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Review of Curators: Behind the Scenes of Natural History Museums

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Grande, Lance. *Curators: Behind the Scenes of Natural History Museums*. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2017.

Curators offers a personal and passionate view behind the scenes of Chicago's Field Museum through the lens of Lance Grande's thirty-plus-year career as a curator there. Grande is currently the first Distinguished Service Curator at the Field, where he has held scientific as well as administrative positions. The book is a memoir and not a comprehensive history of either natural history museums or the Field itself. It nevertheless provides a lively and accessible introduction to natural history curation. While Grande focuses on the scientists who helped shape his career, he also offers snapshots of his colleagues' work to give an idea of the breadth of the Museum's research subjects and collections. Grande's respect for his colleagues and his institution shines throughout the text.

For readers who already know what natural history curators do, this is an interesting look into one person's curatorship journey. For those who have visited natural history museums but are not familiar with what happens behind the scenes, *Curators* gives a broad introduction to natural history curation including fieldwork, specimen collecting, exhibition creation, and public outreach and advocacy for scientific issues and the institution. Written for a general audience, one particularly strong aspect is Grande's masterful explanation of technical biological subjects. In particular, his description of cladistics and its role in shaping biological description in the 1970s and 1980s breaks down complex ideas in clear terms that demonstrate his outstanding abilities as a science communicator.

The book is well organized as a progression through Grande's career. He begins by explaining that curators are the chief scientists in natural history museums and describes their varied roles. He also includes a brief history of natural history museums and curation. The first half of the book focuses on Grande's varied experiences from student to curator to natural history museum administrator. He describes his entry into the profession of ichthyology, including his winding path through education (itself a good reminder of the fact that not all careers follow straight lines), the influence of mentors, and how he got his job as a curator. He then discusses the essential work of a paleontologist. He gives a detailed account of finding his first field site in Wyoming and the costs, politics, adventure, hard work, and scientific results of fieldwork.

Grande devotes one chapter to his close collaboration with Willy Bemis, a professor of biology at UMass Amherst (now at Cornell) and fellow ichthyologist. While they perform scientifically productive work in Moscow and Jerusalem, perhaps their most interesting collaboration comes in the form of the Alabama Deep Sea Fishing Rodeo. Over several years at the Rodeo, they worked with the general public as a way to collect a wide range of fish to add to their collections, a great example of citizen science in action.

The chapter covering the discovery, lawsuits, and eventual purchase of the famous *T. rex* named SUE is a fascinating discussion of a controversial episode in American paleontology. It will be of particular interest to archivists, librarians, and museum staff

because it illustrates in dramatic fashion the ethical and legal issues that affect daily work including permits, provenance, and ownership. Grande and the Field Museum's archivist were called to testify before the federal grand jury that eventually brought criminal charges against the owner of the commercial fossil excavation company that unearthed SUE. One issue is that Grande never mentions the archivist by name despite naming his other colleagues throughout the book. It is not clear if anonymity was requested by the archivist or whether Grande did not think to name him or her. Given Grande's emphasis on science as a collaborative process with many personalities, this lack of identification (or clarification of its deliberate absence) stands out.

After the discussion of SUE, Grande gives a brief overview of the other curators at the Field and their departments and scientific fields, showing much respect for their work and disciplines. This overview demonstrates the wide variety of curators' research interests as well as the global reach of their work. He also devotes a brief chapter to Karl Patterson Schmidt, a Field Museum curator of herpetology who was bitten by a venomous snake at the museum. Schmidt chronicled the effects of the venom in notes that are now in the Field Museum archive.

As Grande turns his focus to his transition toward executive management, he speaks about the different skill set needed: working with outside agencies and creative financial thinking to manage the economic downturn. This section is balanced by the excitement Grande has for the process of putting together a new exhibition in the Grainger Hall of Gems in 2009 using the existing museum collections and supplementing the exhibition with gem and mineral purchases as well as donations and loans.

One of the most powerful chapters is about working with human remains and funerary artifacts. Grande argues that those materials are of very high research value for anthropology, forensics, and human health, especially since most American museums no longer collect them. Grande is respectful and sensitive when explaining the issues around these materials, including disrespectful collecting practices in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The chapter gives an overview of the reform of approaches to human remains collecting over the twentieth century. Following the 1990 passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), museums began to reckon with the legacy of unethical collecting policies that were expressed in their collections. Grande describes the Field Museum's process of repatriating human remains to the Inuit community in Labrador.

Grande ends the book with a discussion of how curators and natural history museums have come to focus on using the collections and data to help save ecosystems as well as educate the public on science and scientific inquiry, particularly in light of the rise of modern creationism. He discusses the challenges and opportunities facing natural history museums including the cost of conducting research, curation, and managing large collections. He suggests that collaborations are the way forward because institutions do not have infinite storage space, money, or staff. Grande's discussion of evaluating resources will resonate strongly with archivists and librarians.

This volume includes many beautiful color photographs for each chapter that enhance the text by depicting the various specimens, expeditions, and exhibitions that Grande describes throughout the book. Unfortunately, Grande refers to illustration numbers throughout the text, however the illustrations are not actually numbered.

Curators joins a small collection of books on natural history museums, most notably *Dry Storeroom No. 1: The Secret Life of the Natural History Museum* by Richard Fortey (Vintage, 2009), which takes the form of a walking, behind-the-scenes tour of the National History Museum in London and focuses more on natural history museums than on one person's personal experience in museums. Both books are great reads; each curator and each museum has an interesting history and story to tell. While *Curators* is not a textbook or comprehensive reference, it will be an informative and exciting read for archivists, librarians, and museum staff who are interested in a personal look into natural history museum curation.