

texts for easy reference and to create something we can recognize as a catalogue. Greece, where literacy was far more widespread, saw the first signs of an economy of book (that is to say, scroll) distribution, which allowed individuals such as Aristotle to amass private collections of high repute. Ancient Egypt probably had libraries—but with the contents on papyrus.

The great library at Alexandria, the first to be both truly comprehensive and open to a large scholarly public, was also the first to practice alphabetization and to have a complete shelf list, the famed *Pinakes* that listed and described every work of Greek literature. The *Pinakes* perished along with the rest of the library in the still mysterious catastrophe that ended its existence. (Weighing in on this longstanding conundrum, Casson says the library was probably burned not by Julius Caesar but by the forces of the Roman emperor Aurelian as they put down a rebellion around A.D. 270.)

Casson's story continues through Rome, which contributed the innovation of non-scholarly public libraries for leisure reading, and up to the rise of Christianity, which helped spread use of the parchment codex (the ancient equivalent of a book)—probably because it was free of the scroll's cultural and religious associations. Throughout, the tale is told in upbeat tones. But its feel is bittersweet, a story of progress in the preservation of human knowledge set against a backdrop of constant loss.

—AMY SCHWARTZ

DOUBLE FOLD:

Libraries and the Assault on Paper.

By Nicholson Baker. Random House.

384 pp. \$25.95

Baker, best known as a novelist, has a new obsession. Previous obsessions have included John Updike (*U and I*) and sex (*Vox*, *The Fermata*). *Vox*, of course, is the *Moby Dick* of phone-sex narratives, the book Monica gave Bill so that he'd get the idea; *The Fermata*, duller but longer, is no one's idea of a gift. What's got Baker heated up these days is, of all things, the misbehavior of the nation's librarians. No, not *that* kind of misbehavior, but rather the librarians' complicity in a decades-long conspiracy to rid themselves of a good portion of the stuff that so complicates their lives: those space-hungry books, newspapers, and periodicals.

In *Double Fold* (the term refers to a way of testing the durability of a page), Baker argues, with a master rhetorician's tricks and a clever lawyer's selective regard for facts, that our great research libraries, led by the Library of Congress, have betrayed the cultural heritage they were supposed to guard. And what is the implement of their treason? The microfilm camera. The libraries have transferred to film—brutally and imperfectly, in Baker's version—the contents of hundreds of thousands of books and newspapers and destroyed the originals in the process, or discarded them subsequently, on the grounds that they were no longer required. (The destructive procedures he rails against, by the way, are no longer the preservation standard.) The justification for the filming was the inexorable workings of chemistry: The acidic content of paper produced in America throughout much of the 19th and 20th centuries has doomed it to inevitable darkening and weakening.

What's in dispute is just how weak, and therefore how useless, the printed materials will eventually become. Baker challenges the scientific evidence that persuaded the librarians, though he cannot dismiss what is plain to anyone who has ever left a newspaper too long in the light, or even in the dark. Baker discredits the microfilming process too, but how hard is that? Who in his right mind has a good word to say about using microfilm, which ranks as a form of torture with economy-class air travel or reading *The Fermata*?

There's no denying Baker's charge that we're the poorer for having destroyed the original copies of books and newspapers that represent—often uniquely—aspects of the nation's historical temperament; the microfilm versions are no adequate replacement but a mere grim expedient. Of course, we're a lot poorer for the loss of most of Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles too, but life goes on. The world's a destructive place, and to pretend otherwise, to insist, as Baker is disposed to insist, that we save every scrap of original printed matter—book, magazine, flier, inscribed Post-It—because you never know what the future may decide was significant about the past, is to be blind not just to economics but to reality.

So is half the truth better than none? Not when the result is a deceptive half-truth. What's shameful about *Double Fold* is its systematic dis-

tortion of motive—its attribution of malice or madness or, at best, massive ignorance to individuals who acted in good faith and, indeed, out of a sense of obligation that, if they did not do something, chemical decay would take from the world a significant chunk of the materials they were charged to protect. Librarians saw no option but to film. Should they have moved the materials instead to ideal storage conditions (salt mines, Himalayan caves) and kept them forever from light and thumbs, inaccessible but intact? Perhaps Baker is just too thoroughly a novelist. Led astray by imagination, he can't help but make fiction.

—JAMES MORRIS

COMIC BOOK NATION:
The Transformation of Youth Culture in America.

By Bradford W. Wright. Johns Hopkins Univ. Press. 336 pp. \$34.95

A mainstay of popular culture for over 70 years, comic books have at times been as controversial as they've been common. They've been piled and torched in schoolyards as a "violent stimulant" to the young, and Superman himself, that quintessential dogooder, has been denounced as a Nietzschean, Nazi-like figure. Wright, who teaches history at the University of Maryland, treats the genre seriously without slighting what makes it fun.

Through an extensive reading of surviving comics from the 1930s to today, Wright shows how they closely followed, and even presaged, major trends. During the depression, Superman and Green Lantern fought corporate greed, for example, and Captain America took a punch at Hitler well before the United States entered the war. It's not surprising that comics of the era appealed to many adults. Indeed, a 1945 study found that roughly half the population read comic books.

Comics lost most of their adult audience after the

Korean War, when publishers began targeting a distinctive youth market. They achieved their greatest commercial success by demolishing the complacent myths of Cold War America. Horror and crime comics, some of them lurid even by today's standards, soon were condemned by concerned parents, pundits, and politicians, who, with scant evidence, blamed the images for a rise in juvenile delinquency. With Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) and subsequent U.S. Senate hearings, comics briefly became the most pilloried mass medium. "Not even the Communist conspiracy," one senator declared, "could devise a more effective way to demoralize, disrupt, confuse, and destroy our future citizens."

The controversy subsided when the industry adopted a self-censorship code in 1956, and the debate over possible causes of delinquency switched to movies, television, and rock music, which had followed comics' lead in catering to teens. Instead of helping define the rebellious youth culture, comics largely restricted themselves to a preadolescent niche for the next decade. The self-censorship slowly abated, starting with Marvel Comics' pitch to adolescent angst in such comics as *The Amazing Spider-Man* and *The X-Men* in the 1960s. In the 1970s came comics' resurgent attention to social issues, and in the 1980s the violent realism of so-called graphic novels.

Even so, comic books haven't been prominent in recent controversies over misguided youth—simply because much of the teen audience has shifted to movies, the Internet, and video games. The audience didn't move on because comics "failed to keep up with changes in American culture," Wright maintains, but rather because "American culture has finally caught up" with comics in its devotion to the "perpetuation of adolescence." For better or worse, we truly have become a comic book nation.

—ROBERT J. YULE



Along with Batman and Spider-Man, the X-Men became the most popular superheroes of the 1980s and '90s.