

Zine Librarianship and the infinite madness

Mick O'Dwyer supports his zine habit by moonlighting as an Assistant Librarian in Maynooth University.



With zines, appearances are often deceiving. If you take one thing away from reading this blog post, remember that!

I am a zine librarian and librarian zinester. You are probably thinking something like, “What’s a zine”, or “aren’t they from the ‘80’s”? I will do my best to allay your fears.

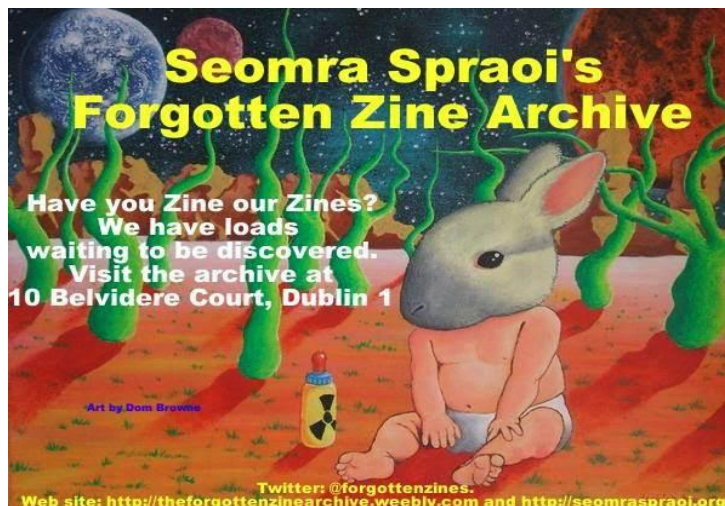


Zines (as in magaZINE), are independent self-published, Do-It-Yourself (DIY) magazines, created out of a desire for self-expression rather than profit, and distributed in small runs. They’re highly personal, can be on any subject imaginable, and are made with an eclectic variety of materials, such as twine, string and glitter. Zines are awake and immediate in a manner that is unlike any other medium. To me, they are powerful tools used to represent the underrepresented in society. They offer a platform to people on the fringes, whose voices are ignored or misrepresented in mainstream publications and traditional libraries.

However, zines have often proved problematic for librarians and have been disregarded in many libraries for a number of reasons; they contain minimal metadata, have erratic publishing schedules, are ephemeral in nature and often proudly flaunt copyright. As they are free from editorial restraint, zines can contain content that is unique, creative and thought-provoking, whilst also being objectionable, agenda-driven or poorly structured.



Despite making a zine when I was in school, and spending countless hours reading zines and free-sheets in record stores, it was only when I was doing my MLIS in 2012/2013 that I actively got involved in the Irish 'zine scene'. For my Capstone project, myself and six other librarians decided to do something a bit different and revitalise the only dedicated zine archive in Ireland - The Forgotten Zine Archive. We thought it would be interesting to study them as they have been habitually overlooked from an information management stand-point. We also thought it would be great to examine them in a non-traditional library setting. Independent zine archives often have close associations with anti-establishment countercultures that some establishment libraries feel the need to distance themselves from. Our archive is run out of Seomra Spraoi; an anti-capitalist, autonomous social centre, frequented by anarchists, socialists and a range of different groups.



Established in 2004 by Irish zinester (zine maker) Ciáran Walsh, the Forgotten Zine Archive's main role has been as a curated memory institution, where Irish and international zines are collected, preserved and made available to the public. Its contents now stand at around 2000 items, ranging in date from 1978 until now, and covering topics on a diverse range of subjects; from riot grrrl to Bray

Wanderers FC, from anarcho-punk to cryptozoology. Tom Maher and I now co-curate the archive on a voluntary basis.



Like zines themselves, zine librarianship is a niche market. Demand is low and you constantly seem to be fighting for legitimacy; from your friends, from other librarians, and even, on occasion from yourself. But every moment of self-doubt, every hour spent cataloguing in a cold archive on a Saturday afternoon, or Tuesday evening fund-raising meeting is more than worth it. It has been fulfilling, rewarding, and ultimately where I found my voice as a librarian.

Zines and zine librarianship or both inherently DIY. You have opportunities to be creative in ways you may never be offered in traditional libraries. We created our own taxonomy of subject headings, specific to our archive as we felt other subject heading taxonomies were surprisingly limited in capturing the content of our collection. We consulted members of the zine community to do this, engaging with diverse groups of people who often operate outside traditional library user groups.



In August 2014 we helped organise the Dublin Zine Fair with a group of local Dublin artists, and ran an exhibition on the contents of the archive in the Centre for Creative Practices. Both events really

highlighted the benefits of seeking alternatives to the current 'corporate vending to library' paradigm, showcasing an array of talented local artists.



Radical, independent archives such as the Forgotten Zine Archive are important. It's important that libraries play a role in supporting and promoting local independent publishing. It's also important that librarians encourage people to write and make and use their imaginations. By making and distributing zines, the zine community is creating its own historical records. It is shining a light on undocumented aspects of society that might otherwise go unnoticed or be forgotten. Zine archives preserve the parts of history that do not make it into books or blogs. They provide links to disenfranchised communities and offer them a platform so their collective voice is given extra weight.

That is vital.



Mick O'Dwyer and Tom Maher will be presenting a parallel session on zine librarianship at the 2015 Academic and Special Libraries Conference, February 26th and 27th. The presentation is entitled "A community involvement and collaborative case study: the Forgotten Zine Archive".