Nicholson Baker’s new book Double Fold, so named for the folding test by which old books are determined “ready” for disposal, exposes the insidious newspaper archives practices of numerous public libraries including the British National Library, the New York Public Library, and the Library of the American Congress. In his prefatory remarks, Baker outlines the mass preservation trend that the book was written as a direct response to his own startling realization that “a million responses to a day once read Pulitzer’s World; now an original set is a good deal rarer than a Shakespeare’s First Folio or the Gutenberg Bible” (p. 4). Baker began his polemical investigation of book keepers-reapers when he learned that the British National Library was getting rid of its post-1850 American Newspaper collection, many of which can no longer be found on any library shelves (p. 23). He started writing imploring letters and e-mails in an effort to stop its disposal plan. In a final act of desperation, Baker founded his own non-profit organization (with his family members acting as co-signers) called the American Newspaper Depository (p. 13), effectively spending U.S.$26,000 a year of his retirement savings. His warehouse currently shelters more than 20 tons of early metropolitan dailies and saves them from the landfill, the pulping mill, and sinister dealers who cut up the papers into a thousand pieces to sell as personalized birthday gifts (see the “Original Keepsakes” chapter).

However, one should not just dismiss Double Fold as the frantic ravings of a traditionalist. Baker delineates a connection between “book disposal” policies implemented by British and American libraries and a larger ensemble of strategic monetary and military interests that have undergirded the rampant destruction of these historical newspapers since the 1950s. At the outset, he proclaims that, upon inspection, these dailies are printed on the “very best preserved wood pulp paper of 100 years ago” (p. 5). The analytical trajectory of his work buttresses his claim that books fare best when you “leave them alone” in well-ventilated storage spaces to be pored over by conscientious, gentle readers (p. 13). Why then, have our libraries turned to the garbage dumps? The answer is, appositely enough, double folded. The supposition that old newspapers are crumbling, rotting, dissolving, and in short, “doomed” is revealed to be well orchestrated propaganda plotted by a constellation of players: Kodak, Xerox, Rockefeller grant hoarders, suspiciously commissioned scientists, ARPANET inventors, and, by extension, the CIA.

Baker first proves that alum-rosin paper sizing or groundwork pulp paper is sturdier than expected by debunking scientific reports cited by microfilm entrepreneurs. He attends “scanning workshops” (funded significantly enough by Mellon and the National Endowment for the Humanities) and performs the double fold test himself on supposedly endangered books that are unfit to read and finds their pages “turnable” (p. 226). Not only are the books not deteriorating, Baker also elucidates how hideously expensive the practice of microfilming newspapers is. The Library of Congress, for example, has microfilmed more than 67,000 volumes of newspapers printed before 1870 (p. 37). Baker divulges that a set on microfilm costs U.S.$150 a volume (p. 26). Alternatively, Baker posits that it would “cost less than five dollars to build outlying storage and hire someone to truck to-and-fro whatever people want to see” (p. 26). This maniacal micropreservation trend became the prevailing doctrine when library administrators were also working with CIA surveillance operations and thus, were intimately connected with national information dissemination (see Baker’s research on Verner Clapp of the Library of Congress, footnotes on p. 278). Baker’s investigations of CIA files (many of which, ironically enough, are copied from microfilm and are barely legible) serve to excoriate the more ominous underpinning issues behind what, in Baker’s mind, is euphemistically considered a space crisis (p. 31). What this mass “mircrofix,” as Baker calls it, entails is mass destruction under the aegis of preservation. Though mass-microfilming mandatizes speak of “saving our collective memories” (p. 226), Baker paints a different portrait. The tragedy implicit within these mass preservation crusades is that the original volumes must be disbinded or, in Baker’s speak, “guillotined down the spine” in order to avoid “gutter shadow” and be photographed properly (p. 25). The impaled volumes are thereafter considered irreparable and discarded.

Baker is intent on exposing this conspiracy and vindicating this unfathomable cultural loss. He investigates the life expectancy of microfilm and finds that, contrary to popular belief, the medium is of “dubious residual strength” (p. 41). He traces the material history of microfilm, from its cellulose-acetate form in the 1940s (which had a tendency to bubble) to Kodak’s polyester film (which was employed in the Corona spy satellite) to the “Kalvar”-brand vesicular film (which released corrosive gases) to the new fungi prone silver film of the 1980s (pp. 42-44). One begins to see how microfilm is not the panacea it was made out to be by the visionary “shrinkifiers” selling the medium.

However, new digital scanning procedures only further the assault on paper. Baker asserts that the prospect of the obsolescence of microfilm may stop the death toll, but most of the precious cultural data will still be lost. The spurned newspapers are doubly endangered by “an invitation to didgiput” (p. 241) in the schema of the new digital library because new networking and scanning technology is still inadequate. Baker never loses sight of the role of technological monopoly in library policies. At the New York Public Library, he notes that Xerox funded virtual storage initiatives regardless of the brute realities that higher transmission speeds, higher resolution, and more memory capacity are needed in order to store, search for, and be able to read a newspaper (pp. 243-245). Baker’s claims are lucid, obsessively researched, and apocalyptic. He states: “Bell and Howell/Universal Microfilm Inc. now owns...
bound form in order to avoid this problem for future generations. Further, Baker concludes that "the National
another archive to do the job" (p. 270). Meanwhile, libraries today should begin to save current newspapers in
Washington, and provide physical access to all print materials on site, then "Congress should designate and fund
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The reader can become simultaneously seduced and incensed by this conspiratorial rhetoric quite easily, and Baker
is a master at it. The book is organized in a beautifully witty episodic structure and is replete with personal jokes and
flourishes. A head librarian's predilections for bow ties does not escape his snide pen. However, to level criticisms at
Baker on this level would be missing the point of this treatise. His intent is clearly not to study archival practices as
an objective scholar. This book is a veritable call to arms, and demonizing the "guilty" party is part of his ideological
project. Take, for example, Ted Hughes, a "fundamentalist man with a small mustache" who "cut[s] them out of their chronological context with a utility knife (you can hear the binding
strings pop softly as the blade travels down the inner gutter of the volume) and sell[s] the eye-catching headline
issues (Al Capone, the Lusitania, Bonnie and Clyde, Amelia Earhart)... shrink wrapped against white cardboard...
or through his printed catalogue or web site" (p. 13). A newspaper dealer, in one fell swoop of a paragraph,
becomes a veritable book butcher. And those of us who weren't aware that libraries sell old newspapers to dealers
all the time realize that they aren't the impervious bastions of history we thought them to be.

His highly ornate writing style is a curious blend of his own narrative panache and investigative reporting, mostly in
the way of primary source material from interviews, e-mail correspondence, and his on-location visits. Furthermore, his erudite footnotes demonstrate an endless attention to detail (see for example his footnote on how Canadian
public libraries fare somewhat better in keeping the original newspapers than their American counterparts. p. 274, n.
22). The scholarship is built-up and just as tendentious as the rhetoric he seeks to debunk. Baker shapes a
wonderfully biased tale, peppered with characteristic wit and depth of knowledge. By perusing a few
chapters, for instance, one can find out about how some of the first newspapers were printed on Egyptian mummy
wrappings, as a result of a British aristocrat's entrepreneurial fantasy, and how a pyroclynic gas called diethyl zinc
and NASA became implicated in newspaper preservation methods.

One should, therefore, bear in mind that Double Fold's ideological purpose is explicit throughout, and that this is, of
course, its raison d'être. The "call to action" epilogue illustrates this well. He recommends that "libraries that receive
public money should as a condition of funding be required to publish monthly discs on their web sites" (p. 270). Baker
has demonstrated the necessity of ensuring that the general public isn't hoodwinked into losing historical
artifacts without the opportunity to hold libraries accountable. Therefore, in his schema, the Internet does play a
useful role as a sort of "democratizing tool" for the library system to re-connect with, fundamentally, the readers of
books.

Double Fold is also a salient text for media historians because it grapples with how mass disbinding/microfilming
policies affect media-history scholarship. Baker points out throughout his book that microfilm effectively strips
the newspaper from its historical context in many ways. On a purely visual level, the microfilm format destroys the
experience of reading a newspaper into an enforced linearity (p. 24). Baker uses full spread glossy pictures of
examples of a gorgeous copy of Pulitzer's World dating from February 11, 1912, and its microfilmed equivalent. The
paper was formerly owned by the British National Library and has since been microfilmed and discarded, and Baker
invites us to compare both versions (p. 213). The microfilmed copy is virtually unintelligible; the dark gradations of
the illustration create dark ink stain-like patches on the text. Baker's quest to save the original is justified by these
empirical examples.

Baker also discusses how historians are no longer reading the old newspapers because of the physical reality of
trying to browse through microfilm. In a characteristic moment, he even notes that a microfilm machine in an Ontario
archive comes equipped with its own air sickness bag (p. 39). Coupled with the nauseating experience, there is also
the fact that most of the microfilmed copies of the newspapers are mutilated by the "ace-comb effect" (pp. 47-53).
This means that volumes of newspapers are considered complete by the Library of Congress regardless if there are
a few pages missing, if articles are poorly photographed, or if "a few issues per month are missing" (p. 52). Baker
consults media historians to glean first-hand testimony about what this disastrous lacunae has meant for scholars
working in the Communications field (p. 51).

It may be said, however, that Double Fold makes a case to defend the victimized innocent books, without
expounding who the real villains are. Are we to blame the head librarian who uses hyperbole to secure more grant
money? Or a public who never noticed that these newspapers went missing in the first place? Baker never
investigates why Patricia Battin, head librarian of Columbia University, and the unfortunate person to whom the
"assault on paper" is attributed, would be so misguided in her policies. Is it because "out of 45 million dollars given to
libraries in preservation money, zero is allocated for storage space" (p. 15) or is there a deeper meaning? What
does it say about our current cultural milieu that there are more administrators in our library systems than people
with curatorial skills who can repair those volumes once they are disbindered? These are perhaps more pressing
questions and, to this end, it becomes clear that Double Fold is merely a point of entry into a complex array of
socio-cultural issues.

Though Baker's work is a fascinating read, at times he demonstrates a naïve faith in the accessibility of information,
a sort of informational fantasy, if you will. He asks, "why not both? Why can't we have the benefits of the new and
everlasting digital copy and keep the beauty and convenience and historical testimony of the original books resting on the shelves?" (p. 67). His almost Proustian reverence of "things past" is quite in keeping with his
earlier paper fetishism exploits. This is a book written by the man who once lamented the disappearance of the
library-card catalogue (see his 1994 essay on the destruction of library catalogues called "Discards"; Nicholson,
1997).

For Baker, then, all books are artifacts and should be museumified as such (pp. 224-226). It is this idea of
the intrinsic value of the original object that butts head to head with information age enthusiasts who tout the electronic
dissemination of texts as a necessary transformation of the library institution. This is perhaps the crux of the matter,
and Baker has his work cut out for him now that the microfilm ideologues have been supplanted by equally suspect
digital gurus. Patricia Battin, for example, now submits that her role is to ensure that the Columbia University library
provides "access not storage" (p. 252), but Baker laments that this doesn't mean "physical access." Fundamentally,
then, he is interested in books in their pure tactile state. He is a book lover. The dissemination of information does
not concern him, because it is faulty, hard to read, riddled with aporias, and part of a complex web of technoto
necy that he distrusts.

Baker proclaims at the end of his book that if the Library of Congress is not willing to lease a building near
Washington, and provide physical access to all print materials on site, then "Congress should designate and fund
another archive to do the job" (p. 270). Meanwhile, libraries today should begin to save current newspapers in
bound form in order to avoid this problem for future generations. Further, Baker concludes that "the National
Endowment for the Humanities should either abolish the U.S. Newspaper Program and the Brittle Books program entirely or require as a condition of funding that 1) all microfilming and digital scanning should be non-destructive and 2) all originals be saved afterwards” (pp. 259-260).

These are noble suggestions on the part of a man who is fighting to keep a finger on our past. In his words, there is no other way of exploring history that will "enclose you so completely in one time-stratum universe of miscellaneous possibility" (p. 225). Saving the original, then, means in some sense keeping the text “alive,” along with the multiplicity of meanings that one traverses while reading. With Baker at the helm, we can be sure that our books will not die a digital "death."

REFERENCE


Double Fold exposes some of the US library faults from the past 50 years, mostly in regards to the microfilming industry. Books and bound newspapers by the hundreds of thousands were disbound, photographed, and discarded all in the name of preservation. Several librarians invented wacky methods for testing paper, including the double fold test, from which the book gets it's title. A national library committee joined with NASA and the CIA to try and come up with a mass de-acidification program (which involved hundreds of pounds of diethyl zinc) to save "brittle" books. The Assault on Social Policy This page intentionally left blank The Assault on Social Policy William Roth c o l u Assault on Soho. Assault on Soho.  01_041560 ffirs.qxp 7/26/06 3:00 PM Page iii Shakespeare on the Double!™ Macbeth translated by Mary Ellen Snodgra ×. Report "Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper". Your name. Email.