

Q&A

BARBARA GOLDSMITH'S PASSION FOR PRESERVATION

When a book you buy today does not deteriorate in 30 years, you can thank Barbara Goldsmith, the New York Public Library Trustee who led a movement to preserve disintegrating paper, which vastly extended the life of books printed today.

Ms. Goldsmith, a well-known writer, was able to bring together 2,500 authors and 40 influential publishers to sign a NYPL Declaration of Book Preservation where they pledged to use only acid-free paper for first editions of their books. Also, in 1989, she was instrumental in securing a \$20 million increase in the annual budget of the National Endowment of the Humanities dedicated to this preservation work.

In recognition of her transformative work and enlightened philanthropy, NYPL named the Barbara Goldsmith Preservation Division and the Barbara Goldsmith Conservation Laboratory in her honor in 2000.

Ms. Goldsmith's widely acclaimed books include *The Straw Man*, *Little Gloria...Happy At Last*, *Johnson v. Johnson*, *Other Powers: The Age of Suffrage, Spiritualism, and the Scandalous Victoria Woodhull*, and *Obsessive Genius: The Inner World of Marie Curie*, now reprinted in 22 languages. Ms. Goldsmith recently spoke with *Bookmark* about preservation and conservation and her other pursuits.

BOOKMARK: When and how did you become interested in the preservation and conservation of written materials?

BARBARA GOLDSMITH: In the late 1970s, I was researching a book on three generations of the Vanderbilt family. I worked with collections at the NYPL and found that documents printed before 1830 were usually in good condition, but more recent publications would frequently disintegrate on the way to the copy machine. I was curious and began to research and found that chemicals added to paper in the 19th and 20th centuries made the paper acidic, which causes it to consume itself. The term "slow fires" is what we conservators use. It is as if you baked the book. It becomes so embrittled that fragments of the pages fall and scatter like snow. Also, I found that there was cost-comparable, acid-free paper, and that books printed on this paper would last 300 years instead of disintegrating in 30 years.

When I became a trustee of NYPL, we had 33 linear miles of decaying books—a staggering amount. I began a campaign to induce writers and publishers to use cost-comparable, acid-free paper. It was difficult work, but after several years, we even convinced the federal government to use acid-free paper and most paper mills to convert to an alkaline process.



Photo: Steven Richter.

BOOKMARK: How do you like the Barbara Goldsmith Preservation Division and Barbara Goldsmith Conservation Lab in their new location at the Library Services Center in Long Island City?

BG: It's a dream come true; a 145,000-square-foot state-of-the-art building with 266 capable people working under the best conditions is a jewel in the crown of NYPL.

Now we won't have to worry about knowledge vanishing down an Orwellian "memory hole." That gives me incredible pleasure. Today, preservation and conservation are of primary importance at NYPL.

BOOKMARK: What issues still concern you?

BG: We're in a period of massive change. There are worries about what form the future is going to take. One example is the question of who owns the material that we digitize? Another is when we digitize a document will it be available in a form yet to be invented? There are so many unknowns.

For people who can't come to NYPL, it's imperative to preserve the collections and make them accessible in digital and other forms. In the future, we have to figure out how to use our resources (since they are not limitless) to provide wide access, yet to preserve written materials.

BOOKMARK: What are you working on now?

BG: I'm spending a lot of time as Producer of a Sony/HBO project based on my Marie Curie book. I am writing my sixth book and various articles and essays. But I always have or make time to lend my essence and expertise to help save the written word. ■