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The Department of Rare Books and Special Collections

By Eva Jurczyk. Naperville, IL.: Poisoned Pen Press, 2022. 336 pages. Softcover [also hardcover]. \$16.99 ISBN-13 978-1-7282-3859-3.

Reviewed by Caryn Radick, Rutgers University

Eva Jurczyk's debut novel, *The Department of Rare Books and Special Collections*, is the second mystery I've read in the past year that takes place in the world of rare books and archives. (The other is Rex Pickett's *The Archivist*,¹ which—full disclosure—I wrote a jacket blurb for.) The question arises: why set a mystery novel in the world of archives and rare books? In truth, both Jurczyk and Pickett hit upon what archivists and rare books librarians, particularly those who work in academic settings, have known for a while: between the politics, bureaucracy, and hierarchies of university culture—not to mention the locked-away, “behind closed doors” atmosphere and the promise of arcane secrets to be found in rare and unique materials—a lot goes on beneath the surface. Whereas outsiders might only think about how cool it must be to work at a library that has a famous author's papers or a Gutenberg Bible, librarians and archivists know the backstories and histories that come with holding such treasures.

As one of *The Department's* characters points out, librarians' “entire job is finding information” (p. 79), which makes librarians and archivists natural sleuths. Whether untangling a thorny reference problem or troubleshooting an unexpected complication in a project, I've often thought of myself as a detective of sorts. If the world of libraries and archives is a world of information, it's no surprise that it can also serve as the backdrop for a mystery.

The Department of Rare Books and Special Collections in Jurczyk's book is based at a Toronto university. The story takes place in 2009, but in many ways, the library still operates as if it were the mid-twentieth century: the director's office smells like cigars even though smoking has been banned for decades; sexism is entrenched; and the librarians have a gatekeeping, snobby attitude about who should be able to access their materials—even early career “pre-tenure” researchers are looked on with “disdain” (p. 49). The director, the “venerable Christopher Wolfe” (p. 2), is a superstar and great man in the rare books world who has been at the helm of the department for forty years. As *The Department* opens, Christopher has suffered a stroke and is lying unconscious in a hospital bed. Leisl Weiss, his assistant director, has been called back from her sabbatical to step into his very big shoes.

¹ Rex Pickett, *The Archivist* (Ashland, OR: Blackstone Publishing, 2021).

Liesl's first task is to wrangle a donor event that was supposed to feature the library's latest acquisition, the multivolume Plantin Polyglot Bible. The Plantin is the envy of the rare book world. Everyone wanted it when it came up at an auction, and Christopher re-cemented his stature by acquiring it for his institution thanks to his ability to scare off other potential bidders. The only problem is that the Plantin is secured in the safe in Christopher's office, and he could never be bothered with practical details such as ensuring someone else also had the combination. To mollify donors and the college president, Liesl substitutes another rare treasure, a mathematical work in Sanskrit with the first known use of zero, for everyone to salivate over (but hopefully not spill wine on—there's a lot of wine!). Liesl's relief at averting one crisis quickly dissipates when another much larger and uglier one arises. As it turns out, the Plantin isn't in Christopher's safe, and Liesl has a stomach-dropping realization that it could be anywhere. Soon, a member of the department goes missing and other treasures of the collection disappear as well, forcing Liesl to contend with the fact that she may not know her colleagues as well as she thought.

Liesl's search to find the Plantin is hindered by administrative pressures and by colleagues who want her to locate the book without letting anyone know it's missing. It's both implied and stated outright by Liesl's male coworkers that her desire to call the police speaks to why she doesn't deserve to be the acting director: they see her as lacking their imagination and great vision, and as willing to risk the department's reputation. In fact, Liesl's second-in-command status is based not so much on her being a giant in the rare books world as it is on her role as the employee who does the administrative paperwork and takes care of practical matters that Christopher felt were beneath him, such as ensuring the combination to the safe was accessible. She notes that "I was promoted over Francis because I'm better than him at schedules and budgets and tax fillings and all the things that the leader of this place has to do but Christopher didn't want to bother with" (p. 184).

Jurczyk herself is a librarian at the University of Toronto and worked in its rare books library as a graduate student. In a "Conversation with the Author" section of the book, Jurczyk notes that she thought her time working at the rare books library was "one of the coolest experiences of my life" (p. 321), noting the fascinating stories of the people who worked there. No doubt, even outside the rare book setting, her experience in librarianship impacted her descriptions of interactions with faculty and university administrators. The book also shows Jurczyk's understanding of the delicate nature of donor relations, and the sense of awe and reverence certain books can inspire. Her depiction of how a librarian or archivist would approach finding a missing item is spot on. Liesl first assumes the book must be in Christopher's office; when she does not find it there, she then believes it must be somewhere on-site or (perhaps) accidentally mis-shelved. She knows that a book can easily be "lost" in the library if it's put in the wrong spot. This is reflected in Liesl's contemplation of how the books are stored in the basement, an area no researcher sees.

The basements were only for the ones who knew. From inside each book popped a tiny flag on acid-free card stock where someone had typed each book's call number. . . . Someone sticks the wrong flag into the wrong book . . . or slides a book next to the wrong neighbor, and it might be years before someone realized the mistake. They might never realize (p. 42).

When Liesl eventually understands that the Plantin has not been mislocated, she knows whoever took it did so in a passion for possession, not out of greed. She knows one of her colleagues is most likely the culprit, forcing her to question the true motives of everyone she's worked with at the department, even those she'd rather not suspect.

As someone who works in a university special collections with rare books and archives, I recognized and winced at the characters and situations depicted in *The Department*. The privilege, elitism, territoriality, and entrenched and casual sexism the characters display indeed exist in the rare books and archives field. Liesl's feelings of impostor syndrome in holding her department's top role also resonated. Some of the characters' interactions made me smile, such as Liesl's encounters with a worker who quickly cites department and union policies and regulations when she asks him for assistance.

However, the characters and story do reflect some tropes and stereotypes of the library and archives profession. The men tend toward the fastidious and needing to assert alpha-male dominance by lauding their own expertise in the obscure. Liesl's only female coworker is a cardigan-wearing, painfully shy, Emily Dickinson-spouting bundle of nerves who just feels so darn "lucky" to have been selected to work with the books. And although dust is a reality of life, I found myself aggrievedly wanting to count how many times "dusty" was used. I wasn't sure what to make of these tropes, which stood out and took away from the believability of these characters. They added a note of dissonance for me as I wondered why Jurczyk relied on them to tell this story, particularly given her admiration of the rare books librarians she knew. However, a key theme in the story was the discussion of who should lead the library into the future, to signal progress and change. Perhaps these stock characters were included to show what libraries needed to shift away from in order to move into the twenty-first century.

Rare books were also unquestionably the stars of this book, and Jurczyk only included tangential references to the work of processing manuscript collections (e.g., when she described gray archival boxes and acid-free folders). Although I don't see the exclusion of "box and folder" processing as a fault, an archivist picking up this book might be surprised to realize that it rarely depicts archival work. Of course, that might be preferable, as it can be hard to escape into fiction that gets into the nuts and bolts of one's day job.

Even so, I recommend *The Department of Rare Books and Special Collections* to archives and library colleagues for the enjoyment of seeing aspects of their work

portrayed in a fictional setting, with the caveat that their nods and smiles might be accompanied by some eye rolls. General audiences will enjoy it as well—it's entertaining, and Jurczyk serves as an engaging tour guide, deftly navigating the reader through the world of rare books and special collections.