

Book Review / Recension d'ouvrage

Teaching the Museum: Careers in Museum Education

Edited by Leah M. Melber, PhD

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This collection of 17 short career-related memoirs and reflections of mid-to-late career museum professionals provides personal insights into the development of expertise, confidence, and recognition in a museum education career. The book is structured by theme, based on the type of career advice provided in each article. Each section concludes with an afterword by a different emerging professional, who reflects on the wisdom provided, writes about his or her own personal reaction and gives a generalized “Things to Ponder” list to encourage the reader to undergo a similar exercise of reflection. This feature gives the book a proactive self-help quality, though it is conceived not as a career development manual but rather as a collection of informal, candid advice.

The intended audience for this book is very specific: it is written directly to young professionals working in the member museums of the American Alliance of Museums (AAM), the American equivalent to the Canadian Museums Association (CMA). However, Canadian museum professionals can equally relate and the content is international, with contributors from England, Ireland, and Croatia represented. Although the stance of the writers is that of giving informal, chatty advice to an emerging museum professional, those who might be curious about careers in the museum field will enjoy “eavesdropping” as well. An overarching theme of finding passion in the work and a feeling of contributing meaningfully to the public good emerges in all the articles as these leaders in the field reflect back on their careers. Each author has a biographical statement, but these are all grouped at the end of the book. It is worth flipping to the back before reading each article

to help place the voice that emerges in the writing.

Because of the loosely structured nature of the book, and the editor's stated goal of "tapp[ing] into the talents of my colleagues and ask[ing] them to join me in sharing a key bit of advice with the next generation of educators" (p. 2), the personalities and priorities of the various contributors are allowed to provide the direction for each article. "Their charge would be to pretend they were at a social mixer, speaking in hushed tones, telling it like it really is" (p. 2).

Interestingly, in a book entitled *Teaching the Museum*, there is very little discussion of teaching. The theme of education is secondary to the theme of museum careers. Most authors choose to discuss how to get the job done in the collaborative museum environment among other topics relating more directly to career development. Paula Gangopadhyay's "Evolve as a Museum Leader: Be a Catalyst!" and Sarah Marcotte's "Volunteering Has Value" discuss work habits such as leadership and service in the museum context. Others offer career advice applicable to any field, for example, Celeste DeWald's "You Made a Mistake. Now What?" and Greg Stevens's "Then, Now Text: Transferring a Lifetime of Careers." A reader from outside the field of museums looking to this collection to learn how education fits into the work done in museums might want to start with Ted Lind's "Sometimes You Have to Be a Little Subversive." He describes a career dedicated to bringing educational opportunities to the forefront in each gallery, as well as incorporating these opportunities into all the projects that his museum took on during his tenure there.

The informal nature of education in the museum field is highlighted by the fact that only one of the professionals—Brad Irwin in his "When You Are Offered the Perfect Job You Never Wanted, Take It"—mentions holding an education degree and a school teaching background. Non-museum readers of this collection might be surprised at how distant from school teaching the field of museum education really is. There is some discussion throughout the articles on the placement of education in the mandate of the museum. These passionate museum educators all clearly feel that the educational component of presenting a museum's collections to various publics should be front and centre to the work of a museum in a holistic way. However, Lind notes that education is sometimes at odds with curators' goals or passed over when funding decisions are made in museum planning. Several of the authors discuss their wish to continue to elevate education in the priorities of their institution, for example, in her essay "It's Normal to Ask: What Am I

Doing Here?” Katarina Ivanišin Kardum writes that “the museum’s educational programs have contributed to the popularization of both the institution and the field of natural history” (p. 24).

When the authors come down to giving specific career snapshots, including a summary of their challenges, what approach they took, and what they learned about life, relationships and work, the reader benefits from some valuable insights. Very practical nuggets of wisdom include taking responsibility for one’s own mistakes (DeWald), what specific benefits come from seeking an advanced degree (Ben Garcia, “Yes, You Should Go to Grad School”), and the differences between working as a consultant versus being on staff (Beverly Serrell, “You Work for the People, Not the Institution”). Those articles that describe some specific cases and the insights that became work habits that serve successful professionals throughout their careers—such as Kardum’s—are the most useful to the intended audience of emerging museum professionals. Kardum describes her uneasiness at being an artist and educator working in a museum where the topic—natural history—was outside her field of expertise. She describes some of her successful projects, and comments on her realization that “The line connecting all these projects was the interdisciplinary approach, the collaborative work, the blurring of boundaries between nature and culture, science and art, and most of all the playful, artistic approach to ‘serious’ scientific issues” (p. 24).

I found myself stopping every so often to imagine what it would be like to work with each writer, or how I could apply their advice to one of my own work challenges. The book provides much fodder for reflection on working methods and relationships. Because it is a personal advice book, the reader gets a rare glimpse inside the heads of those ultra-professional people that an emerging professional would only normally see shining at museum events. It is quite fascinating to see several candid moments of humility and insight.