

Archiving My Life

By LINDA K. KERBER

I'M A HISTORIAN. Books are my trade. A historian guards memories, including her own; a historian's duty is to gather books, to save correspondence, to keep. I filled my shelves — in my office, in my home — to overflowing.

Despite repeated resolutions to build coherent collections (of first editions in the history of women, of ephemera from the days of the Vietnam War), I acquired my books haphazardly. Books by historians. Books I assigned to my students. Books written by my friends. Books I wrote. Or edited. Books I wanted to read. Books I read carefully. Books I intended to read but didn't. Books I never intended to read.

I've got worn books from my days at Barnard (Malcolm Cowley's *Exile's Return*), graduate school at Columbia (all of Richard Hofstadter's); my husband's from Columbia's required "Contemporary Civilization" course, anthologies in which no woman except maybe Hannah Arendt seemed ever to have had a thought worthy of study. Biographies and autobiographies. Some fiction, some poetry (Robert Penn Warren's *Brother to Dragons*: "All night long History drips in the dark / and if you step where no light is / the floor will be slick to your foot").

These books conjure up my life. Thus Martin Duberman's *Charles Francis Adams* — there's not much in it now for me, but it surely helped me develop a sense of the rhythm of language. Another book so dense that I'll never open it again, but I once chaired the committee that gave it a prize, so now it's part (isn't it?) of my own history.

Now that I've retired from teaching, I have to clear out of my office — 226 feet of shelves of books; 21 file drawers in three cabinets and two desks; four cartons of copied research materials, though I no longer have any idea what is in them.

This is much harder than anyone warned me it would be. "Freaking out" is not a phrase usually in my vocabulary, but now it could be the title of this essay. I make a first pass, pulling several dozen books off the shelves and offering them to the graduate students' book sale. I segregate many of the women's-history books and offer them to my successor, but she already owns most of them.

I consult old friends from other universities. One took a few home and then arranged for everything else to be boxed up for a good cause and hauled off by the relevant non-profit organization, which was happy to have them. Another friend, who

was at the center of the psychological transformation of what it means to be a feminist historian, did something similar with her books and (I can't believe this!) trashed her files.

Over crepes one Sunday morning I whine about this to a friend, a wise psychiatric social worker. He warned me back in 2011, when I was cheerful about the prospects for my retirement: "All very well, but don't be surprised if you find it harder than you predict." He was right, and not in any of the ways I would have predicted. Now he hears me out — why is it so hard to give away my books?

"Oh, Linda," he breathes.

"It's not about the books you won't read. It's about death."

The rightness of that stuns me. Of course. It's about time, which once stretched out before me, time without end. Now the time has an end, though I don't yet know precisely when it will be.

THE BOOKS are relatively easy:

Books that speak to my current research interests, books that our grandchildren might want to read someday, books that have inscriptions (even if I don't remember the signer, it seems crude to give them away), books that have

an aura — these are boxed to come home with me (triggering another wave of deaccessioning there).

Then, one book at a time — I select books specifically for a former student or a colleague or a friend, a gift that I discover does not hurt to send away with the inscription "From my shelves to yours ..."

Books that a start-up library will welcome, like 10 volumes of the Papers of James Madison. These volumes and others fill six boxes and counting for a new college whose founding faculty includes a former student.

Finally, the books that don't fit the first three categories, for the Graduate History Society's annual book sale.

As for the papers — though I've relied on archives since the days of writing my senior thesis, I have no idea how to make one. But seasoned archivists teach me how to think. Under their gaze, my messy teaching materials are transmuted into valuable assets. For the University of Iowa, the materials are significant for its history of women's studies, and indeed, for its own history. For the Schlesinger Library of the History of Women in America at Radcliffe, my teaching materials are evidence of the rebellion that forced women's

history into the academic curriculum the 1960s and 70s and kept it there.

Guided by a generous former graduate student with extensive archival experience, my papers slowly emerged from their cabinets. We sorted them into categories: biographical — CVs, awards, ephemera from college and graduate school; book manuscripts, arranged in subseries for each title, in chronological order of first date of publication, including correspondence with libraries about research, with publishers and editors, with co-editors; essays and talks, in chronological order; teaching materials, organized by courses taught, with syllabi, examinations, some lecture notes; correspondence, some organized chronologically, some by correspondent.

And so on. As I write, two of us have already invested 50 hours each, and my guess is that each of us will spend at least another 30 hours. So far, we have filled more than two chin-high recycle containers.

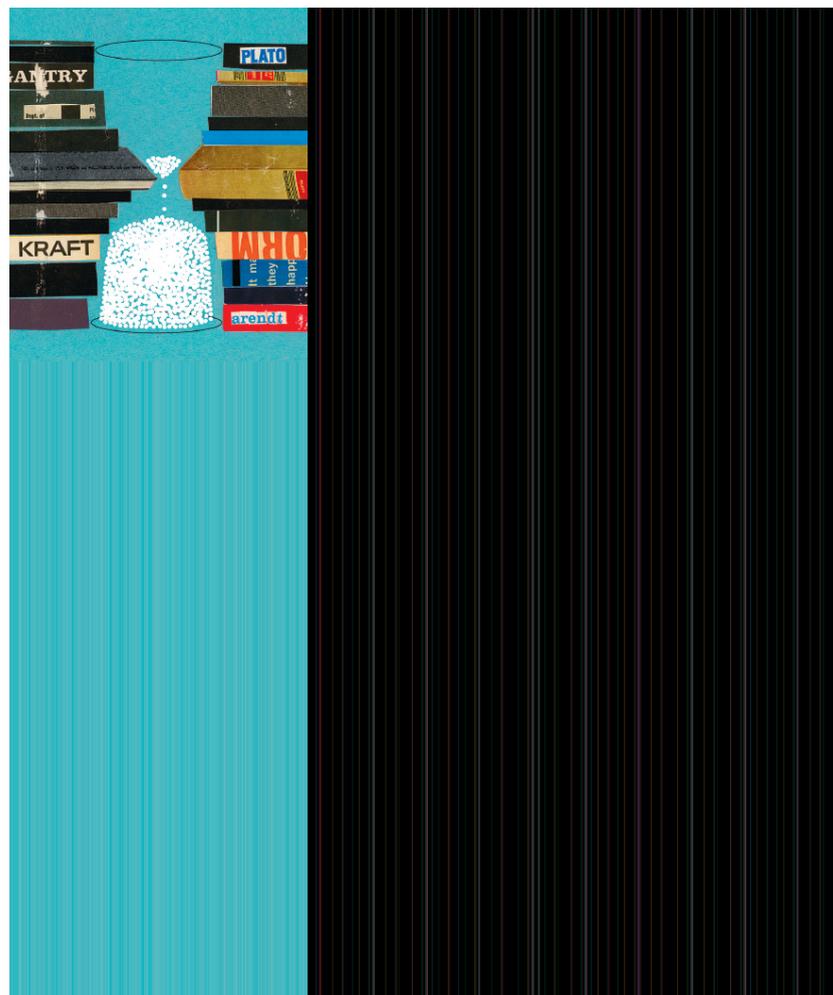
As we work, I cry out to my younger self: "Date every syllabus! Put the year on every letter! Link each syllabus with your notes on what worked and what didn't! Print out substantive emails! Don't keep piles of duplicates! Track your essays from handwritten to print! Why didn't you take a picture of the students at the end of every course? Indeed, why didn't you make sure we took more photographs? (Few of the colleagues who welcomed me when I joined the department are now alive; I have no pictures of us at informal gatherings.)

I ricochet between demoralization (how could I have been so sloppy?) and delight: From the debris emerge letters from old friends and former students I have forgotten I ever received, essays I don't remember writing, the only poems I ever wrote.

Sometime in January I stopped freaking out. Once a book has been marked for elsewhere, it ceases to trouble me; indeed, I reserve future time for future books, yet unwritten. The fat folders, stuffed cabinets, and piles of paper that once testified to a productive, busy life now register as clutter. Clear surfaces and open bookshelves calm my spirit.

It's OK to be a historical artifact. The bare shelves and empty drawers of 117 Schaeffer Hall await my successor. May there be joy in filling them. ■

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JUSTIN RENTERIA FOR THE CHRONICLE REVIEW