I found it interesting that Sanford Berman was one point of contact between these two seemingly very different books. Johnson’s book, on one level, is a thematically arranged set of anecdotes about librarians—primarily public librarians—in the US today, while Battles takes us on an epic tour of libraries from his own Widener Library at Harvard to the Alexandrian libraries, backtracking to Mesopotamia, then passing through China, various times and places in Europe and the Americas, only to end up back at Widener, musing over the LC classification number for his book. Not to be outdone by Battles’ musings on Panizzi (the systematizer), Dewey (the person) or LC (the system), Johnson devotes a chapter to a trying implementation of a new online system in her own public library consortium, and the earliest citation in her bibliography is Lubetzky’s 1953 Cataloging Rules and Their Principles.

Neither book, of course, is about cataloging or catalogers, who here happen to be common actors on two very different stages. Yet, in the end, neither book is really about what their titles or tables of contents might suggest.

Both books have in common their inception through other works. Battles’ Unquiet began with a 2000 Harper’s article (“Lost in the Stacks: the Decline and Fall of the Universal Library”) while Overdue was inspired, according to Johnson, by her prior work on obituaries (“the most engaging obit subjects were librarians” (p. 5) which inspired in her the idea that “libraries were where it was happening — wide open territory for innovators, activists and pioneers.” (p. 7)).

Johnson begins in the very real frontier town of Deadwood, South Dakota, with a description of the town’s librarian and archivist, then moves to the Second Life version of Deadwood, complete with its library, librarian and community. For the remainder of the book Johnson moves between the world of physical libraries with their buildings, books, users, boards of directors, librarians and technologists, and the virtual worlds many of these librarians inhabit (or in some cases, populate). From the two Deadwoods Johnson brings us back to her own public library, over to Rome, to New York Public Library, and twice up the road to Connecticut, with intermediary stops in descriptions of information and technology overload, Second Life, librarians’ blogs, the PATRIOT Act, archiving, and radical reference, among others. In each of her vignettes her focus is on the librarians she encountered in these journeys, and her pages give life to their stories. Yet these are not randomly selected tales: she tells us (p. 10) that her book “can be read as a journey into increasingly activist and visionary forms of library work” with her focus on, in her view, a chaotic world of information
that demands increasingly creative efforts to capture it, organize it, and navigate it. And librarians are the ones to trust these endeavors to: after all, “Civil servants and servants of civility, they had my back. They would be whatever they needed to be...information professionals, teachers, police, community organizers, computer technicians...or...guardians of my peace” (p. 252). So, in the end, and presaged from the beginning, her work is about ethos and ethics of librarianship as expressed through the librarians she highlights in her narratives of libraries and technology.

Along with the heroes, there are villains, but in many cases Johnson hedges on her initial judgments. For example, the librarians (and others) primarily responsible for the “democratization” of the research branch of the New York Public Library are lauded for their foresight and technological savvy, yet much of that chapter is devoted to describing the downsizing of the research function of the library, its special collection, and the host of special relationships created by that unique mixture of collections, librarians and users. Her conclusion? “I was an old-fashioned writer who loved the ancient books summoned via pneumatic tubes, the archives, the quiet. I had found something rare there: an inexhaustible wonder” (p. 211). Yet on the next page she continues: “But I couldn’t deny that there was something happening in the room...that thrilled me...A fresh crowd for the old library, new, alive, and up-to-date...” This is as close as Johnson comes to expressing what it is both about the traditional library she sees being displaced (sometimes) and the technology that replaces it (sometimes). It’s not merely that the old is comfortable; it provided a certain experience that she does not see replicated in any other setting. Yet she also posits that there really is no choice: if libraries, and librarians, are to flourish, the “new” has to find its place even if that qualitatively changes or removes the experiences she so dearly valued. Or...does it? The penultimate chapter posits the accidental nature of archives and archiving (real papers! letters! poetry!) before moving on to...wait for it...digital archives and the democratic functions they serve.

The only villain Johnson does not give second thoughts to is the U.S. Government. She tells in detail the experiences of the “Connecticut Four” and their principled defense of patron privacy in the face of an FBI request for patron records under the guise of the PATRIOT Act. As she notes (p. 70): “Few principles rouse librarians more than the right of free access to information and the right to privacy in our choices” and concludes, quoting a member of the librarians’ ACLU defense team, that “Congress won’t follow laws, the president won’t follow laws, the FBI won’t follow laws but we still have our librarians.”

So even though this book is story after story of librarians and technology, Johnson’s real message is that libraries are a public good and librarians are defenders of that public good. The colorful stories make great reading, but as she notes at the beginning of her tale (p. 12), “So where does one go in such a wobbly, elusive, dynamic, confusing age? Wherever the librarians and archivists are. They’re sorting it out for us.” And her
unstated conclusion is that we can trust them to do so because they are smart, creative, and adhere to a professional ethic that puts the public good out front.

Johnson’s conclusions, though, are contingent rather than absolute, and it takes grappling with Battles’ arguments to put Johnson’s remarks into perspective.

“And what the Word means to society...this is what the library enshrines” posits Battles (p. 9) in his Library: an Unquiet History. For Battles, the Word is encased in books (or their predecessors), and which books the library contains is, in the end, a measure of its creators, which, for Battles, ultimately is a measure of the culture and society of its creation (and, for most libraries in Unquiet, its destruction). The two characters on this vast cultural stage are the “Parnassan” library, the library of canonical works, the library of essential truths, and its counterpart, the accumulative, expansive “universal” library. Though these two different perspectives on the library are ever-present in this narrative, and though Battles favors one over the other, they, much like Johnson’s librarians, are stand-ins for other ideas Battles wishes to explore. Along the way Battles treats us to a selective look at notable libraries and collections within the context of the cultures that produced them, as well as the development of various “storage technologies,” from clay tablets to scrolls to inscriptions in caves to the codex, ending with a few wistful notes on the digital library along with final musings on the creation and destruction of libraries.

Destruction of libraries, for Battles, usually is not accidental but purposeful: it serves to mark the end of a culture’s reign. While some of the libraries of Alexandria certainly succumbed to fire, that fire wouldn’t have happened without the threat of invasion; in the end, the great universal libraries of Alexandria and elsewhere in the Roman empire...just...disappeared, along with its civilization, to be replaced by the far more constrained (Parnassan) libraries of medieval Europe. The great (universal) libraries of the Islamic world, too, rose along with the flourishing culture in the Middle East, and, along with that culture, succumbed to a wave of invasions. Battles documents the rich Arabic heritage of Spain, nearly completely removed by the end of the fifteenth century with the expulsion of the Moors, in parallel with the Spanish destruction of the heritage of the Aztecs (who previously had destroyed the works of their predecessors). In each of these cases, and in several others Battles documents, the destruction of the universal libraries of these cultures coincided with the decline (or overthrow) of the culture itself.

As the early universal libraries disappeared, the various Parnassan collections that replaced them do not fare well in Battles’ narrative. Access both to books and to literacy itself in the European middle ages were, in his terms, “parceled out on a ‘need to know’ basis.” Those libraries were as focused and purposeful as the access to them, and each contained only “a few venerated texts.” Battles contrasts the poverty of these libraries
(as well as the attitude toward literacy and books they embodied) with the flourishing culture and book culture of the neighboring Islamic world. It took the rise of the university and of humanism in Europe to (re-)embrace the notion that the book did not exist in isolation but was meant to be read reflectively in the presence of others. “Big libraries didn’t spring up because of the economy and efficiency of the printing press, as others would later fear; they were bound up in the appetites of dukes, and merchants, and popes for the new learning aborning in the Renaissance” (p. 72).

The central chapter of *Unquiet*, “The Battle of the Books,” is devoted to the clash between the proponents of the Parnassan and the universal libraries through Battles’ recounting of Jonathan Swift’s story (now known by the same title). In this story, it is the books themselves that quarrel; in Battle’s words (p. 104) “conflict among books is what the universal library is about. The choices are not made for the reader; the reader must do the choosing, and the books must compete for his attention.” Despite Swift’s misgivings, the universal library won out over time; indeed, the next chapter is “Books for All.” Battles goes on to document the growth of the British Library (through its role as copyright registrar) and, for the first time in his narrative, dwells on the work of a librarian: Antonio Panizzi, and, from Panizzi and the British Library, moves to the rise of the public library in England and the United States, and to the obsessive Melvil Dewey.

“Books for all” does not mean all books for all: the creators of the earliest public libraries had an agenda; in Battles’ words (p. 137) “supporters of public libraries...hoped that libraries would channel the subversive urges of the underclass traditionally denied access to cultural means” and (p. 136) “through assimilation of the powers of reason [aided by greater access to information, and] fostered by education, the masses would come to accept capitalist principles as truth.” Battles documents the significant growth of libraries in the nineteenth century along with the standardization of tools for their organization and standardization of models of service, focusing on the mixed legacy this era left us: the notion that libraries, through the work of librarians, are to “improve” the reader; systems of organization that reflect a late nineteenth-century “gentleman’s” understanding of knowledge; the professionalization of librarianship along with the subservient role of women in that profession.

“If the nineteenth century was about the building of libraries, the twentieth was about their destruction” Battles continues in his next chapter, “Knowledge on fire.” He focuses especially on the destruction of European libraries (though he chronicles many others), and, through detailed examination of selected instances, links the destruction of libraries with the attempted (and in some cases, successful) destruction of the cultures that created them. Destruction, as I noted earlier, is a recurring theme throughout this work, and in this chapter especially but presaged in others, Battles gives a forensic analysis of just what happens when a library is destroyed. He notes that, on the one hand, gathering together a multitude
of books in one place assures their collective destruction; on the other hand, he notes books don’t burn all that well by themselves, and many conflagrations leave something behind—not whole books, but burned and scarred fragments. Discarding library materials accomplishes much the same (without the burned edges), and he relates a tale of a geniza, literally, a “book tomb” in Cairo, where worn-out materials were placed—buried—out of respect for the written tradition they embodied. It is worth quoting Battles at some length here (p. 195):

So is the geniza a library? In the strict sense of the term, of course, it is not...the geniza is the library’s opposite: its contents were the things thrown out, discarded specifically for their uselessness. In a more fundamental sense, however, the geniza is a library—for libraries collect and store books for future use, and this the geniza certainly has done...it could be said that the geniza preserved its materials better than a library would have done. ...More interestingly, the fact that they were deemed valueless is precisely what makes them invaluable to us today. They convey a far more comprehensive message from their times than any vetted and authorized library collection ever could...The geniza has no ax to grind...This above all makes it the library’s opposite, [for the library] contains the buried and often contradictory impulses of the princes, philanthropists, and academicians who are its authors.

That is the heart of Battles’ discourse: by tracing the idea of the library through different cultures and centuries he shows that any library has an agenda (or, perhaps, several contradictory ones); even the universal library is, well, not as universal as its advocates might assert. Indeed, over time, the items that have the most value might be the most accidental items, the ones left rather than the ones selected (and then removed, intentionally, or through damage or decay). For this to be the case, though, Battles notes that, unlike the Parnassan collection (if it’s canonical once, it’s always canonical), in the universal collection the value and meaning of a work changes over time and in relation to the other works that surround it. He doesn’t assert that any work is meaningless or contains any meaning the reader wishes to impart; rather, each is like a diamond, casting different colors when illuminated different ways. So as much as librarians attempt to create coherent and meaningful collections, there always will be connections (in the universal library) that transcend the particulars of their time, their place, their acquisition, and even (knowledge of) their destruction.

By conflating accidental with purposeful destruction, though, Battles obscures one critical point. While it is true, perhaps trivially so, that every physical book in every library today sooner or later will be gone, whether in years, centuries or millennia, that does not necessarily imply that its contents will not be preserved in some other form (in replicas, or, more abstractly, in works inspired by the originals). Systematic destruction attempts precisely to destroy the ideas contained in those works (for me,
the most touching instances Battles describes are the libraries of the Jewish ghettos of Eastern Europe during the Holocaust, and the destruction of the Sarajevo library: both of these were attempts to destroy not only a culture but, especially in the case of Sarajevo, an idea, that of a functioning multi-ethnic society. There is little comfort in Battles’ observation that even the most vicious attempts at destruction leave something behind; for, after all, following his argument, if the meaning of a work is at least in part contingent on its dialog with the works that surround it, removing the context inevitably distorts the intended meaning of the work.

Battles ends his book back in the stacks at Harvard, musing briefly about digitization (as well as the precise classification number for his book). He ends with this contradictory set of observations (p. 213): “What we face is not a loss of books but the loss of a world...the Word shifts again in its modes, tending more and more to dwell in pixels and bits instead of paper and ink.” Yet a few sentences later: “...the very fact that the library has endured these cycles [of manifestations of the Word] seems to offer hope. In its custody of books and the words they contain, the library has confronted and tamed technology, the forces of change, and the power of princes time and again.” Well, maybe. Although his book suggests an endless cycle of death and reincarnation, note that he has spoken only of physical books (and their physical antecedents). Maybe this (cycle), too, is one of many. Battles appeals to Borges, but rather than Borges the librarian, in the context of Battles’ final remarks I would reflect on his story “The Circular Ruins.”

So which masters do librarians serve? As we substitute electronic rentals for physical, owned collections, to what extent are we complicit in a collection’s destruction? And what will remain as the bytes decay (including the operating system code, transmission protocols, software code, the code the actual work is expressed in...oh, and the equipment, too)? Johnson trusts us to be advocates for the public good; through her narrative, librarians are of the public as well as advocates for the public and servants of the public. In Unquiet History, librarians, when they finally do show up in the narrative, often are portrayed as oppressors rather than servants or liberators. We may believe our universal libraries are indeed more inclusive and less utilitarian than the nineteenth-century libraries Battles describes (critiques of Berman and others about what is missing from our collections notwithstanding). Battles, however, notes that the fate of libraries (as well as the idea of the library itself) is intertwined with both the Word and its manifestation. Neither the choice of medium nor choice of message is value-independent: what are our choices, and which values do they reflect? The ALA Code of Ethics tells us that our collections should represent “all points of view,” but what good does this do as their manifestations vanish? Perhaps we also should think in terms of “all manners of expression.” This might be hedging our bets: according to Battle, it’s all dust, sooner or later, but at least we would have a little more success in passing along our desire for the universal library that is created and preserved with more intention than accident.