarding the use of pencil for note taking was usually felt to be necessary. Many of the curators adopt a policy of "watchful waiting" on the premise that the printed rules and signs and the atmosphere should be sufficient deterrents. However, the percentage of affirmative replies rose sharply on the question of special admonitions to the reader entrusted with the greatest rarities, particularly the fragile ones.

In many of the libraries the reader is informed of his responsibility for the book. The Clements call slip bears this notation: "You are responsible for this book until you return it to the desk and see this white slip stamped 'Returned' by attendant." The Huntington Library states in its "Reading Privileges and Rules" that readers are responsible for the books until they have been returned and the call slip reclaimed. The Folger Library concurs in this.

When the reader must leave books unattended, a librarian is informed or the books are brought to the desk. Some rare book reading areas are small enough so that the reader may come and go with the attendant easily supervising. Many readers wish to use the same books for several days in sequence. Rather than reshelve the books at once as a security measure, nearly all libraries have temporary storage fa-

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cilities under lock and key for reserving the books—a truck, a desk, or a case. The Library of Congress and the University of Virginia Library are the exceptions, generally reshelving each day.

A majority of the libraries, no doubt remembering the famous slip case hoax of many years ago in which a Shakespeare folio was abstracted and only the empty slip case returned by a skillful (and well recommended!) reader-thief, now keep the case at the desk and handle the removal and replacement of the book personally. Few libraries check the book for possible mutilation immediately upon its return, the reasons being that close supervision obviates the necessity, it is time consuming, and one or two felt it would be embarrassing to the reader. Some check as soon as possible but do not hold the reader for clearance; others inspect only if suspicious. However, one correspondent wryly reported that even in a small room a reader cut out pictures almost under her eyes.

One of the controversial points with readers as they casually whip out their fountain pens for note taking is the prohibition of the use of ink and the insistence on pencil. This is a rigid rule in many of the libraries; it is the one rule printed in red in the Huntington instructions, for example. However, with the advent of the ball point pen, some librarians are relaxing to the extent of permitting its use, or wondering whether they might not do so. In one university library, the fountain pen—unaccompanied by bottle—is even sanctioned. It should be mentioned that in many libraries, typewriters, usually noiseless, are provided, at no expense or for a small fee, or readers are permitted to use their own. Indelible pencils are taboo and tracings and rubbings are not permitted. One curator remarked that one of her greatest problems was to keep students from laying note paper down on opened folio pages and thus leaving impressions as they wrote. This is reason enough to provide reading lecterns. Velvet shot bags or glass plates are indicated for holding books open to eliminate needless handling of the opened pages. Needless to say, it is forbidden to lay books open face down, or to employ harmful bookmarks such as pencils.

The Folger Library's statement lines out several of these points upon which libraries are alert: "No marks may be added to or erased from books and manuscripts; no tracings or rubbings may be made without specific permission; no books, paper or other objects (except the weights provided for holding books open) may be laid on rare materials." All these precautions are designed not only to protect the book, but the reader as well, from the expensive accident.

One of the most carefully weighed considerations in rare book hand-

ling is that of uncut pages. The premium placed by rare book collectors upon the original condition of the book including this feature raises the important question of value. In no instance is the reader allowed to open the pages, and in many cases the curator makes an individual decision on each book.

All rare book libraries shelve their collections in locked stacks, or locked cases, or locked cases in locked stacks; often the greatest rarities are kept in special vaults, or "vault rooms." Reference works, however, are found often in open areas with easy access by the reader. In response to the question as to whether browsing in the rare book cases was permitted there was a positive consensus with answers ranging from "No!" to "No-no-no!" Occasionally a trustworthy reader with special requirements will be taken to the shelves by a staff member. Any photographing of materials is arranged by the staff. Smoking is prohibited in reading areas.

Sentry duty by staff members varies with the reading room situation. A few libraries employ special guards whose primary duty is to stand watch much as in museums, and to screen visitors to the reading area. Among these are the Folger, Huntington, Newberry, and Morgan libraries. When the rare book room is kept locked as at the New York Public Library, special guards are not hired. Many rare book rooms, being contained within the general library security system, have no separate arrangements. Not being show places, they do not attract crowds of tourists. In libraries without a separate guard force, staff duties necessarily include security surveillance.

There is no uniform practice in check rooms. Some places provide them but do not insist that patrons leave their coats, packages, and brief cases there. However, the Folger requests that brief cases be checked. In general, a reader's books are not inspected when he leaves except at the Newberry and the New York Public Library. It should be pointed out that some libraries other than rare book ones request inspection of brief cases and books being carried out. In other libraries other security provisions have been made such as at the Library of Congress where the reader presents evidence at the exit that his books have been discharged. In the small library it is easy to observe departures without formal inspection.

Common practice in rare book libraries forbids the circulation of books and home use, but surprisingly enough there are some who let books out of the building for good cause. This is not on the liberal public library basis, however, but for special exceptions. Two of the libraries in the study participate in inter-library loans, the Morgan will

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send out reference books, and others lend rarities for special exhibits. On the other hand, the University of Texas, the Huntington, and the Clements have a definite prohibition against books leaving the building. This non-circulating policy is occasionally stated in the deed of trust. Generally speaking, removal of books from a rare book library is not lightly undertaken.

One device found useful in some of the libraries for recording visits of readers is a daily register. It assists in tracing lost books, or it can be used for a quick survey of reader activities or annual statistics.

The effectiveness of all these various precautions is demonstrated by the reports of little mutilation and few losses. Several of the libraries cited one sobering case of defacement within recent knowledge; only one knew of a loss, a minor one. One correspondent in a large library commented that they had suffered losses until the system of locked doors to the room was inaugurated. One can safely conclude that rare book custodians have carried out their major responsibility of care and protection with marked success.

Perhaps, put baldly in print, these rules for the conservation of costly books sound like stern prohibitions—a calculated scheme by hoarders to fend off eager readers. Yet, no one reading through the questionnaires themselves, particularly the extended answers, could fail to be impressed by the tone of graciousness and helpfulness. A tone of cordial, pleasant atmosphere rather than a restrictive, forbidding one, says the chief at the New York Public Library Reserve Division, is the goal, and each correspondent expressed the same sentiment. This is confirmed by reports heard from the other side of the desk from well-traveled readers. Again and again they express their appreciation of the personalized, unstinting, and knowledgeable service extended them in rare book libraries where they are given the priceless opportunity to examine rarities. All librarians take pride in having their materials seen and used. Most of the libraries welcome visitors; guided tours are frequent occurrences highlighting the display of treasures.

The solicitude of the libraries for their materials varies from those who merely issue an injunction to be careful to those who extend minute directions. Flexibility of policy is indicated by the wide range of materials. Many books such as reference books and bibliographies require no special treatment at all. While at the other extreme the tenderest of care is given illustrated manuscripts. At the Morgan, pages of manuscripts are to be turned carefully with fingers resting only on blank margins, and care taken not to breathe on the decorations during close examination. Though this essay has been confined to treat-

ment of books, it should be noted that rules for servicing manuscripts are often more stringent. Consequently, rules created especially for manuscripts tend to establish policy for all materials in the collection.

It must be remembered that policies are made to yield to the status of the reader. All authorities relax surveillance for the proved reader who has demonstrated conscientious care.

Regulations and manuals appear to be more elaborate when one or more of the following factors are present: the collection contains a large number of extraordinary rarities; the library has independent status; and close relationship exists, or existed, with a benefactor. In addition, institutions like the New York Public Library and the Library of Congress, located in metropolitan centers, with a large patronage must maintain stricter restrictions which may be administered impersonally as part of an inescapable system.

Flexibility of policy is determined also by the function of the library. If the trend may be discerned, it is toward efforts to encourage greater use of the materials, especially in those collections which are part of an academic institution. Necessity to justify existence in competition with other library service units may be partially responsible, as well as the genuine desire of the librarian to stimulate students to become acquainted with fine books. Hence, for them, there is no barring of the inexperienced student for lack of credentials or purpose, and a welcoming atmosphere free of obvious restrictions is sought.

When asked whether they felt regulations have been tightened or relaxed over the years, the curators gave varied answers. It must be pointed out this is a difficult "yes" or "no" question because relativity depends on the original standards, which were not asked for, and personality differences in application enter in. Four of the libraries reported no change; three are relaxing rules, but seven are tightening up and all for the same reason: more readers and increased use.

Laws are by their nature negative—witness the Ten Commandments. If there were no law breakers, and no careless temperaments, the library of rarities could give man free rein. But there are the inescapable facts of human nature and limited library resources. It is the rare book librarian's duty to use his technical knowledge and experience to preserve while serving. A table sign in the Pierpont Morgan Library expresses a view which all rare book librarians surely hold:

#### TO READERS

Many of the books and manuscripts you handle are unique and irreplaceable.

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Our inheritance from the past, and our legacy to the future,  
they deserve to be treated with the utmost care.

Please respect them.

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