Book Review

Rosenbloom, M. (2020). *Dark Archives: A Librarian's Investigation into the Science and History of Books Bound in Human Skin*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

The title of this book alone invites curiosity. Equal parts travel memoir, history, and analysis, *Dark Archives* is a first-hand account of Megan Rosenbloom's research into anthropodermic bibliopeggy: the binding of books in human skin. Written in an engaging, conversational style, her book invites us to share her experiences with some of the most guarded and controversial objects in both public and private archives worldwide. This book will provide the reader with an up-to-date review of this topic, its history, and related current issues.

Rosenbloom is particularly qualified to write on this subject, as President of the South California Society for the History of Medicine, a former medical librarian and journalist, and a member of the Anthropodermic Book Project, which seeks to verify human-skin books world-wide. She demonstrates her expertise through discussions of technical details on methods, such as peptide mass fingerprinting, a chemical technique used by analysts to distinguish true human-skin books from the fakes. The unique vantage point she gained through these professional experiences is also suggested by her citations, which span historical newspapers, interviews, and scholarly articles from disciplines ranging from medicine and chemistry through archival science. Her ability to synthesize disparate sources has enabled her to fill a research gap in writing the first book on anthropodermic bibliopeggy.

The central argument here is how our historical and modern perspectives on key issues, such as death and consent, have been enacted through the making and disposition of human-skin books. Rosenbloom recognizes the people, often nameless, who have been interred in our archives, and she explicates how the use of their bodies for this purpose after death, often without their consent or knowledge, parallels the lack of autonomy many experienced in life. In explaining how physicians would sometimes keep the skins of patients from autopsies to bind books, she deconstructs how the intersectionality of race, socioeconomic status, gender, and (dis)ability shaped exploitative practices in medicine and the book trade. Further, she contrasts the outdated hierarchies of physicians over patients and curators over communities to the present understanding of these relations as partnerships. Emphasizing professional accountability within both libraries and medicine, readers from these professions will appreciate the numerous examples of how those of us entrusted with human artifacts can make ethical decisions on their retention and display.

Readers, however, may be somewhat divided in their response to another aspect of Rosenbloom's presentation of this topic. Rosenbloom is a death positivist, one of a growing movement of intellectuals who believe we should engage more openly with the topic of our mortality. She works as an obituary editor, frequents cadaver labs, and directs "Death Salons"—gatherings "in the spirit of the 18th century salon"—to discuss death and culture (*The Order of the Good Death*, 2021). Having donated her own remains to science post-mortem, she handles the study of human artifacts with the same careful consideration as she gives to her own future. She never approaches these objects with neutrality, but with a balance of academic interest and awe, both for the

particular history of each book, and what they collectively signify: our own status as ephemera. This book is then a memento mori, loosely organized around Rosenbloom's personal history of encounters with death and its effects, thick with depictions of human corpses, by-products, and disease. Her interviews with rare book collectors, leather tanners, medical students, and archivists are coupled with reflections on how her death positive research affects her, both professionally and personally.

If this book is grounded in Rosenbloom's personal journey in understanding these relics and her convictions on what they can teach us about bodies and their afterlife, she is aware not everyone agrees with her. She does introduce competing perspectives, such as that of Harvard Rare Book Librarian Paul Needham, who argued for the burial of their library's human-skin book. However, Rosenbloom's appreciation for death and its artifacts dominates the narrative. Those who agree with Needham on the profane nature of human-skin books are unlikely to enjoy this book. Similarly, those grieving, overwhelmed by the mortality rates of this pandemic, or uneasy with graphic details may wish to leave this book on the shelf. Those looking for a shorter, less emotionally freighted introduction should listen to Rosenbloom's and chemist Daniel Kirby's interview on this topic on the podcast "Ologies." As for science aficionados, the morbidly curious, and practitioners of the #darkacademia aesthetic? Sit down and prepare to binge-read.

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(*HUMAN LEATHER BOOKS*) with Megan Rosenbloom & Dr. Daniel Kirby [Audio podcast episode]. In *Ologies*.

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