

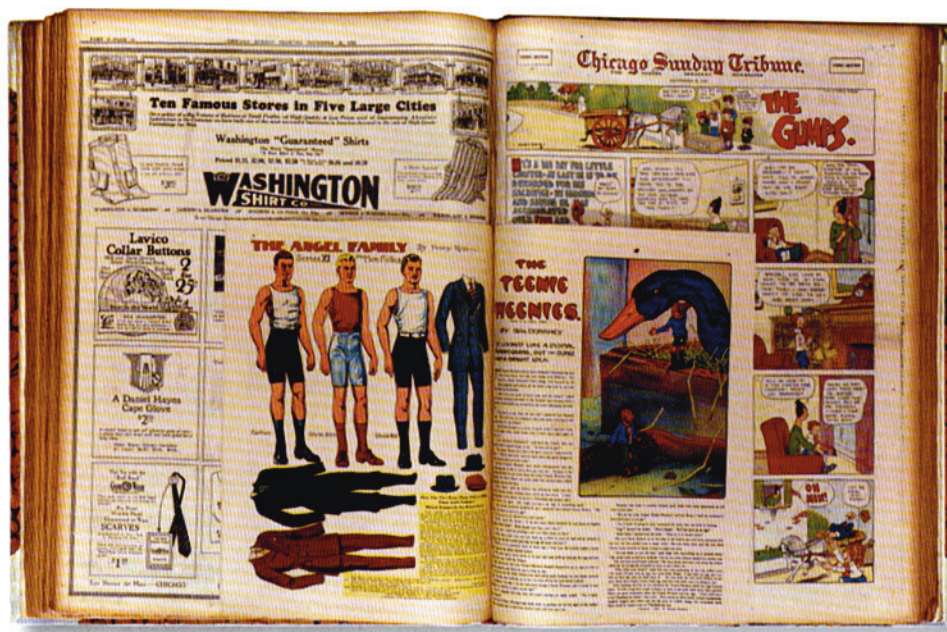
# nicholson baker

NOVELIST AND ARCHIVIST

Interview by Steven Heller

Nicholson Baker, author of such novels as *The Mezzanine*, *Vox*, and *Checkpoint*, is a leading advocate for the preservation of 19th- and early-20th-century newspapers. In 1999, with his wife, Margaret Brentano, he founded the American Newspaper Repository in Rollinsford, NH; its mission is to acquire and catalog these fragile, endangered artifacts of popular culture. Baker's 2001 book, *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper*, which won a National Book Critics Circle award for general nonfiction, is a manifesto for the protection of these documents. Baker argues that even the most dedicated librarians made an irreparable mistake when they destroyed newspapers after copying them onto microfilm. "My hope is that we won't repeat that mistake in the digital age," he explains. His book triggered heated debate among librarians, and even a rebuttal: *Vandals in the Stacks?: A Response to Nicholson Baker's Assault on Libraries*, by Richard J. Cox.

The ANR holdings began with a major purchase of hundreds of bound volumes that were discarded by the British Library. Overall, ANR is a unique collection of original newspapers that includes American and foreign-language and immigrant newspapers, such as the Yiddish weekly *Forward*. In the spring of 2004, Baker delivered five tractor-trailer loads filled with the volumes to Duke University's rare books library. I caught up with Baker as he and Brentano were correcting the final galley of the first book based on the collection, *The World on Sunday: Graphic Art in Joseph Pulitzer's Newspaper, 1898–1911* (Bulfinch, September).



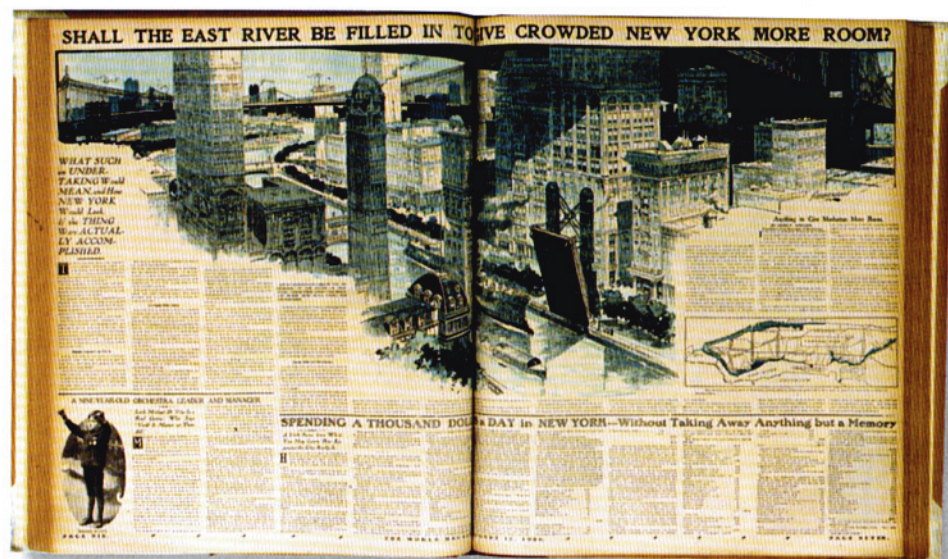
**HELLER:** Nick, you are a novelist and essayist, and you've also written *Double Fold*, the seminal manifesto on collecting and preserving newspapers. Do you see yourself as a scholar or connoisseur or both? How and why did you start this mission to amass vintage newspapers? **BAKER:** My father had a graphic design business in the basement of the house where I grew up, so I was aware that there was blood, sweat, and tracing paper behind every stylish logo and newspaper-ad layout. I like the soupy specificity and "mixed-upedness" of old newspapers—the sense they radiate of how the mighty have fallen. I'm certainly not a scholar of newspaper history. I've turned a lot of pages by now and lifted tons of bound volumes, which gives me a lower-back sort of connoisseurship. **HELLER:** What were you thinking when the British Library's gigantic collection was made available?

**BAKER:** By the time I learned about the Brit-

ish Library's disposal program, I'd interviewed Bill Blackbeard, a collector of newspaper comics, and I'd learned more about the great American library cleanout. Blackbeard had cut out some of the pages and strips, but a lot of it he'd left uncut in bound ex-library volumes—with bookplates—which he'd stored in stacks all over his house. So I knew (a) that many big libraries hadn't been doing what we thought they'd been doing, and (b) that one determined pulp-loving guy in a baseball cap could, if he wanted to, save a lot of things that were eminently worth saving.

**HELLER:** Why, given the old photographic and now the current digital methods, do you have such a passionate need to save the original documents? **BAKER:** Microfilm began as a way for Kodak to sweeten its revenues during the Depression by selling lots of 35-mm film to libraries. It hasn't saved libraries any money, and it has done history a lot of

harm. The federal government has spent more than \$100 million on large-scale library microfilming programs in recent decades, almost all of it wasted. With a fraction of that money, libraries could have leased space sufficient to store all of the linotyped and roto-gravured treasures they got rid of. Saving printed things, even bulky, brittle, fragile things, is cheap compared to making film or digital copies of them. We're always going to need the originals. We need them, first, because they are the true time machines, linking us back to the period in which they were made and, second, because there will always be new ways of making copies, and we need something left on the shelf to make a copy of. Right now, newspaper companies are in a fret because a lot of them do not have original runs of their own papers—the digital copies they are offering are taken from old, unlovely microfilm owned by ProQuest [an online content repository]. One basic thing we really need and don't have is a national copyright-deposit library: one that is formally charged with the permanent storage of whatever publishers are required to send it under copyright law. Other countries have libraries of this kind. The Library of Congress has no legal requirement to keep anything. We need at least one indiscriminating print-saving institution. We can't depend on publishers to do it themselves, because publishers go out of business or they get amalgamated, and of course their main function has to be to make enough money to keep publishing. When the pinch comes, they're going to jettison their own history if they feel they have to. **HELLER:** Is it really necessary to retain everything published during the run of a daily or weekly newspaper? Isn't this just contributing to artifact glut? **BAKER:** Part of the meaning of commercial art comes from its context. Think of a '50s Lord & Taylor ad for gloves or bras next to some Cold War controversy in the *Times*, or think even of the Arthur Rackham illustrations tipped into Hawthorne's *Wonder-Book [for Boys and Girls]*. You need to see words and images in their original balance to understand how they worked together. As for artifact glut: There



**Previous page:** Penny Ross's "The Angel Family" paper dolls and William Donahey's "The Teenie Weenies"; *Chicago Tribune*, November 26, 1922. **Above:** Spread from the *New York World*, August 12, 1906.

are thousands of surviving runs of *National Geographic*—next to none of Pulitzer's *World* or the *New York Herald Tribune*—the calculus of glut went screwy somewhere. **HELLER:** The quality of paper has something to do with the glut: *National Geographic* was always printed on better paper. It was also not considered as ephemeral as a newspaper. But being the devil's advocate here: Who, besides you and me and a handful of others, cares about these original documents? **BAKER:** If something once had a daily circulation of several hundred thousand copies—if that many people were eager to clap eyeballs on that particular printed object every day—and only one or two of these original issues survive, prudence would suggest we make an effort to keep the one or two. The newspapers are monuments of American originality and visual sophistication—just as important as the Brooklyn Bridge or the Chrysler Building. The intentions of the creators of a publication are, in a way, irrelevant, as is the paper stock they chose to use. Some of the things most valuable to historians—broadside and posters and political pamphlets—were produced entirely in the heat of the moment and not for posterity. Oddly enough, that's what gives them their ageless immediacy and interest. **HELLER:** Are there items that you have yourself discarded? **BAKER:** I'm not a collector, so I don't bother about being discriminating; I'm just an intermediary. With materials this rare, it's a serious mistake to dis-

card anything. The reason we ended up with a run of the Yiddish paper, *New York's Forward*, was because I bid on every single title on the British Library's auction list. I didn't then know what the *Forward* was. **HELLER:** Decades ago, after a New York underground newspaper folded, I was given all its file cabinets with papers, photos, and back issues. For a few months, I kept them in an office, but eventually I had to leave. I had nowhere to bring the files, and they were dumped—a priceless record of achievement gone without a trace. Did you ever have such a traumatic experience? **BAKER:** Jeepers, no, but I've felt over the years that I've lost many minor opportunities. In the '80s, I would look at the piles of J. Crew catalogs as I was recycling them and think, Somebody should be collecting runs of these things—in a hundred years, a historian could learn a great deal about the '80s by studying these catalogs. And then, of course, I tossed them—all but a few. In the '90s, I told myself that I should be saving a run of the *National Enquirer*, but then I didn't. Is anyone? Just yesterday I was marveling at a recent Tiffany's catalog—not at the jewelry, at the layout—at the very faint checker-boarding of shades of gray in the background. **HELLER:** Sounds like you've retained a lot from your dad, the graphic designer. With such passion, why didn't you become one? **BAKER:** Well, graphic designers have to have artistic talent—I don't. I'm just an appreciative bystander. **P**