

Tryptich: Death, AI, and Librarianship

R. David Lankes, with Jain Orr and Qianzi Cao. *Tryptich: Death, AI, and Librarianship*. Independently published, 2025. 97pp. \$17.99. Paperback. 9798286706198.

R. David Lankes' *Tryptich: Death, AI, and Librarianship* is a short treatise of three lectures that build upon each other to present a common manifesto for librarianship as a vocation, both within and beyond the confines of professional and institutional structures.

Lankes' is the Virginia and Charles Bowden Professor of Librarianship at the University of Texas Austin and is well-known in the library science literature for developing the idea of *new librarianship* over the past decade and a half. In earlier works such as *The Atlas of New Librarianship* (MIT Press 2011) and *The New Librarianship Field Guide* (MIT Press 2016), Lankes has introduced an approach to librarianship that prioritizes a mission of community-centered knowledge creation and radical social change. This agenda has been developed further in various symposia and is reflected in the wider library literature through venues such as the *Journal of New Librarianship*. The present volume is a continuation of the new librarianship project, developing Lankes's work in ways that speak especially (though not exclusively) to the political and social context of the first and second Trump administrations in the United States, as well as to new technologies such as generative artificial intelligence.

The first lecture of the volume makes a bold claim that libraries do not merely serve communities, they save them. Lankes is not speaking figuratively here; the chapter begins with the statement, "I am here to implore you to join the mission of saving lives" (14). The life-threatening scenario that Lankes identifies is one of social isolation leading to deaths of despair. Within a societal context that has been hollowed out by exclusivist politics and distrust, libraries function as necessary social infrastructure for providing equitable access to ideas that challenge the status quo. Lankes sees this important role as under threat from banning and censoring efforts masquerading as appeals to parental rights and library neutrality.

The second lecture discusses the necessity of library adaptation in the face of post-industrial society and the rise of artificial intelligence. This adaptation is framed in terms of the objective of joy as a value that the library brings to community. Libraries are spaces of storytelling that can bridge societal rifts and isolation. Lankes sees technologies such as artificial intelligence and industrial approaches to knowledge organization as having "two faces," one that is more problematic and one that offers possibilities for librarians to fulfill their vocation. For example, Lankes envisions "hyper-local" confirmation of AI output as an opportunity to protect and develop local knowledge.

The third and final lecture turns from the problems and possibilities of community to the identity of librarians themselves. Lankes argues for a symbiotic relationship between professional and "feral" librarians, arguing that librarianship is defined by its mission rather than by its institutional credentials. He distinguishes between "librarians by education," who have received credentials from an iSchool or other library program, "librarians by title," who have taken on librarian roles within organizations, and "librarians by spirit," who carry out the mission of librarianship whether or not they are affiliated with professional librarianship or have librarian training credentials. Lankes offers a case study of Dutch library practices to show how the mission of librarianship can be reconceived beyond traditional boundaries of professionalization (55-56). Library degrees were phased out of the Netherlands in the 1990s, and while this has led at times to a lack of consensus on who is a "real"

librarian, it presents a possibility for reimagining what library organizations can look like, with or without official librarians at the helm.

This volume is a thought-provoking read and speaks to the present moment in American librarianship and public life, as well as to some contrasting European examples. It exercises the virtue of brevity and can be recommended as a conversation starter for those interested in the societal impact of libraries or the state of the profession. It is, however, often long on passionate slogans and short on details or analysis. Readers who seek a detailed understanding of the effect of AI on the creativity or literacy of its users, its impact on metadata generation, or the ethical implications of AI regarding authorship or intellectual property will not find very much information in this book.

Detailed analysis is perhaps not the book's purpose, but throughout it engages in bold imperative statements: "We must infuse optimism through action" (53), "We must act locally and share, share, share" (also 53), and "We must insist on networks of ideas and conversation instead of standards and functions" (again, 53). Similarly, it asserts, "We, as a profession, need to see the large complex world we work in" (62). The heft of these statements is reduced when they are presented in quick succession and without more than a paragraph of exposition.

It seems important for Lankes that the stakes of librarianship be set very high: in the first lecture they are literally a matter of life and death. This amplification is achieved by an appeal to a poly-crisis, although Lankes doesn't use this theoretical term: AI, as well as the climate crisis, as well as social isolation and the commodification of information systems, etc., all converge to create a crisis that is more dire than the sum of its parts. This diagnosis of the seriousness of the problem(s) is probably correct, but when libraries of all institutions are put in the center of salvific efforts, the manifesto seems exaggerated. This approach also belies his statements on page 38 and elsewhere that Tryptich's call to action is not meant to buy into the allure of vocational awe criticized in Fobazi Ettarh's important article.

Most helpful (perhaps because most concrete and specific) were Lankes's discussions of library credentialing, which were present in all three lectures and especially in the third. Lankes makes a convincing case for the unity amidst diversity of the Information School curriculum (29) and spells out the stark legal challenges to ALA accreditation at the state level (63-66). Not all readers will agree with Lankes's conclusions about welcoming non-credentialed librarians to the fold as a new normal, and it is worth asking whether this plays into strategies of de-professionalization that are tied to neoliberal austerity measures in academia. But here Lankes identifies the current crisis of professionalization and faces it squarely. Discussions about necessary adaptations of the profession and professional training will be increasingly necessary in the next decade as both academic and public libraries face demographic and political pressures.

A note on the authorship of this book is worth making. R. David Lankes is the primary author of the text, is attributed as such, and speaks throughout in the first person and in a conversational tone. Artificial intelligence has been employed for some purposes, and Lankes provides a useful acknowledgement in the front matter that can be a model for future authors using AI tools. The book also recognizes Jain Orr and Qianzi Cao. Orr has authored a postscript criticizing the concept of a "loneliness epidemic" that complements the first lecture well. It is unfortunately unclear, however, what role Cao plays in the volume, although Orr and Cao are singled out for their feedback in the Acknowledgements section.

While I have raised certain criticisms of this volume, it is easily recommendable as an accessible and conversational account of societal troubles and library responses in the current political moment.

The book does not often follow through with a very thorough analysis of these issues, but it poses them boldly, and this in itself can be helpful.

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