Placing Papers: The American Literary Archives Market


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Placing Papers: The American Literary Archives Market by Amy Hildreth Chen explores the competitive marketplace of literary archives, which document the lives and work of authors. These papers have become a multimillion-dollar industry, predominantly driven by US research universities. Chen delves into the history, evolution, and significance of these archives, detailing their role in academic archives and special collections. She explains how American universities began actively acquiring writers’ papers in the 1950s as their accessibility and affordability presented a perfect option for graduate student research. Chen highlights the University of Texas at Austin’s Harry Ransom Center and the Yale University Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library as examples of institutions that developed successful, aggressive, and well-funded collection strategies for acquiring authors’ papers.

Chen uses the seventh edition of The Norton Anthology of American Literature to locate authors’ collections and describe the processes and funds needed to place these collections in institutions. Additionally, she employs The Norton Anthology of American Literature to uncover trends in collections, such as the dominance of white male writers and the slow acquisition of women writers and writers of color.

Archivists are often overlooked in academic discussions concerning archives, yet Chen, an independent scholar, devotes an entire chapter to archivists. She emphasizes the importance of archivists’ intellectual labor in managing and documenting literary archives and asserts that archivists’ work is crucial for allowing researcher discovery and scholarship. Chen urges scholars to acknowledge archivists’ professional labor and stresses the importance of consistently crediting them in finding aids to ensure due recognition and citation for their valuable contributions.

The book concludes by examining the “Matthew effect” in the literary archives market. The “Matthew effect” can most easily be described as the concept that those who start ahead, stay ahead. This means top institutions continue to thrive while others struggle due to rising prices for writers’ papers. With dwindling financial resources for institutions to engage in the marketplace, the curation of literary archives may lean toward representing the collecting preferences of a select few, potentially overshadowing an author’s true impact and contributions to the literary field.
Placing Papers provides a thorough exploration of the American literary archives market, making it an essential resource for those with a keen interest in these distinctive collections.