Jean Preer, Professor at the Indiana University School of Library and Information Science, Indianapolis, has written a book that addresses how library professionals should navigate the immense amount of ethical issues that the always-changing library environment brings to reality. Or, as Professor Preer puts it in her introduction, the book aims “to provide an ethical framework that will remain constant while we subject our values to constant scrutiny, reexamination, and reformulation” (xiv). A book like this should not and cannot provide definitive answers to the questions it raises. Indeed its purpose should be to raise as wide a range of questions and problematic scenarios as possible in order to prepare students and professionals for the sorts of issues that will call out for address in the, at times, perplexingly diverse landscape of the modern library. And Professor Preer achieves this goal while consistently including historical information on libraries and the progression of their stances on ethics to explain how we have come to where we are. This “historical” aspect of the book is particularly engaging. In addition to an MLS, Preer holds a JD and a PhD in American Civilization, and her threefold and deep knowledge of librarianship, law, and American culture enables her to weave case studies on informational-ethical issues since the founding of the American Library Association in 1876, as well as perspectives on America’s fluctuating attitudes toward race, class, and censorship, into her study of today’s libraries and the contemporary ethical concerns they face. Ten distinct “codes of ethics,” from the ALA’s first “Code of Ethics for Librarians” formulated in 1938 to “A Librarian’s 2.0 Manifesto” published in 2006, are included in an appendix, and an extensive bibliography of titles for further reading, broken down into subjects such as “Identity,” “Access,” “Conflicts” and “Confidentiality,” make Library Ethics a compelling and, especially for instructors, useful book.

Professor Preer begins her investigation by discussing the motivation for the founding of ethical guidelines for libraries in the late nineteenth century. The motivation was grounded as much in practical concerns for the career of librarianship as it was in the desire to ensure that libraries provided quality service to all of its constituents. The sudden expansion of libraries under Andrew Carnegie gave librarianship a scope large enough to be considered a proper “profession,” but the limited range of the library’s functions and presence prior to the push to make it an institution open to the general public had not forced librarians to codify their missions, obligations, and ethical positions. For librarians to be initiated into the world of “professionals,” creating and practicing a general system of ethics specific to their activities was necessary. By 1903, ethics codes had begun to be proposed by librarians.

The establishment of librarianship as a profession via the declaration of an ethics code leads to the problem of identifying who in fact belongs to the profession; i.e.,
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is there a difference between a librarian and someone who works in a library? If there is a difference, are there to be different expectations for librarians and library workers when it comes to upholding the library’s ethics code? As elsewhere, Preer is good here in noting the problematic differences between librarianship and other professions: in, for example, medicine and law, there is no dispute over who is and who is not a doctor or a lawyer, respectively, because these industries enforce strict rules of accreditation for entry into the professions. Similar criteria for such entry is necessarily absent from the world of libraries, due to the multitude of services libraries offer that require the participation of staff with widely varying areas of expertise. In other words, what would the accreditation process look like for the general title of “Librarian” when the title might refer to catalogers, subject specialists, database managers, preservationists, and so on? More to the point, which of these many distinct types of library staff are in a position to enforce the ethical guidelines formulated for the library? As with other questions prompted by the book, Preer has reached her own conclusions (“Whether professional librarians, trustees, or support staff, all who work in and for the library must be aware of and uphold its ethical obligations”), but she does not allow them to dampen her readers’ own considerations and experience of the issue at hand (35).

From these foundational events, Preer conducts a highly informed survey of the areas most germane to the library’s (and specialized libraries’: health, law, public, research, for example) formulation of ethical guidelines. Chapters are devoted to the new formats and types of information that the Internet has brought to bear on libraries, and past practices of integrating new formats into collections; the ethical questions that money, gifts, politics, and conflicts of employment bring to the librarian’s table; and the extent to which librarians are obliged to keep the information needs of patrons private and confidential. As might be expected of someone with Professor Preer’s legal background, the sections of Library Ethics dealing with censorship are adroit and illuminating. They detail the evolution throughout the twentieth century of the different standards by which a work could be considered obscene, discuss the range of impulses that may instigate a person or community’s labeling of a work as inappropriate for collection by a library, and offer a lucid distinction between acts of selection and censorship. To complement these chapters’ comprehensive and clear explanations of difficult and sometimes long-past (though relevant) ideas and controversies, Preer injects into the text series of bullet-point questions and statements of provocation after major topics have been analyzed. These serve to reinforce the main foci of the subjects being treated, and will be extremely helpful to teachers looking to introduce the book’s topics in classroom discussions and assignments.

In light of its strengths, Library Ethics has shortcomings, and two of the most serious are also unfortunately inevitable. Chapter 3, on library users, is the closest the book comes to being perfunctory, bringing up many good questions about the populations that different types of libraries are beholden to and offering the fewest points of guidance for their answering. A minute’s reflection however reveals that an approach superior to Preer’s would be difficult to discover: tackling the subject
demographically, for instance, would result in an impractical voluminousness, and whatever conclusions might be reached through this method would likely be outdated, thanks to the pace of change in today’s libraries, soon after if not before the book saw publication. Secondly, and more generally, one wishes that Library Ethics were twice its length. At under 300 pages, Professor Preer’s book is forced to set more conventional observations on an equal footing with ideas and occurrences that could be fascinatingly amplified. For example, the 1933 censorship trial of James Joyce’s Ulysses, “in which the book itself was the defendant,” receives barely a paragraph of mention (85). Though it has been written upon at length elsewhere, this obscenity trial, and other issues like it, would make for the subject of very valuable reading were Professor Preer to make an extended commentary. These are not, though, criticisms of the book Professor Preer has written, but imaginings of other books she could write, and write intriguingly. For its purpose, Library Ethics succeeds admirably.

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