

Editing *RBM*

IT IS TRULY AN HONOR to write a reflection about *RBM* and its relationship to ACRL in honor of the organization's 75th anniversary. I hope my perspective illuminates the recent history of the journal, as well as its relationship with our professional organization.

While I had the pleasure to serve on the editorial board from 2006 to 2008, and as editor from 2008 to 2014, my relationship with the journal goes back even further. My first article in the journal, written with Steven E. Smith, appeared when it was *Rare Books & Manuscripts Librarianship* (12.2, 1998). This was only the second publication of my career, and it was thrilling beyond belief to see my name in what I knew, even then, was the voice of our profession. By the time my second article in *RBM* was published, "'Get It, Catalog It, Promote It': New Challenges to Providing Access to Special Collections" (7.2, 2006), I had published much more widely and was serving on the board, but my excitement about seeing my name again under this masthead was just as fresh. The fact that this article is still widely cited, nearly ten years later, confirms for me that publishing in *RBM* is a good career move!

But I am not writing so much about my experiences as an author, as pleasant and rewarding as they have been, but as an editor. Combined with Sid Berger's contribution to this issue, my perspective represents a big chunk of time in the journal's history.

In my first editorial note, I was "filled with a thrilling mixture of elation and fear," a feeling that continued up until my last day of service. It was exciting to feel as though I was at the helm of this important journal, hoping to steer it boldly and safely to some uncharted future. But, to stretch the nautical metaphor even further, it was terrifying, and I wondered if I had a big enough lifeboat.

Looking back over the issues that were produced when I was editor was a nostalgic and inspiring experience. I have them in print in my office, so I used both the analog and digital platforms! I noticed things on the web interface I had never seen before, like the ability to see the most downloaded articles, updated monthly.

One of the first things I learned as editor was that this journal would not be possible without ACRL. Much like with the RBMS Conference (until recently, the RBMS Preconference), work goes on "behind the scenes" that may never be visible

to the casual observer. In *RBM's* case, ACRL staff provide design and production, taking the word-processed articles and turning them into lovely copy. They manage circulation, ad sales, and other important work. I am indebted especially to Dawn Mueller and David Free, who tirelessly answer questions and bring a high level of professionalism to all our conversations. They are the unsung heroes of *RBM*, as well as other ACRL publications.

Another eye opener for me was the complexity of the ongoing relationship between the journal and the book trade. I am so grateful to our advertisers, who subsidize the publication in many ways. Since ACRL staff manage ads and design, I would not see the ads until the final proof stage. I was consistently amazed by the gorgeous and inspiring ads that grace our pages and by the generous support for our profession they represent.

RBM readers overlap with RBMS section members, and a lot of energy comes from the section. Early in my editorship, after the current *RBM* issues became available online, there was talk of farming out a few issues to be scanned by members according to a set of specs that ACRL would provide to tackle the backfile as well. Eventually, we were able to take advantage of the good will of colleagues at the University of Kansas who scanned each issue in 2010. I am grateful especially to Stuart Roberts, who assisted me with the journal as part of his work as a Sanders Library Scholar, as well as to my KU Libraries colleagues.

But, as anyone who has done any kind of digitization project knows, scanning is the easy part. The RBMS Executive Committee was approached for funding to support the cost of maintenance on the site used to deliver the journal content, and eventually section chair Henry Raine made a successful proposal to the Gladys Kriebel Delmas Foundation to fund that cost. Since early 2011, then, the content of every issue has been available online with a two-issue embargo (more on that later). In addition to the worldwide access this has provided for the journal, the project allows ACRL staff and the editorial board unprecedented data about use of the journal. Not surprisingly, some of the more downloaded articles represent a "who's who" in the field and have had long-term impact.

Book reviews reappeared in 11.2, in the fall of 2010. That issue also marked the first time all the articles were peer reviewed, a surprising development given that the peer-review option had only been available since 9.2 in 2008. My predecessor, Rick Clement, was responsible for introducing the option of peer review; previously, all submissions were reviewed by the editor and editorial board members.

Peer review allows authors to choose traditional double-blind peer review, often required as a mark of quality in the promotion and tenure process, instead of review by the editorial board. This allows colleagues in tenure-track positions to publish in “our” journal, instead of related or less-focused journals, while receiving the recognition their institution expects. As requests for peer review became more common, it also became necessary to balance these articles with other types of contributions, such as informal reflections and provocative-thought pieces, which I believe offer great value to the profession as well.

Another ongoing theme is the changing nature of the “preconference” issue. Since *RBM* is published only twice a year (a fact for which I was eternally grateful as editor), devoting one issue to papers from the preconference made more sense when many readers would not otherwise be able to access the stellar presentations that made the conference so invigorating. It also allowed me to work with outstanding colleagues, Preconference chairs who graciously agreed to continue their work as guest editors. Now, due to the wonderful work of the section, much more content is being made available online, often in a format that better represents the character of the original presentation. It will fall to later editors to negotiate the best way to preserve the enduring value of many of the presentations while maximizing the page count available to other types of articles.

In fall 2011, I noted that *College & Research Libraries*, our “sister” ACRL publication, moved to completely open electronic access, and I discussed the possible implications in my editor’s note.

I have been involved in such discussions [the future publication and distribution of *RBM*] my entire first term [as editor], and honestly do not expect them to end before I cease to be editor. I am increasingly convinced that open access to the electronic version of *RBM* is not only inevitable from a publication point of view, but a logical outgrowth of our profession’s laudable commitment to the free exchange of information and ideas.

I do not know what the future holds, but I am more excited than ever about the role this journal plays in sharing information in the fields of special collections, manuscripts, and archives.¹

Other recent developments of note include the fall 2012 issue, a special issue on assessment in special collections. To distribute copies to attendees of the 2012

1. Beth Whittaker, “Editor’s Note,” *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 12, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 73.

Library Assessment conference, we produced an extra-large print run. This issue also mentions the RBMS Metrics and Assessment Task Force, further underscoring the close relationship between the journal and section. New content licensing agreements were introduced that allowed and encouraged authors to use Creative Commons options for sharing their work.

I have had the pleasure of presenting several times to audiences of librarians who are looking to expand their professional publication. I can now tell them things I did not know before I became an editor: about what to do and what not to do. I appreciate the inquiries from inexperienced authors, unsure if their ideas are worth developing into a submission. I did not appreciate deadlines to be met, harried last-minute corrections, and the fear that a particular issue would never come together.

I must also acknowledge the colleagues who served as reviewers and those who formed the editorial board over the years. The journal is the work of so many people, only some of whose names appear on the page. I encourage everyone who benefits from this special publication to consider if they can assist by submitting manuscripts, volunteering to review, writing book reviews, or serving on the board. It truly takes a village.