

Koehler, W. (2015). *Ethics and values in librarianship: a history*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield. 275pp. ISBN-13: 9781442254268. £52.95.

An extremely thorough analysis of the history of ethics and values in librarianship by Wallace Koehler, who has been publishing in this field for the past 30 years. The angle is more American but there is a good overview of British and European libraries too, notably from Germany, France and Spain. The book could be used as core reading in library schools as each chapter brings its own ethical questions.

The book is divided in 11 chapters. Chapter 1 lays down the thesis of the book that “the ethics of librarianship and its practice are not fixed and constant”. The concept of the library as public sphere as seen by Habermas may, on the contrary, be a “mechanism for standardization and elite control”. The concepts of “where” and “when” are primordial for understanding this history, though the author recognises that librarians of the late twentieth century tend to have similar values.

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Chapter 2 Stewardship and Service emphasises the conflict between book conservation and usage. Preservation, with time, has become a complicated business with the appearance of new formats and even websites. In chapter 3, classification, I am a bit surprised to see that no mention is made of criticisms of the Library of Congress and the Dewey classification schemes seen by some as marginalising developing countries. In chapter 4 the “public” library changes over time, from individual collections of books donated to universities but reserved for a few (the Bodleian Library, La Mazarine) to the opening of public libraries, as we understand the term today (Manchester public library). Chapters 5 and 6 deal with intellectual freedom and democracy where the author breaks down a few myths such as often thinking as the library as instrument of democracy; after all there were and there still are libraries advocating the propaganda of their respective non-democratic states. Chapter 7 on copyright has to be taken with a pinch of salt for the UK and European audiences as there is no concept of fair use in the UK but of fair dealing. Yet the author develops on the different school of thoughts in copyright between countries.

Management of collections has changed a great deal over time too, from books of value, no “riff raff” as Thomas Bodley would have said, to less intellectually demanding books and the inclusion of non-book materials. The reader has changed as well, in the past knowledgeable in Latin, Greek, Hebrew and several European languages to the not-so polyglot reader of today. And parallel to this naturally, the role and abilities of the librarian; a man of great and wide knowledge, custodian for Thomas Bodley, courteous for Jean-Baptiste Cotton des Houssayes to the more diverse library professionals of today.

While focusing on the historical context, this book is also extremely up-to-date. The chapter on censorship and freedom of speech does not fail to mention the Charlie Hebdo event. There is also an impressive analysis of the digital revolution and ethics with quotes from Luciano Floridi. Again, some myths are dispelled here, we tend to think that digitisation is a perfect answer for conservation, but like medieval manuscripts, those objects are fragile and need regular shifts towards newer technologies.