

*Librarianship and Human Rights: A Twenty-First Century Guide*, by Toni Samek. Oxford: Chandos Publishing, 2007.

*Reviewed by John Buschman*

(Truth in reviewing note: the Progressive Librarians Guild (PLG) and three members of the PLG Coordinating Committee – including me – are thanked or cited positively as examples of critical librarianship.)

Perhaps it is my own recent ventures into LIS theory, or perhaps it is a broader weariness with the constant collisions between the human toll from our Middle East folly with the drumbeat to “stay the course,” but this book is a refreshing change. Samek, Associate Professor in the School of Library and Information Studies at the University of Alberta, sets out not to write a scholarly book on the topic, but rather a literal guide to the issues: “this book documents social action strategies used by library and information workers worldwide to negotiate...fundamental barrier[s] in support of human rights in the face of adversity and risk” – professional risk, and well beyond. “It is time we fully recognised the political context of library and information work.” That alone should get our hearty endorsement.

Samek straightforwardly situates this work within the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), and IFLA resolutions on intellectual freedom (IF) which explicitly link IF (and its ancillary issues) as the core value of librarianship to the UDHR. Along the way, Samek sensibly situates human rights generally as lesser in magnitude than other issues – like war or global warming, and, while I might quibble about the disclaimer that human rights are not universal nor appropriate for all peoples, that is probably the more direct route into her primary purpose. The book then proceeds through “The Rhetoric” of the matter, nicely guiding us through the context – and urgency of – twenty-first century librarianship, and the moral imperatives upon the profession. Always the focus is on international contexts – not just our own North American “digital divide” to give one instance. This is a tonic, tending to break us out of our own bubble. Along the way, Samek knits together an overview of IF, human rights, information work, and various dangers like the destruction of Bosnia’s national and university library or the obstacles analyzed and critiqued by the likes of Herbert Schiller or Sandy Berman.

The heart of the book is its part two: “The Reality.” Therein Samek extensively outlines “practical strategies for social action” via extensive definition and documentation of examples. The examples run from “mass direct action” to “access to information” to “critical dialogue” to “activism, honouring of.” These tend to follow a standard format:

“Activism, honouring of”

Definition (“Activism: A doctrine or policy of advocacy energetic action.”) from the OED in this case. This is followed by a paragraph of discussion (“... often used synonymously with protest or dissent...”).

Example (a festschrift on honor of Marvin Scilken) again followed by a discussion, and the source of the information and any relevant citations or websites.

The effect is threefold: 1) the book contextualizes current critical/progressive efforts historically and internationally; 2) the book consciously forges links between these efforts historically and internationally; 3) perhaps most importantly, the book provides a kind of précis for newer librarians on exactly what critical/progressive librarianship is, how it has been and can be effective, and what they might be able to do themselves following these examples and models. Along the way Samek helpfully pulls together a great deal of relevant documentation (ALA’s resolution on the USAPATRIOT Act, the UDHR, and lists of current and past progressive librarian groups worldwide. The effect is, I must admit, energizing.

In sum, Toni Samek is to be congratulated for taking what, in our neoliberal and postmodern age, is a deeply unfashionable topic, and making it compelling, shoving the ethical and moral imperatives of our profession back in front of those who might also need it shoved elsewhere. Finally, any mamby-pamby talk at ALA, on listservs, or by conservative “librarians” about what is and isn’t a “library” issue needs to account for Samek’s argument. ALA and IFLA aren’t veering “off course” when they engage those issues, and our “colleagues” simply want to eviscerate the concept of the responsibility of a profession from within rather than make the argument democratically within those organizations that we should not be concerned about the contexts in which cultural memory institutions operate. Tell them to read Samek before they say another word.