



Do We Have a Right to Know? A Review and Discussion of "Dark Archives"

Lily Sellei

MA, Archives and Public History, New York University

MSLIS, Palmer School of Library & Information Science, Long Island University

Citation: Sellei, Lily. "Do We Have a Right to Know?: A Review and Discussion of 'Dark Archives.'" *Bridging Fields*, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2025). <https://doi.org/10.33682/vfky-3yuf>.

The book "Dark Archives" by Megan Rosenbloom is a complicated, morbid, but fascinating half-tale of the history of books bound in human skin, and half-memoir of the author's journey into her research. The book presents an ethical dilemma over what we have the right to study and keep in our collections as librarians, archivists, and researchers. This article cum book review will contain no images, given the nature of the content. Reader discretion for both the book and this article is advised, as uncomfortable themes such as death, nonconsensual body modification and medical practices are discussed.

Access to knowledge is critical, and information about humanity's darkest moments serves as necessary reminders and warnings. The right to intellectual freedom is one of the American Library Association (ALA)'s listed top advocacy and issue topics. The organization's work in defending intellectual freedom – which they define as “the right of every individual to both seek and receive information from all points of view without restriction” and “free access to all expressions of ideas through which any and all sides of a question, cause or movement may be explored”^[1] – rests upon the foundation created by the Library Bill of Rights^[2], first adopted on June 19, 1939 and last amended January 29, 2019. In the first three provisions, the organization declares that:

I. Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation.

- II. Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval.
- III. Libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment.

These statements lay the cornerstones for librarianship and exist to protect the knowledge that we have gained from the perils of censorship. However, there are the occasional, rare moments in which this belief in the sharing of *all* publications, research, and knowledge is challenged. "Dark Archives: A Librarian's Investigation into the Science and History of Books Bound in Human Skin," a 2020 publication written by Megan Rosenbloom, is one such example. Rosenbloom is a "librarian with a research interest in the history of medicine and rare books... [and] a member of the Anthropodermic Book Project, a multidisciplinary team scientifically testing books around the world to verify their human origin."^[3] The book is undeniably fascinating, and readers learn about library practices, world history, science, and radical attitudes surrounding death. These are all elements that make up an excellent book, but I took issue with the way Rosenbloom presented her interests and described the treatment of the books themselves—including the humans whose bodies were used to create them.

In the first chapter ("The First Printing"), as other reviewers have pointed out^[4], Rosenbloom defends her decision to study cases of anthropodermic bibliopegy (books bound in human skin) practices. She writes that there is "no way to change how these people were treated in their deaths, but I can restore some respect to their humanity by uncovering their stories, separating the myths from the facts, and exploring the contexts in which such treatment of the dead could be remotely acceptable"^[5]. At first glance, she provides a wonderful mission statement for pursuing this line of research. In the chapters that make up the majority of the book, Rosenbloom guides readers through both her personal stories and investigations, and the history behind specific books that were alleged (and some tested, and confirmed) to be bound in human skin. However, in all but one case, these books were not created consensually; the individuals whose skin was used did not agree to the act, and, even if consent was given, the circumstances surrounding it would be questionable at best. Rosenbloom's cavalier attitude towards this issue, and her insistence upon continuing research on unconsenting subjects is at odds with her stated goal.

In the third chapter, Rosenbloom begins her investigation with the story of a poor woman named Mary Lynch, who suffered from and succumbed to tuberculosis and ringworm infection. A doctor named John Stockton Hough "first encountered Lynch... on his autopsy table in January 1869... It was during the autopsy that Hough removed the skin from Lynch's thighs. He preserved her skin in a chamber pot^[6] and stored it for safekeeping while the rest of Mary Lynch's body was dumped into a pauper's grave at Old Blockley. Decades later, Dr. Hough – by then a rich, well-respected bibliophile – used Lynch's skin to bind three of his favorite medical books on women's health and reproduction"^[7]. In a later discussion with Princeton University librarian Paul Needham, Rosenbloom seems to believe that male doctors like Hough did not

intentionally set out to “denigrate” a woman, and implies that intentionally sexist or classist motives were not at play. Rather, she contradictorily attempts to sanitize the character of Dr. Hough as someone who simply contained a “blithe disregard for the woman as a person”^[8]. Furthermore, when Needham argues that, in a similar instance of anthropodermic biblioepy, it is “an attack on a dead female body,”^[9] Rosenbloom still maintains that censorship of these materials, through burials or restrictions on research, is problematic because “the singularity of the material of the book made it important to preserve, as evidence of this abhorrent practice. We can’t go back in time and stop anthropodermic books from being created, but since they exist, they have important lessons to teach us... Who knows what else we might find out about these books if they continue to be cared for by librarians like us?”^[10] Her argument is in line with what the ALA appears to believe about intellectual freedom, but it is potentially in disagreement with other codes of ethics.

One affiliate organization of the ALA, ALISE (Association for Library and Information Science Education), does include in its Position Statement on Information Ethics in LIS Education (November 5, 2007; ratified January 10, 2008) a mention of human dignity and similar concerns within the field, or at least within the education or professionals in the field:

As suggested by universal core values promoted by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions and other professional organizations and world bodies it is our responsibility to participate critically in the global discourse of information ethics, as it pertains to, at least, the following articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

- Respect for the dignity of human beings (Art. 1);
- Confidentiality (Art. 1, 2, 3, 6);
- Privacy (Art. 3, 12);
- Right to be protected from torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment (Art. 5);^[11]

If some organizations in the library and information science world are adopting and interacting with rights, values, and principles found in the UDHR, then the study of anthropodermic biblioepy may find itself challenged on the aforementioned grounds. Binding books in human skin is a clear act of inhuman treatment — it is literally turning someone into a nonhuman entity. Doing so violates human dignity. Those who are victims of this practice did not consent to the binding, and did not consent to the study of their remains — by choosing to not perform research on them, we are respecting their privacy and allowing for their personal information, that they may not have wished to be broadcasted to the world, to remain confidential.

The ALA does not directly discuss human subjects, but we can turn to other professions for guidance in this regard. In the scientific world, researchers are directly concerned with the use of human subjects and the concept of informed consent. The United States Department of Health and Human Services’ website^[12] explicitly includes a description of informed consent and references legal regulations that “require that an investigator obtain the legally effective informed consent of the subject or the subject’s legally authorized representative” when human subjects are involved in a research project.

Following this line of thinking from these professional ethical codes, we are obligated to ask ourselves – as Rosenbloom does not seem interested in doing – if we have the *moral right* to conduct research on these materials. She is correct that we may discover much about our own history, previous scientific methods, and philosophical theories about humanity. Still, we do so at the risk of trampling over the dignity of subjects who did not consent or were not in positions to give consent. As librarians, we care about protecting our living patrons from human rights abuses. This same standard of care should, and must, be applied to the deceased victims of anthropodermic bibliopegy.

While consent already cannot be provided post-mortem, other situations exist wherein humans cannot give consent even while alive, as they have been stripped of their autonomy — making the case for the continued study of anthropodermic bibliopegy books doubly questionable. Enslaved and formerly enslaved people living in the American Revolution era cannot freely give clear and unambiguous consent due to the inherent violence and power dynamics involved in the physical and legal exploitation of their body. Whether or not collector Henry Wellcome's book, which claimed to be bound in the skin of Crispus Attucks, is real does not detract from this major issue. Ironically, in the same chapter that Rosenbloom discusses books and racism, she also devotes a few final pages to medical racism. She writes that "the medical profession has a lot of work to do to gain trust within the Black community, and it needs to start with acknowledging both past and continuing problems and educating medical students and practicing clinicians alike."^[13] If librarians, such as Rosenbloom, rightfully condemn the human rights abuses committed by white doctors against patients of color and acknowledge that it is a major reason for the lack of trust today, should they not also acknowledge that continuing to research books bound in human skin, potentially that of a Black man or woman without their consent, can lead to distrust between patrons and librarians? Rosenbloom will surely agree that acts like forced experimentation were wrong, even if the researchers attempted to justify their actions in the name of science and pursuit of knowledge. But why, then, are the individuals in her book still subjected to experimentation (literally, as the method for testing for human skin involves removing a sample and analyzing it via peptide mass fingerprinting) even in death, unable to be freed or put to rest from the dehumanization and disregard for their human dignity? As of 2018 in the European Union, the General Data Protection Regulation^[14] grants individuals "the right to be forgotten." While this relates more to Internet and corporation data privacy, it perhaps provides a legal precedent for arguing that when consent is withdrawn, or never given, any research or data that has been collected should be deleted and ongoing efforts to collect this data must cease. Should this notion not be applied to the individuals discussed in Rosenbloom's book? ALISE's statement — where privacy, respect, dignity, and protection from abuses, derived from the UDHR — suggests that there is a professional interest in doing so.

Criminals, too, cannot give consent; and, just like in the case of the Englishman William Corder, the process in which their skin became the binding for books could involve additional rituals of humiliation. Only an hour after being found guilty of murder and hanged, "the county surgeon, George Creed, was already slicing a long line down the center of [Corder's] body, peeling back the skin... before laying the body out for the public to shuffle past and gawk at. This was a common practice at the time and part of

the public humiliation of murderers implemented to deter future criminals”^[15].

Continuing with the story, the next day, “it was likely that at this point [medical students and anatomists] removed a sizable piece of his skin to bind a book about his trial”^[16] for Creed’s personal collection. Corder, in death, exists now in a state of morbid display for others; while the crime he was convicted for was heinous, no individual can be refused the human rights that are granted to them at birth. Even when, allegedly, another convicted criminal, George Walton of Massachusetts, gives his consent to be turned into a book, the circumstances surrounding such a request are dubious at best. Rosenbloom, though, chooses to take it at face value instead of critically questioning her sources. She says that George Walton’s story was recorded by the prison warden on his deathbed, but in the same breath notes that there are elements of the story that are potentially untrue, fabricated, or exaggerated by the recorder. Who is to say that this consent was not also fabricated, given that Walton, as a prisoner, had little to no autonomy or control over his own life? Either way, the questions of consent and the ethical treatment of their remains must be at the forefront, and not as a throwaway concern.

To return to the main question is to ask again what we have a right to study, to educate on, and to know in the library and information science field and profession. Megan Rosenbloom’s “Dark Archives” is an interesting way of looking at the question because it places many of us at a crossroads between the professional interest of wanting to preserve, obtain, and disseminate information, avoid censorship at all costs, and the human interest of wanting to ensure that all individuals, past or present, are treated fairly and equitably. There is a difficult balance to be made between “all knowledge is valuable, and we cannot stand to lose it,” and “some of that knowledge comes from acts of violence or (in)direct harm.” In the interest of preserving human dignity and allowing those who have been abused to finally rest (perhaps by providing the books with a proper burial or funerary rites), I believe that we must come to terms with the fact that we will not be able to know everything about everything, and that must be okay. I believe that librarians and archivists and professionals in the LIS field must learn to value respect over the unconditional, nonstop pursuit of research. Continuing to study books bound in human skin does not, as Rosenbloom believes, restore respect to their humanity. It condemns them to objectification in perpetuity.

[1] *Intellectual Freedom Resources*, American Library Association, www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/resources.

[2] *Library Bill of Rights*, American Library Association, 2021, www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill.

[3] Rosenbloom, Megan, and Straus Farrar. *Dark Archives : A Librarian’s Investigation into the Science and History of Books Bound in Human Skin*. First edition., Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020. About the Author

[4] Alissa Matheny Helms; Dark Archives: A Librarian’s Investigation into the Science and History of Books Bound in Human Skin. *The American Archivist* 1 September 2023; 86 (2): 679–682. doi: [https://](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003681203000000)

doi.org/10.17723/2327-9702-86.2.679

[5] Dark Archives, 32

[6] As Rosenbloom notes in the fourth chapter, this was likely to do with the use of urine in the tanning process; however, later in the chapter, a professional tanner expresses that he had “never heard of [that] preparation method being associated with leather or book production and the time period, place, and manner of decoration all point to using conventional tanning methods of the time (74-75)

[7] Dark Archives, 50

[8] Dark Archives, 86

[9] *ibid*

[10] Dark Archives, 87

[11] *Information Ethics in LIS Education*, Association for Library and Information Science Education, 2008, www.alise.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=51.

[12] “Informed Consent FAQs.” *Office for Human Research Protections*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, www.hhs.gov/ohrp/regulations-and-policy/guidance/faq/informed-consent/index.html.

[13] Dark Archives, 112

[14] Wolford, Ben. “Everything You Need to Know about the ‘Right to Be Forgotten.’” *GDPR.Eu*, Proton Technologies AG funded by the Horizon 2020 Framework Programme of the European Union, 14 Sept. 2023, gdpr.eu/right-to-be-forgotten/.

[15] Dark Archives, 121

[16] Dark Archives, 122

Author Bio:

Lily is a first year MA student at NYU in the Archives & Public History program and a MSLIS student at LIU pursuing a concentration in Rare Books & Special Collections. She has a BA in History from Columbia University and a BA in Political Science from Sciences Po, campus de Reims. She is interested in too many things, but mostly the (ancient) history of human-animal interactions, biological and chemical warfare, medicine, and science. Within the LIS field, she is interested in the history of the book and language, ethics, preservation, and accessibility.

REVIEWS