The Special Collections Handbook

Alison Cullingford’s *The Special Collections Handbook*, third edition, provides an overview of special collections librarianship and introduces readers to key practices and concepts in the field. Although I have not read the book's first two editions (published in 2011 and 2016, respectively), Cullingford indicates that she updated this edition to reflect the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on collections care, maintenance, labor, and access.

The book begins by describing the types of materials found in special collections. Other topics include acquisitions, cataloging and archival description, storage and preservation (including digital content), digitization and digital collections, and user services (including exhibits and instruction). Depending on the breadth of your skills, experiences, and institutional resources, this book can be very useful in understanding the care and maintenance required for special collection materials and repositories.

This is a nifty guide if you are interested in pursuing an MSLIS, are currently enrolled in an MLIS program, are relatively new to the information/special collections field, or suddenly find yourself working in or managing an area in which you have little or no experience. Cullingford not only addresses basic tasks like cataloging, user services, and digitization but also areas of collections care and maintenance most often overseen by managers or directors, such as emergency and disaster planning, managing special collections staff, physical space planning, and budgeting and fundraising. Many chapters begin with a section on terminology, key concepts, and standards, and all chapters end with “useful websites” and “further reading” sections. Cullingford is British and thus, information and resources throughout the book skew slightly toward British standards and practices (such as a brief section on legal deposit laws), though she is careful to provide US resources throughout the book.

As for readers working in archives, solo archivists and staff might find this book useful as it gives a solid overview of tasks that they might find themselves responsible for, such as curating exhibits, conservation, digital preservation, digitization, policy writing, and other areas for which larger institutions might
designate entire positions or departments. However, since Cullingford does not emphasize working specifically with archival records, much of this book will not be applicable to readers wanting an in-depth guide on preserving, accessioning, arranging, describing, or providing access to archival records.

Also, because each section only provides a brief overview of the topic and does not go into much detail, the sections do not flow well. The book would have been more digestible if it had been organized by material type (e.g., books, manuscripts, oral histories, ephemera, digital files) and then by practice (e.g., acquisition, storage, preservation, description, access, use). I believe this would help readers find specific information. For example, the chapter “Acquiring and Developing Special Collections” has sections on managing oral histories and managing remote storage. If I wanted to learn about either oral histories or storage, I am not sure I would look in this chapter. There is also a brief section on mental health in the workplace in “Legal and Ethical Issues in Special Collections,” but this chapter mostly covers copyright. Luckily, the handbook is indexed for easy retrieval. Without the index, I do not think I would have found those small sections tucked into (potentially) unintuitive chapters.

I recommend this handbook to anyone interested in the field of special collections or archives, or to those who seek to brush up on basic foundations of the field. If you are seasoned in the field and looking for a read that provides new ideas or larger theories of archival practice, I would find something else. Given that it is a handbook, however, *The Special Collections Handbook* succeeds at what it is meant to do—orient the reader to key concepts of special collections librarianship and provide additional resources for further study.