

# Off the Shelf #1: LGBT librarianship

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## Off the Shelf #1

by Rob Ridinger, 10/2/14

Welcome to a new regular column of reviews for LGBT professional literature produced in mainstream and academic presses. In this one, we'll take a look at our own genre of LGBT librarianship. There has been a diverse array of relevant books created over the years, and some of these may not be well known to the newer members of the profession.

When LGBT librarianship is mentioned, the first name that usually comes to mind is the late Barbara Gittings, whose work within ALA created the Gay Task Force transformed, after her resignation in 1985, into today's GLBT Round Table. Less familiar perhaps is a record she left of the importance of libraries to her own life in one of the earliest looks at how LGBT people fared within colleges and universities. In 1978, English professor Louie Crew and Ellen Barrett brought out an anthology entitled *The Gay Academic*. One chapter, authored by Barbara Gittings and representing the field of library science, was "*Library Science: Combating the Lies in the Library*." Five years after stepping down from her work with the Gay Task Force, she published a memoir of her years of work, *Gays in Library Land: The Gay and Lesbian Task Force of the American Library Association: The First Sixteen Year*, later reprinted by Greenwood as part of the 1998 volume *Daring to Find Our Names*.

The year 1990 also saw the appearance of the first book-length treatment of collection development and public service issues for the LGBT population. GLBTRT co-chairs Cal Gough and Ellen Greenblatt gathered contributions from then-active researchers in the field of LGBT libraries and archives. The fifteen papers in *Gay and Lesbian Library Service* provide a valuable snapshot of which important questions in these two key areas were identified 20 years after Stonewall. Sixteen appendices offer a state-of-the-market look at nonfiction, bibliographies, music, films and videos, publishers, bookstores, and mail-order book dealers, books, and notable special collections of gay and lesbian materials. The two papers in this last category, written by Polly Thistlethwaite and Brenda Marston respectively, present the Lesbian Herstory Archives and Cornell's Collection Human Sexuality. The list also supplies the full texts of the Library Bill of Rights and the American Library Association's Policies on Sexual Orientation as they existed at that point in time.

The development of LGBT librarianship as a distinctive professional path was aided in the late 1990s by the appearance of the first volume of personal accounts by gay, lesbian, and bisexual librarians working in a wide variety of institutions and environment. Norman Kester's *Liberating Minds: The Stories and Professional Lives of Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Librarians and Their Advocates* appeared in 1997. It was a joint effort of Canadian, New Zealand, and U.S. professionals in institutions as varied as Glad Day Books (Toronto), assorted public and academic libraries of all sizes, and the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives. James Carmichael's opening essay, "A Gauntlet for All Reasons: the Importance of Lesbigay Library History," provides an excellent introduction to the topic.

Carmichael was also instrumental in editing the second notable collection on LGBT librarianship to appear in the 1990s, *Daring to Find Our Names: The Search for Lesbigay Library History*, mentioned above. The idea for this collection originated with three papers given at the 1995 ALA Annual Conference at a program co-sponsored by the Library History Round Table and the Social Responsibilities Round Table. At that time the Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Task Force was part of SRRT, and the program was, according to Carmichael, "the first general ALA session on lesbigay issues in the Task Force's twenty-five-year history." The seventeen entries examined three major areas: defining the questions and contexts of LGBT library history and those theoretical frameworks which could be usefully applied to researching it; the pioneers who established an open LGBT presence in librarianship focusing chiefly on Barbara Gittings, Israel Fishman, and the development of the GLBT Task Force between 1970 and 1995; and major archival collections. Polly Thistlethwaite and Brenda Marston supplied thoughtful discussions of how archivists

become activists for the preservation and interpretation of LGBT texts and artifacts with an insider's view of the creation of the Lesbian Herstory Archives. *Names* concluded with three reflections on gay and lesbian librarianship and what it has the potential to contribute to personal and community growth.

The opening decade of the new millennium was a quiet period in the production of book-length works on LGBT librarianship, but the years since 2011 have seen a resurgence of this genre and the appearance of significant new titles addressing both continuing professional concerns and questions raised by new technology. Ellen Greenblatt edited a second collection to serve as a follow-up to *Gay and Lesbian Library Service* after twenty years. *Serving LGBTIQ Library and Archives Users: Essays on Outreach, Service, Collections and Access* began by expanding its focus beyond the earlier gay and lesbian community orientation to the broader and more diverse array of emerging communities which define themselves into a lengthy "alphabet soup" of LGBTIQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual transgender, intersex and queer/questioning) with diverse information needs. The work opens with an examination of the impact of the Internet, including virtual communities, and profiles the award-winning website Outhistory.org. Discussions of LGBTIQ issues associated with public, school and academic types of libraries, with the young adult population considered separately, are followed by in-depth treatments of the Quatrefoil Library (Minneapolis) and the James Hormel Gay and Lesbian Center (San Francisco Public Library). These last two essays lead smoothly into the third section on LGBTIQ archives, ranging from an historical overview of the creation and growth of local LGBT archives as community institutions to the development of the Under the Rainbow Oral History Project. The next three sections revisit the basic areas of collection development, bibliographic access and control, and the censorship that LGBTIQ materials can encounter. Professional concerns varying from making library education more LGBT inclusive to the potential impact of transgender collection building on staff development wrap up this diverse and valuable volume. It is worth noting that the GLBTRT is one of the three organizations profiled in the professional concerns section, along with the Lesbian and Gay Archives Roundtable of the Society of American Archivists and HQ76.3, the professional group of New England LGBT librarians founded in 1993.

One topic covered in the last section of the Greenblatt collection receives more lengthy and detailed discussion as the core of the other anthology on LGBTQ librarianship published in 2011. Tracy Nectoux of the University of Illinois served as editor for *Out behind the Desk: Workplace Issues for LGBTQ Librarians* published by Library Juice Press (Duluth, MN). The emphasis is on personal accounts from both newcomers to the profession and veterans, in a wide variety of institutional contexts ranging from the standard suspects of academic, public and special libraries to prisons and LGBT bookshops.

The hugely diverse body of information created by the feminist and queer movements and its management by zine publishers, historians, archivists and librarians is given articulate voice in the 2012 volume from Litwin Books, *Make Your Own History: Documenting Feminist and Queer Activism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. The preface, "Archives as Activism" by Alison Piepmeier, clearly sets out the rationale of the collection:

"documenting is activism. The process of producing a zine, a flier, or even an organization is momentary and can be ephemeral. When librarians and archivists collect these materials, the materials move beyond their momentary effect and the become artifacts capable of longer-term importance. The scholars in this volume explain that it's a political decision to collect things that women, girls and other underprivileged groups have produced. When the creators are on the margins, archivists are activists: when materials are archived, they achieve the status of something significant enough to be worth saving." ( p. ix )

Matching this discussion with its critique of archival study and practice is Alana Kumbier's 2014 work *Ephemeral Material: Queering the Archive*. Litwin Book's current catalog lists as forthcoming another anthology, *Queers Online: LGBT Digital Practices in Libraries, Archives, and Museums*, expected to appear this winter. Clearly, the literatures of our librarianship continue to grow and diversify.

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