

# **The New Monastic Librarians**

Chris Dodge

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In his book *The Twilight of American Culture* (Norton, 2000), the social critic Morris Berman foresees a looming dark age when much of Western learning could be eclipsed. The evidence is all around us, he says: the numbing reign of corporate influence, the mania for credentials over true learning, and a populace rendered nearly illiterate by its addiction to dumbed-down mass entertainment. While that might seem like reason enough for despair, Berman looks to an ancient tradition for hope. Like those who once copied texts as a way to save them for a more enlightened time, a cadre of “new monastic individuals” must take up the task of protecting the knowledge they love.

As in every age, there are those who live for something other than fame, fortune, or mere survival. In their days, work and play are blurred. They may be poets, thinkers, listeners, artisans, or savers of seeds; people who keep languages alive or guard wild, beautiful places. They tend to be iconoclasts who, in Berman’s words, “don’t try to elevate their iconoclasm into a new movement.” Berman doesn’t mention librarians, but he could have. Many still regard the institutions in which they work with reverence, as storehouses of a culture’s wisdom, and quietly work to preserve them. Here are just a few.

### **Julie Herrada Archiving The Edges**

Back when Julie Herrada was assistant curator at the Labadie Collection at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, she worked to acquire what some would consider a dubious prize: the papers of Theodore Kaczynski, a.k.a. the Unabomber. In early 1997, about a year after Kaczynski’s mail bombings ended with his arrest, Herrada first wrote to his attorney and “asked for everything, including manuscripts, journals, correspondence, photographs, and legal papers.” As she recounts in *Archival Issues*, the journal of the Midwest Archives Conference, an agreement was reached in 1999. Not everyone was thrilled. One talk show host “urged listeners to call the university library and complain.”

The Labadie Collection is full of papers that many might rather burn. Founded in the early 20th century from the vast radical literature saved by Detroit anarchist printer Joseph Labadie and his wife, Sophie, the collection has been overseen by a series of dedicated archivists. Herrada took the reins in 2000. Her additions include many books, journals, zines, fliers, and buttons devoted to freethinking, radicalism, and dissent. She travels to anarchist book fairs the way other librarians attend Book Expo America.

Scholars and journalists, at least, are grateful for the effort. The Labadie Collection is known for its unique source materials, including photos, many of which are available online ([www.lib.umich.edu/spec-coll/labadie](http://www.lib.umich.edu/spec-coll/labadie)).

### **Julie Bartel and Brooke Young Collecting Zines**

Though public libraries strive today to offer popular materials like comic books and hit CDs, it’s hard to find the small, self-published periodicals known as zines. Many libraries carry zine anthologies and books on zine making, but few collect zines themselves.

Julie Bartel and Brooke Young, librarians at Salt Lake City Public Library, decided to change that. With library support, they started a zine collection with a budget of \$600 in 1997. What began on a single magazine rack now includes more than 6,000 titles, and their current annual budget of \$2,000 goes a long way at \$2 and \$3 a pop.

Bartel and Young want other librarians to take zines seriously. Bartel has written *From A to Zine: Building a Winning Zine Collection in Your Library* (American Library Association, 2004), and she and Young both speak at library conferences and alternative press gatherings. As Bartel explains, zines are a necessary alternative, a conduit for fresh, uncensored, noncommercial expression. And the collection draws people who have never been in a library before.

“Every library should have a zine box,” Young adds, and maybe soon more of them will. Bartel says she spends much of her time fielding questions from library school students who are interested in starting and managing zine collections of their own.

### **Jenna Freedman Recording Feminism’s Raw Feed**

Jenna Freedman started a feminist zine collection at Barnard College in New York City partly to protect history’s precious first draft. “In 20 years you will not be able to find out what really happened at the protests against the Republican National Convention by reading old newspapers,” she says, referring to events last summer in Manhattan. “They didn’t cover it, but zinesters did.”

Freedman, a librarian and coordinator of reference services at Barnard, collects zines by urban women that focus on “activism, anarchism, body image, feminism, lesbians, menstruation, parenting, sexual assault, war, and other topics.” She encourages other librarians to acquire materials beyond what they see reviewed in trade sources like *Choice* and *Library Journal*. If they don’t, she says, they’re being “passivists.”

An activist herself, Freedman dreamed up Radical Reference, an in-the-streets service supporting demonstrators at the Republican National Convention. With the help of others, Radical Reference went on to become an online reference service ([www.radicalreference.info](http://www.radicalreference.info)) where volunteer librarians field questions from activists and independent journalists. Freedman publishes her own zine, the annual *Lower East Side Winter Solstice Librarian Shout Out*, and often participates in the online zine librarian forum she founded at Yahoo Groups.

### **James Danky Looking for Local Voices**

Whenever Jim Danky finds a periodical published in Wisconsin, he makes sure the Wisconsin Historical Society in Madison subscribes to it. As the society’s librarian in charge of newspapers and periodicals since 1976, he has his share of homegrown printed matter arriving at the door.

Danky archives other materials as well. Thanks to his efforts, the WHS library has a vast collection of military base publications — titles like *Shoot ‘Em Down, Danger Forward*, and *Bulldogs on Five*. The library also collects an impressive number of Native American and African American newspapers and magazines. In fact, Danky seeks out periodicals by and for Americans from nearly all nationalities and ethnicities as well as from the radical fringe.

If you want to look at contemporary American life, Danky says, libraries must throw open the doors. “Libraries are in the business of promoting democracy — not for partisan purposes, but rather to expand the debate about our society, to make our future one that incorporates as many visions as possible.”

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