

## Review

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Nancy Mackay. *Curating Oral Histories: From Interview to Transcript*. Walnut Creek, California: Left Coast Press, 2007. ISBN: 978-1-59874-057-8.

While Nancy Mackay's *Curating Oral History: From Interview to Archive* seems like it may be yet another addition to the already plethoric library of oral history "how to" guides out there, it establishes itself in a significantly unique position by turning its focus towards the stages of oral history collection normally forgotten within the genre. While those wishing to pilot new projects and dive into the recording process have the luxury of drawing on a wide range of written and digital resources, Mackay's book turns itself towards the often excluded audience of librarians and archivists who must deal with oral history recordings as complete and finite collections.

Mackay's choice of title is deliberate; she has worked to provide a written toolkit for those who must "curate" oral history collections, acknowledging that, for many librarians and archivists, recorded interviews present a number of curiously unique exceptions to typical modes of practice. Mackay's work stems from her career as both a librarian and an oral historian, throughout which she noticed there was little discourse surrounding practice when it came to "bridging the gap between conducting oral histories and caring for them" (7). As such, she conducted a world-wide survey among a range of oral history repositories in hopes of getting a clearer picture of the ways in which librarians and archivists manage their collections. By compiling her responses and working closely with several archives, Mackay has written a clear and concise handbook which aims at bridging this gap.

In addition to creating a generally solid point of reference for those dealing with oral history records, Mackay has also created a sort of "workbook" which provides self-assessment tools aimed at empowering archivists to evaluate their situation and make informed decisions regarding the management of their collections. This "self-study" aspect of the book proves especially useful in the chapters which discuss archival administration and legal issues. By clearly laying out current codes of practice alongside appendixes which provide example collection policies as well as sample documents and forms, Mackay delivers a tool kit which makes the seemingly enormous task of organizing a collection accessible to those who work in the field.

Furthermore, Mackay assists her readers through the self study process by identifying a hierarchy of importance within the field of practice. This assists readers in assessing their ability to manage collections from a critical and, more importantly, realistic standpoint. While every archivist and librarian must aim towards what is considered to be "best practice," Mackay's book contextualizes that goal within the very real constraints of resources and legal

restrictions. She is encouraging to those who may be overwhelmed by the task of establishing or overhauling an archive, but also acknowledges that there are limits to our abilities and clearly denotes the various points at which her reader should consult experts or approach larger, more established institutions. This approach provides useful but non-prescriptive, practical guidance from which oral history curators can draw when developing their own policies of practice.

From a theoretical standpoint, Mackay's book does not overtly engage the on-going critical debates surrounding oral history practice which authors such as Valerie Yow and Paul Thompson employ in their how-to guides; however, in cases where theory presents contentious issues over practice, Mackay does a remarkable job of summarizing debates and making these issues accessible. Most notably, Mackay provides a clear and concise summary of current debates on transcriptions, by laying out the pros and cons of having interviews transcribed as well as tracing how changes in recording technology have altered our need for transcripts over time.

Mackay also handles the issue of ethics in an accessible manner.

*Curating Oral Histories* highlights a number of ethical issues that practitioners must contend with, from monitoring content within collections, to the often sensitive questions which surround controlling the use of archival materials. In addition to the well summarized debates, Mackay's work is peppered with quotes and theoretical tidbits which introduce the reader to significant works and authors who are established within the field of oral history. Her use of occasional quotes from authors such as Michael Frisch, Alessandro Portelli, and William Schneider provide a strong context for her work, while also serving as intellectual stepping stones for readers who have further interest in oral history discourse.

*Curating Oral Histories* strongly acknowledges that resource restraints have a large impact on archival work. As such, organizational and resource factors are ranked highest within Mackay's "self study" assessment. This advice is very helpful, but, perhaps as an extension of her work in surveying oral history libraries and archives, Mackay could have provided further details on budgets and funding. Alongside evidence of general operations and practices of the various international archives who worked closely with Mackay, it would be useful to see a summary of how these archives operate financially as well as specific advice on managing and securing financial resources. How do different archives manage their budgets? What bodies offer funding for the post-project life of oral history? Answers to these questions could have been paired with appendices which give examples of funding policies and applications which could further assist those ambitious oral history curators who seek to expand their budgets.

Although the book is explicitly aimed at those who deal with the post-project life of recordings, Mackay's clear and thorough approach provides certain value to those involved in all aspects of the field of oral history, not least because it encourages those who do oral history to think about the bigger picture so that our recording projects can be preserved as accessible and

relevant archival collections. Mackay's work also provides a highly extensive glossary of terms and appendix of resources which are relevant to all aspects of oral history work. Whether your work in oral history is based in grassroots community projects or highly academic research, Mackay's accessible yet critical approach will certainly prove valuable to your practice.