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A Billion Little Pieces, by Jordan Frith

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See table of contents

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Book Review: *A Billion Little Pieces*

Frith, Jordan. *A Billion Little Pieces: RFID and Infrastructures of Identification.* MIT Press, 2019, 336pp, $35.00.

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Jordan Frith, Professor of Professional Communication at Clemson University, explores the often-overlooked world of radio-frequency identification (RFID) technology in *A Billion Little Pieces: RFID and Infrastructures of Identification*. In the book, Frith provides a needed intervention in infrastructure studies, urging the reader to reflect on how a type of object communication that frequently happens at the level below human perception or awareness invisibly shapes our world.

Libraries receive only sporadic mention in the text when Frith refers to the ubiquity of RFID tags in library materials, but this does not mean that *A Billion Little Pieces* has no value for a librarian readership. Other, more library-focused titles already deal with practical RFID applications in the library context (see, for example, Pandian 2010, Ayre 2012, and Singh 2019), and what Frith provides in addition to these other books is a sociohistorical perspective on RFID technology. Throughout *A Billion Little Pieces*, Frith marries significant technical RFID knowledge gained through his examination of the technology's history and perusal of its trade literature with a theoretical understanding of the issues at stake when we now have "the ability to collect unique identification data about almost any material object" (4) by affixing it with a cheap, tiny tag. After reading Frith's work, my own view of libraries' use of RFID technologies changed, seeing libraries' adoption of RFID as less benign service improvement and as more continuous with changes in supply-chain management, and broader trends in the datafication of the world. To the evergreen library school debate of whether libraries should conceive of their users as "customers" or "patrons," after reading *A Billion Little Pieces* we might feel compelled to bolster this debate by posing the question of why libraries have become comparable to Walmarts via the item-level RFID tagging common to both environments, and what that might mean.

Some of the strongest chapters in *A Billion Little Pieces* are found later in the text when—having earlier sketched the technical underpinnings of RFID tags, frequencies, and readers in chapter three—Frith delves into data privacy concerns associated with the technology. Chapter five is a particularly fascinating read, moving across a wide range of examples where "RFID data is used to produce various forms of data visibility" (145): Disney MagicBand bracelets, livestock tagging, temperature-controlled supply chains, the identification of counterfeit pharmaceuticals, and evangelical Christian interpretations of RFID as the "Mark of the Beast." Following this, chapter six tackles RFID surveillance concerns head on, looking at general mobility, retail surveillance, workplace and school tracking, biometric identification, and bodily implantation as contexts of "liquid surveillance" where human intervention to surveil is not necessarily needed anymore.

Frith's engagement with conspiracist RFID viewpoints in these later chapters—such as Katherine Albrecht and Liz McIntyre's influential 2006 book *Spychips: How Major Corporations and Government Plan to Track Your Every Purchase and Watch Your Every Move*—demonstrates the nuance of his thinking and writing across *A Billion Little Pieces*. On the one hand, Frith critiques *Spychips* for its inflammatory rhetoric and for misunderstanding the technical capabilities of details like RFID tag read ranges. On the other hand, he is not completely dismissive of the unease that RFID technology creates in the public and that manifests in texts like *Spychips*, admitting that—even after rigorous research for his book—he still believes that "the fears about the ubiquity and invisibility of the technology are real" (224). Says Frith, "fears expressed about RFID make sense when understood within our broader information landscape" (224) where "[p]eople's digital movements online are tracked every day by a variety of corporate actors" (225). Librarians and their institutions would do well to extend this same dignifying perspective to patrons that may be wary of RFID technology being deployed in library contexts and may be reluctant to trade their privacy for increased convenience or personalization, regardless of how intuitive, flashy, or frictionless a new suite of services may seem, especially to librarians eager to evangelize the modern, tech-fetishist version of the "library faith" (Wiegand 2015, 76).

Published in 2019, *A Billion Little Pieces*' five-year-old age makes reading it in 2024 a curious exercise. In the book's conclusion, Frith contends that "so much about the successes or failures of RFID as an infrastructure of identification have to do with factors external to the technology" (244), and he wonders if "some kind of crisis would emerge that contributed to RFID adoption," positing that "crises almost by definition are difficult to predict" (244). Reading this brief set of remarks in 2024 four years after the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic makes one wonder if that crisis moment could have been the tipping point for RFID. Contactless payment adoption—

whether through RFID chip credit cards or near field communication (NFC) on mobile devices, a subset of RFID technology—was accelerated by the pandemic (Yun 2024), as was the digitalization of academic library services more broadly conceived (Ashiq et al. 2022). At the same time, futurist prognostications about a partly RFID-driven Internet of Things that Frith writes about in the book's fourth chapter now feel slightly outmoded, as does the phrase "Internet of Things" itself.

Though slightly dated, *A Billion Little Pieces* remains a useful text for the library professional looking for a good primer on RFID technology and many of the sociological issues associated with it. As mentioned, though libraries do not feature prevalently in the book, one does not have to work too hard to find connections between some of the RFID-related concerns that Frith raises, and RFID use in library contexts. On a methodological note, Frith's choice to pay persistent attention to an infrastructure that is, by design, meant to go unnoticed could be mimicked by LIS scholars in an examination of the seemingly banal infrastructures that shape library work. Olson's (2002) work and the Critcat movement brought this kind of attention to cataloguing standards, but one wonders what other invisible infrastructures are overdue for critical analysis in librarianship, whether built or "informational."

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