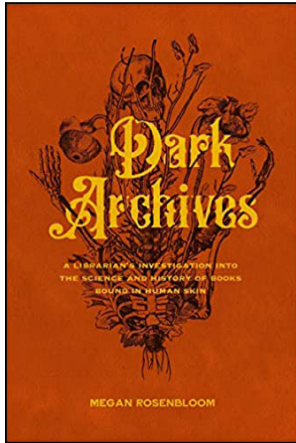


## Book Reviews



**Megan Rosenbloom.** *Dark Archives: A Librarian's Investigation into the Science and History of Books Bound in Human Skin*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020. 288p. Cloth, \$26.00 (ISBN: 978-0-374-13470-9).



*Dark Archives: A Librarian's Investigation into the Science and History of Books Bound in Human Skin* begins with a flashback, transporting readers to the exhibit halls of the Mütter Museum of The College of Physicians of Philadelphia, legendary home of historical objects of medical oddity, scandal, and intrigue. It was here, author Megan Rosenbloom recalls, that she first encountered books donated by Dr. Joseph Leidy and Dr. John Stockton Hough, visually nondescript yet captivating, because their covers were purportedly made using human epidermis. In 2015, after scientists Dr. Richard Hark and Dr. Daniel Kirby sampled and tested tiny bits of Leidy's and Hough's books, the Museum announced they had incontrovertible proof: the bookbindings were anthropodermic—bound in human skin. Rosenbloom, a self-declared “death-positive” journalist

and librarian, joined forces with Hark, Kirby, and Mütter Museum Curator Anna Dhody that same year to form the Anthropodermic Book Project (ABP), and their collective bibliographic quest drives the narrative of *Dark Archives*. In vivid prose and true journalistic fashion, Rosenbloom seeks answers to the who/what/when/where/why and how of anthropodermic books, bringing readers along on her detective story-cum-memoir-cum-travelogue. With a relatable tone, the author dispels myths; reminds the public that under almost no circumstances should gloves be worn while handling rare books; hops from California to Cambridge to France, and through centuries of medical and legal history; and defends the research value of these uncommon items, in just under 300 pages.

Rosenbloom writes with a general, albeit bookish, audience in mind, including true crime fans, librarians and archivists, medical history aficionados, graduate students, body art proponents, staff employed in cultural heritage contexts, and any reader who carefully considers if they should check the “organ donor” box when they get a new driver's license. *Dark Archives* offers only one image (Joseph Zaehnsdorf's 1898 binding of Hans Holbein's *The Dance of Death*), but no matter; images of almost all of ABP's confirmed anthropodermic books can be found online, from Boston Athenaeum, PBA Galleries, digital collections at the University of Cincinnati, Harvard Libraries' and the Mütter Museum's blogs, and in *The Morbid Anatomy Anthology* (2014).

For special collections professionals and educators, there is not much in *Dark Archives* that was not covered in Jacob Gordon's “In the Flesh? Anthropodermic Bibliopegy Verification and Its Implications” (2016, published in *RBM*, the journal of the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section), and Lawrence S. Thompson's “Tanned Human Skin” (1946, published in the *Bulletin of the Medical Library Association*). Though *Dark Archives*' 12 chapters investigate book history, Rosenbloom's bias shows through in digressions about Death Salons, goofy medical school

students and the Jefferson Scale of Physician Empathy, and an entire chapter that focuses largely on tissue, body, and organ donation, viewed through the lens of the author's personal experience.

The prologue hooks readers with a scenario that offers the best of both worlds: an institution has two alleged human skin items, and ABP's tests reveal one to be authentic and one as a fake. This establishes *Dark Archives'* major questions: Why would a book be bound in human epidermis, and why would anyone falsely describe something as being bound in that material? The narrator's journey repeats throughout the volume: Quirky Librarian in sensible shoes enters library/museum after some misadventure, encounters quizzical/welcoming staff, touches and describes books, takes samples of their bindings (or is prohibited from doing so), technical and/or historical details are provided, and test results are delivered. In this case, Rosenbloom visits the Huntington Library, Art Museum and Botanical Gardens, admits she'd never used a scalpel before collecting samples, sidebars describe the library items and explain peptide mass fingerprinting (PMF) tests in accessible language, and the results are revealed.

Chapter 1 centers on the first PMF tests—three alleged anthropodermic books, only one of which came back human—at Harvard Libraries. Rosenbloom outlines the history of identifying alleged anthropodermic books (book size, handwritten notes, follicle patterns), how the ABP came together, and how an insensitive blog post brought new attention to these mysterious volumes. Rosenbloom recounts meetings with Harvard libraries' staff, but one voice notably absent from this history is Heather Cole, the curator responsible for the blog post that prompted calls for the book to be buried (and worse). Rosenbloom neither interviews Cole nor mentions her directly, though she is credited in the endnotes, and the offensive original title remains in the URL on Houghton Library's blog.

Chapter 2 largely focuses on 18th-century medical history. Chapter 3 takes the author back to Philadelphia, home to the "largest confirmed collection of anthropodermic books in the world." Rosenblum tells the story of Mary Lynch (whose thigh skin was used on four books), Hough (whose estate donated those books), and Leidy (another doctor/donor), and relates the rise of book collecting as a "gentleman's hobby." In chapter 4, "Skin Craft," Rosenbloom takes a trip to Pergamena tannery (late of Discovery's *Dirty Jobs with Mike Rowe* fame) to understand historical skin-tanning methods. The chapter is replete with gory details that certain readers will love. The next two chapters spotlight women and people of color in the long and revoltingly shameful history of medicine. The book closes with ripped-from-the-headlines true-crime narratives relayed with rich storytelling and drama. Of note are Rosenbloom's summaries on capital punishment, cadaver obtainment, and 19th-century anatomy laws—it's fascinating, but light on book history.

Rosenbloom also tackles myths of Nazi human skin lampshades and related macabre trophies (spoiler: there is no evidence any existed, and there are no known books), 21st-century whole-body donations and tattoo preservation, and international laws governing the sale, donation, and display of human remains. The author's final chapter offers several pages on her largely unsuccessful research trip to France and recaps testing a French collector's book-bindings. The author takes the Epilogue to reflect, in death-positive terms, on the books she has encountered, and those her group has not yet found. Rosenbloom concludes with a list of confirmed anthropodermic bindings in "public" collections, along with a 28-page section of endnotes and a 12-page index.