

## Dark Archives: A Librarian's Investigation into the Science and History of Books Bound in Human Skin, by Megan Rosenbloom

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## Book Review: *Dark Archives: A Librarian's Investigation into the Science and History of Books Bound in Human Skin*

Rosenbloom, Megan. *Dark Archives: A Librarian's Investigation into the Science and History of Books Bound in Human Skin*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020. 288pp. \$34.99 CAD.

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Megan Rosenbloom's *Dark Archives: A Librarian's Investigation into the Science and History of Books Bound in Human Skin* offers insight into a subject matter that few may know about: anthropodermic bibliopeggy, or the science and history of books bound in human skin. Written as part memoir and part historical overview, Rosenbloom tackles this topic in a way that is accessible, engaging, and incredibly intriguing. This book would especially appeal to those who already have an interest in science, history, and true crime — particularly forensics and the macabre. Those who tend to find themselves easily unsettled about such topics may not get the same enjoyment out of this book, but it is still a worthwhile read.

As the title suggests, *Dark Archives* provides its readers with an overview of Rosenbloom's investigation into the science and history of books bound in human skin. Divided into twelve chapters, Rosenbloom seeks to understand the scientific and historic truths behind anthropodermic bibliopeggy. Each chapter gives a first-hand account of Rosenbloom and her team's cross-continental journey of testing alleged anthropodermic books to determine if they truly are of human origin. In these chapters, Rosenbloom details the technical aspects of these tests, giving insight into peptide mass fingerprinting (PMF), the main way to test and analyze whether a book is bound in human skin. While many tests prove to be fruitless and the books are not deemed to be of human origin, it is interesting to note just how many books claim to be of human origin. Throughout the book, Rosenbloom often questions the legitimacy of written historical records, and it is easy to see why she has these doubts when considering how long myths surrounding countless alleged anthropodermic books

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would be allowed to persist were it not for her team's efforts to dispel any rumours or uncertainties.

Each of the twelve chapters is also interwoven with historical events, including the origins of identifying alleged anthropodermic books, as well as an overview of medical history in the 18th century, among other histories. Including these histories is incredibly important to understand the context in which anthropodermic bibliopeggy came to be — the 'how', the 'why', and the 'when' of its origins. When discussing these histories, Rosenbloom makes a point of addressing and recognizing the often-forgotten contributors to the medical field in general, but particularly in the area of anthropodermic bibliopeggy. Rosenbloom repeatedly mentions that women and people of colour were often unknowingly and unwillingly exploited and dehumanized to advance the medical field and she does not shy away from exposing the shameful history of medicine. While Rosenbloom writes about these events in an historical sense, the ideas surrounding consent, authority, and memory remain relevant in today's world.

Rosenbloom proves her expertise to write about anthropodermic bibliopeggy through her professional and personal affiliations. She is a leader in the global death-positive movement, leads The Anthropodermic Book Project, and is the co-founder and director of the Death Salon, a society that "encourages conversations on mortality and mourning and their resonating effects on our culture and history" (The Death Salon, 2022). Additionally, Rosenbloom is the president of the Southern California Society for the History of Medicine, is a member of the Order of the Good Death, and is also a journalist and a former medical librarian — giving her access to old and rare books, as well as in-depth knowledge of the language and context of the medical field. At the end of the book, Rosenbloom also includes over thirty pages of endnotes, indicating the extensive research that has gone into its creation. Knowing the amount of research that was done, as well as seeing the variety of resources used — including scholarly journal articles, historical newspapers, and interviews — furthers the validity of the claims and histories that are presented. Rosenbloom's affiliations and research help add legitimacy to her authority and insights as an investigator of this topic, which ultimately helps establish trust with the reader that she truly is an expert in the field.

Rosenbloom offers an alternative point of view in her book, specifically one that opposes her death-positive perspective. She includes commentary from Princeton's rare book librarian, Paul Needham, who argues for the burial of human skin books as "the ethical thing to do" as opposed to their celebration (28). Rosenbloom dedicates several pages of her book to Needham's perspective and does not seem to immediately dismiss his opinions despite their opposition to her own. However,

Rosenbloom maintains her positive stance towards anthropodermic bibliopeggy, and the general tone of this book remains arguably pro-books bound in human skin. While considering different points of view is important, it is equally as important that Rosenbloom does not waver in her stance, as it would likely detract from her authority on this topic, which she spends the entire book establishing.

While *Dark Archives* centers around the world of libraries and archives, readers do not have to be librarians or archivists to enjoy this book. Readers who may have had preconceived notions about what it means to be a librarian or archivist and what libraries or archives do will likely have their notions challenged throughout this book, as Rosenbloom's activities clearly present a different picture from the stereotypical shushing and stern librarian. Librarians who may have had preconceived notions of what archivists do would benefit from reading this book as it explores the variety of directions the profession can take. Rosenbloom's ability to synthesize a wide variety of information sources and present them in a way that is interesting and accessible allows her to fill in a gap in the literature that might not have been otherwise filled. Overall, *Dark Archives* is an intriguing read that should not be overlooked, regardless of one's awareness of or interest in anthropodermic bibliopeggy.

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