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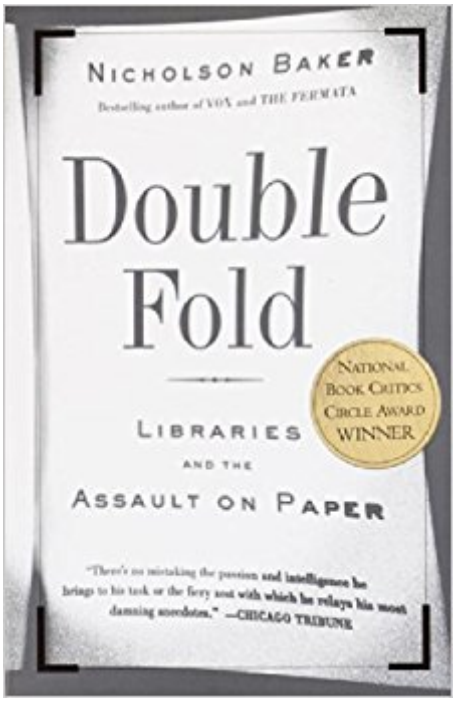
Double Fold: Libraries And The Assault On Paper



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Synopsis

The ostensible purpose of a library is to preserve the printed word. But for fifty years our countryâ ™s librariesâ “including the Library of Congressâ “have been doing just the opposite, destroying hundreds of thousands of historic newspapers and replacing them with microfilm copies that are difficult to read, lack all the color and quality of the original paper and illustrations, and deteriorate with age. With meticulous detective work and Bakerâ ™s well-known explanatory power, Double Fold reveals a secret history of microfilm lobbyists, former CIA agents, and warehouses where priceless archives are destroyed with a machine called a guillotine. Baker argues passionately for preservation, even cashing in his own retirement account to save one important archiveâ “all twenty tons of it. Written the brilliant narrative style that Nicholson Baker fans have come to expect, Double Fold is a persuasive and often devastating book that may turn out to be The Jungle of the American library system.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Baker raises some extremely interesting points in regards to libraries and the disposal of books and newspapers. This is an important and necessary read for anyone in the field of librarianship. I do think that there are some problems with this book however. Baker clearly began this book with an agenda--an admirable one in my view--but one that has prevented him from accurately portraying the story. He repeatedly refuses to acknowledge the very real and very pressing space problems that every library in America is now facing. Space is at a premium and libraries cannot continue

unabated growth. Baker argues that it is cheaper to build storage facilities than to microfilm books and newspapers. Perhaps, but it is immeasurably cheaper to purchase a newspaper on microfilm than to build and maintain storage that is deperately needed for many other resources. Further, microforming and digitaization provide greater access to resources. I agree that discarding the original of microformed or digitized texts is bordering on criminal and idiotic, but libraries have realistically been left with no option. Money is scare and money is needed to hold on to thousands and thousands of volumes.Baker delights in depicting librarians as nefarious ogres who delight in destroying books and newspapers in favor of microforms and digitization. This is an unfair and inaccurate depiction. Most librarians regret the destruction of books--for many, including myself, it can be a painful decision to discard a book--but unless governments and universities are willing to spend the money to store these items and maintain that storage area, there really is no practical alternative. Every librarian I know would prefer to have a hard copy of every book and newspaper they use, but this just is not possible.

Nicholson Baker's _Double Fold_ is an extended screed on the destruction of old books and newspapers by research libraries, and their inadequate replacement by microfilm and microfiche and digital copies. The book is not temperate in tone at all, which at times is a disadvantage. Baker at times advances his arguments unfairly. (For instance he complains in one case that a chemical used in a deacidification experiment was also used in bombs. So what? There are a number of other example of slippery rhetoric on his part.) Still, he makes his main points very well, and the story he has to tell is rather distressing.Baker's interest in this subject was piqued when he learned that the British Library was selling off its extensive collection of old American newspapers. He found that for many newspapers no copies may exist but on microfilm, or at any rate that physical copies are harder and harder to find. The primary justification for this was that the papers, especially those printed since about 1870, were doomed to decay into unreadability, because of the low-quality, high-acid, wood pulp paper on which they are printed. (The secondary justification, somewhat more sensible perhaps, was simply a need for more space.) Baker found in particular that American libraries rarely have extensive runs of old papers anymore, opting instead for subscribing to microfilmed copies. Baker makes a good point that microfilm is simply not a good reproduction of the papers, particularly the color illustrations. He makes even better points that the process of reduction to microfilm has been rife with errors: skipped pages, pages photographed so poorly that they cannot be read, many missing issues.

This work is not news reporting. This is one intelligent and passionate person's account of his suprise, shock, and disgust at the manner in which historically important documents of popular American history have been mismanaged over time. Decisions on the destruction of newspapers (and more recently of older books and journals, as Nicholson points out) were made on broad statements of supposed fact, rather than a professional study of the material under question. He maintains librarians could have and can maintain their collections better. As a librarian, I know this to be true, and I agree with Mr. Baker.This is not a perfect book. Nicholson Baker is aggressive and engages in hyperbole. He can be one-sided. However, he does not hate libraries, or librarians, but he has a major bone to pick. His suggestions of consiracy are a bit stretched, but his evidence that similar poor solutions were widespread and fed one on another is accurate. His focus on newspapers may make them sound more imporant to historical research then perhaps is true, but in some branches of study access to the complete sets of originals is indeed crucial. And he is right in most instances as to the failure of the system, even if he does not show constraints libraries are under. I, however, personally believe the book would have been less strong had he done so.Baker advocates we keep as much as we can - far more than we do now. However, every library cannot keep all it has and will receive. Deterioration of material does happen, material is stolen or damaged, and more money for a new library storage facility is difficult if not impossible to secure in these times.

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