

REVIEW OF: RADICAL CATALOGING: ESSAYS AT THE FRONT, EDITED BY K.R. ROBERTO, INTRODUCTION BY SANFORD BERMAN, MCFARLAND & CO INC (JUNI 2008), 303 PP., \$ 45.00, ISBN-10: 0786435437

by Lacey Prpic Hedtke

Just when you thought catalogers had been relegated to the back rooms for good, they've come out in droves with 35 essays ranging from Library of Congress Subject Headings (a hot topic), folk art terminology, zines and Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual/Transgender (GLBT) visibility in catalogs. This new book from McFarland is a collection of anecdotes, words to the wise and criticisms from catalogers on the front lines.

This is the rabble-rousers' introduction to cataloging. Those who "revel in the secret handshake of the MARC fraternity" (Smith in his essay) will read with an experienced nod, but those who aren't catalogers, or even librarians for that matter, will enjoy most of the essays in this 303-page book.

Roberto first started using the term "radical cataloging" around 2002. The term fits into the broader category of "radical librarianship", a tradition that's been around for decades, referring to progressive, radical, and socially responsible library work, attitude, and outreach. There's much discussion throughout the book on what role cataloging plays in the greater scheme of things and what a radical cataloger is. In the Preface, Roberto details the behaviors and traits of a radical cataloger. They include: "Being user-focused with regard to *your* library's users. [...] Skepticism about the quality of readily available bibliographic records. [...] Appreciating traditional cataloging models while examining ways to integrate new and useful ideas into this framework without abandoning what already works. [...] Feeling passionate about cataloging and its benefits."

Cataloging has been under attack in the past few years, and many essays touch on this. A main focus of concern is Karen Calhoun's 2006 report for the Library of Congress questioning the value of library catalogs and the catalogers maintaining them. Unarguably, cataloging is expensive, and the question has been raised if that expense is justifiable. Weinberg details in her essay, "Cataloging in Non-Roman Scripts", that in the United States, cataloging in non-Roman scripts is considered a radical cataloging practice. Some of Sanford Berman's "radical and progressive" ideas of thirty+ years ago are now considered standards. This book examines what is considered radical cataloging, and more broadly, librarianship, and spends time focusing on traditional biases in the traditional catalog.

The purpose of this anthology as stated in the Preface is as follows: "[...] to serve as a tool for catalogers and cataloging advocates." It is broken into three sections: Cataloging in Context, with historical overviews, and personal and theory-heavy essays. The second, We Criticize Because We Care, concentrates on criticisms of contemporary cataloging (including a scathing review of OCLC and the predictable grumblings about Library of Congress Subject Headings). The final section, Innovative Practices introduces readers to new projects to increase the use of catalogs, including pieces on teaching radical cataloging, cataloging zines, and tagging and other forms of folksonomies.

Some themes that continue to emerge throughout the book are issues with and advantages of Web 2.0 techniques in and around the catalog, how to sufficiently represent minors, whether they be race, sexual identity, or gender, and of course, the inadequacies and blatant biases and tiltings of cataloging mega-forces like OCLC and the Library of Congress. The most hilarious (and my favorite) essay is Christopher H. Walker's "Rearranging the Deck Chairs on the *Titanic*: A Drowning Cataloger's Call to Stop Churning the Subject Headings". Written in a chatty conversational tone, Walker approaches a subject so well-worn it seemed predictable and surprises with a commentary on social change and progress through LC's eyes.

Jenna Freedman's essay, "AACR2-Bendable but Not Flexible: Cataloging Zines at Barnard College" details the mysterious world of zine cataloging. Brian Hasenstab takes us on "A Highly Selective,

Slightly Irreverent Trip Down Radical Cataloging Literature Lane” - the subtitle of his collection of mini book reviews, in “This Subfield Kills Fascists.” A title like that doesn’t come along everyday. Jeffery Beall’s review of OCLC leaves no stones unturned in exposing it as a money and power-mongering multinational corporation lurking in our catalog’s backyards. And of course, many authors throughout mentioned Sanford Berman.

In a way, Sanford Berman laid the foundation for radical cataloging. Without having a name for it, he single-handedly led a crusade against the Library of Congress and their questionable headings, created a new subject authority file that he implemented at Hennepin County Library during his influential time there, and many of which the LC finally incorporated. He has long promoted alternative viewpoints in librarianship. This book, and review of it, would be incomplete without recognizing the immense impact he has had on the subfield of radical cataloging. His ideas that were considered revolutionary have now become commonplace library procedures.

The Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) that Sanford Berman has railed against for so long continue to be criticized throughout the book. He called the headings “chauvinistic”; others call them biased, racist, sexist, and unjust. “A Hidden History of Queer Subject Access” delves into the topic surrounding access to GLBT materials, and their bibliocide due to the lack of adequate headings. Tatiana de la Tierra expands on this theme with “Latina Lesbian Subject Headings: The Power of Naming”. She points out that: “Library of Congress subject headings do not name the complete gamut of sexual expressions”, and that “Subject headings carry a lot of weight. The [...] wrong [subject headings], or none at all, can cut off access...” Although LCSH is the largest subject thesaurus in the universe, their progress is continuously pointed out as being pathetic and antiquated. Christopher H. Walker brings the reader through a brief history of the modern era by way of LCSH; which headings are passed that should have been a long time ago, which we now has no need for, and which are reflective of a larger view of society. Love them or hate them, LCSH get a lot of attention in *Radical Cataloging*.

Another topic with almost equal attention paid is the topic of tagging, and ultimately, Library 2.0. Several essayists fret about Amazon.com’s encroaching success in user searching, review functions and suggesting similar titles, a capitalist approach to reader’s advisory services. Tagging is wildly popular in user-driven programs like Flickr, LibraryThing, and del.icio.us. Again and again, the argument is made that libraries must keep up with these developments and innovations, or run the risk of losing users’ to The Google Empire. Cataloging has come out of hiding in mysterious back rooms and into every social networking site user’s hands. LibraryThing catalogers are connected to the Library of Congress or Amazon.com by default when cataloging personal collections.

LibraryThing developers seem to place equal value on these two organization’s cataloging records. What message is this sending to users? Will catalogers be replaced by the tagging masses? Will users be drawn in by the layperson terminology of tagging, foregoing the often archaic language of more traditional cataloging tools like LCSH? In “Ubiquitous Cataloging”, Bradley Dilger and William Thompson take on these questions in a wildly informative essay. They reveal that LibraryThing’s author and title “clouds” show that J.K. Rowling and J.R.R. Tolkien are the most heavily collected authors on the site. Tools like tag clouds could be used in libraries to connect users with information never exposed before - and could change collection development, if it becomes obvious that patrons want popular fiction rather than the canon. The authors suggest a “more participatory catalog [...] [that] would situate this debate between readers themselves, via the catalog (in user groups, for example).” They excitedly imply that allowing users to add tags to a library catalog could make cataloging a more open-ended process, with end results beyond any professional cataloger’s wildest imagination. New connections could be made that never were explored before. Maybe catalogers would even accept user-suggested tags into their bibliographic records and their hearts. Sites like del.icio.us suggest tags that other users have used for our bookmarked websites. Finally, Dilger and Thompson concede that tagging does have its critics: “While tagging and its much ballyhooed companion ‘folksonomy’ (classification by amateurs, as opposed to ‘taxonomy’ created by experts) aren’t going to automatically

revolutionize the art and craft of cataloging, they remain valuable tools for reaching the larger goals we've set out as cataloging moves toward ubiquity."

With taggers breaking away from the constraints of LCSH, many of which didn't know those chains were there to break free from, the concept of what and who warrants an official cataloger is blurry. Tagging's main function is providing a pathway for easy access to information, so is traditional cataloging. Taggers base their tags off of the work's content; catalogers have been working from the "work in hand". Where will the two meet and who will be there to facilitate this merger?

An underlying theme of the book is librarian as activist. Librarian as advocate for a cause they feel strongly about, consider themselves experts on, or have been affected by directly. Whether it be GLBT issues, Native American names in catalogs, or the treatment of religious sects, this anthology embodies the idea of not only a "radical cataloger", but a "radical librarian". Without which the field will be lost to corporations like OCLC, Amazon.com and Google. And without which the world, and our bibliographic records, will be a much more boring place.

Radical Cataloging is strongly recommended for anyone curious about, invested in, or bored by cataloging. Almost all of the essays bring a new light on the broad topic. Only a few essays are extraordinarily dense or academic; most are entertaining, informative and most of all, radical in thought. A daring ideology all libraries need more of.