

Book review: *Exploring Emotion, Care, and Enthusiasm in “Unloved” Museum Collections*, edited by Anna Woodham, Rhianedd Smith and Alison Hess, Leeds, ARC Humanities Press, 2020

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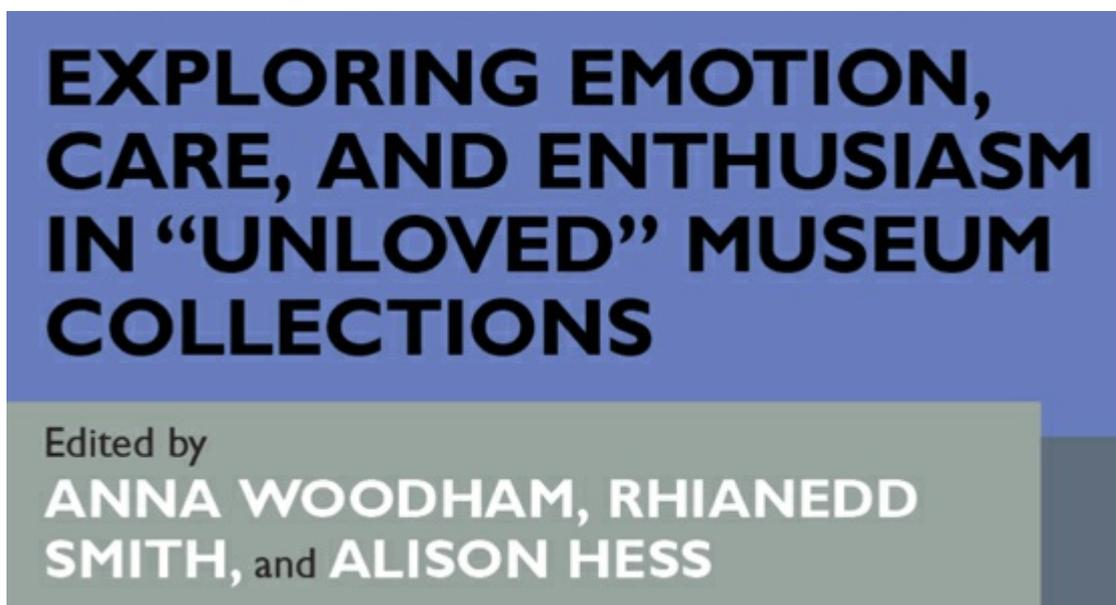
This article was written by [Jennie Morgan](#)

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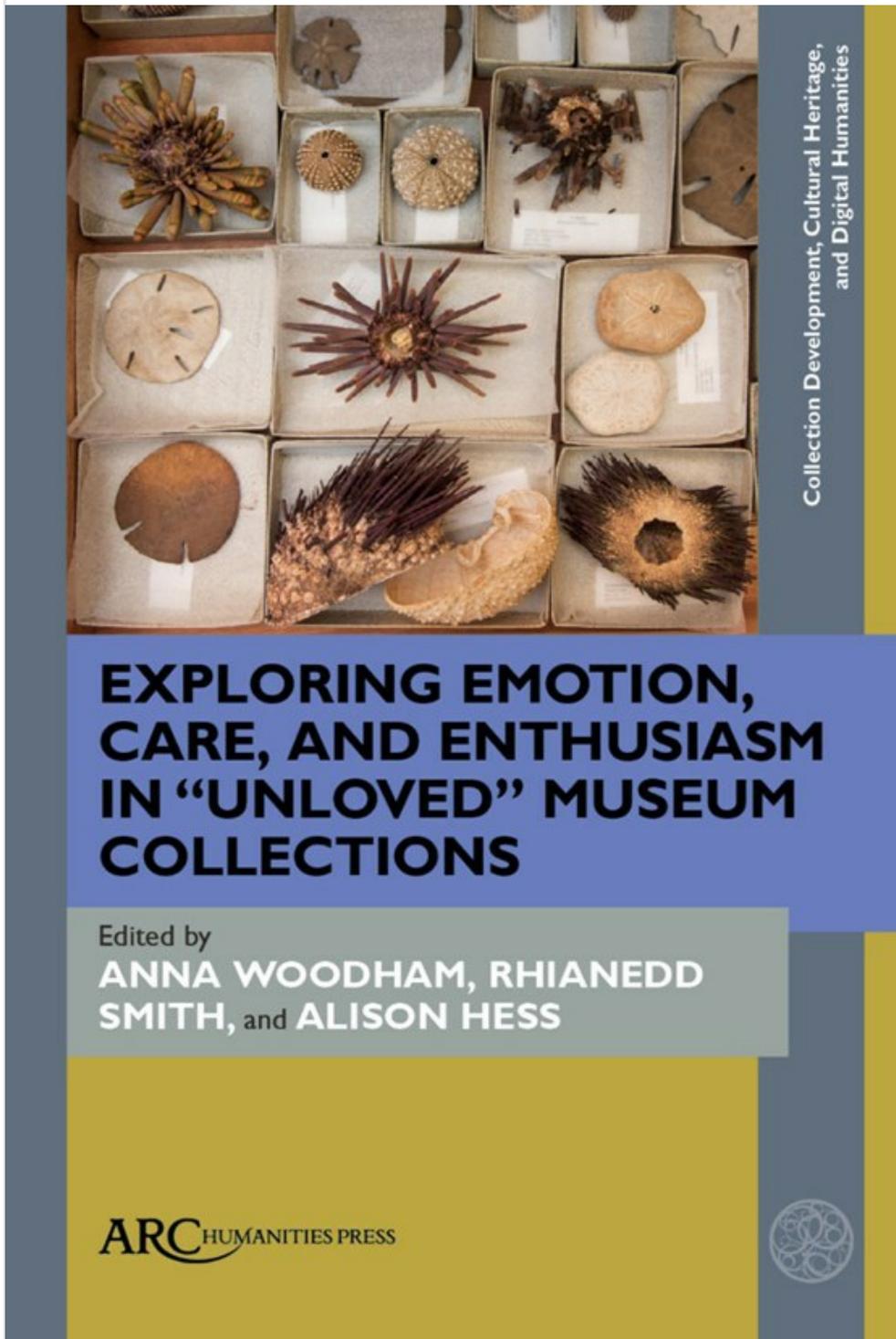
Collections, care, storage, expertise, emotion

Review: Exploring Emotion, Care, and Enthusiasm in “Unloved” Museum Collections

The majority of the chapters in this edited book have their origins in the ‘Who Cares? Interventions in “Unloved” Museum Collections’ conference held in 2015 at the Dana Research Centre, Science Museum (London). The conference marked the culmination of a UK Arts and Humanities Research Council funded project of the same name. Like the project and conference, this new book shines a light on ‘unloved’ museum collections. A term, the editors explain, which refers to stored collections, and more broadly objects with limited public appeal and for which ‘significance may be harder to recognize’ (p 1). Yet to speak of ‘unloved’ collections is not to suggest that they are disregarded. On the contrary, this book takes the reader beyond public displays into the hidden space of museum storerooms to look at who cares for such collections, and in doing so reveals a range of individuals, groups and institutions who care intensely. Driven by the applied aim of considering what happens ‘when people who care about stored collections are brought into the research, engagement, and curatorial process’ (p 7), the book addresses a broader challenge for the museum sector: how to find new ways to understand, interpret and use ‘unloved’ collections in ways that will enable the public ‘to value them as much as, if not more than, objects which are “easy to love”’ (p 201).

This book is a welcome addition to material culture and museum/heritage studies. Beyond a few notable exceptions ([Brusius and Singh, 2017](#); [Macdonald, Morgan, Fredheim, 2020](#)), these fields have largely overlooked stored collections, despite the fact that these form the vast bulk of museum holdings. Additionally, the kinds of 'uncharismatic' (p 2) objects featured across the book's three sections and eight chapters have also been ignored within critical scholarship. In their introduction, the editors do a fine job of outlining the book's structure and intended contribution to wider debate. A tightly articulated set of guiding questions (around care, emotion and collections) tie the various threads together. By focusing on the emotional response and caring practices of museum professionals and external stakeholders working with stored collections (and especially with objects considered by others to be 'dull' or 'uninteresting'), a range of sub-themes are addressed including curatorial practice, expertise, knowledge, ownership and value.

Figure 1



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Section One draws on the work of the original 'Who Cares?' project to provide a fascinating look into how 'unloved' collections are understood, accessed and interpreted by enthusiasts, or non-professional experts. We meet the Lock Collectors Association

encountering the lock and fastening collection at the Science Museum, London (Chapter One, Hess); past donors, collectors and users of the Museum of English Rural Life's historic hand tools collection (Chapter Two, Smith); and the Historical Metallurgy Society who co-manage the national slag collection owned by the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust (Chapter Three, Woodham and Kelleher). Collectively, these chapters explore the 'emotional, biographical, and professional ties that connect people to "unloved" objects' (p 14). By considering how and why enthusiasts care for collections, the role of lived experience of objects, skills-based understanding, and physical engagement with material and sensory qualities of objects in generating emotional response, personal meaning and collections knowledge is highlighted. Overall, this section raises the question – as Woodham and Kelleher (Chapter Three) explicitly consider – if such enthusiasms 'can be transferred or shared between those who "care" and those who seemingly do not' (p 14).

Section Two further responds to this question. It invites museum professionals to reflect on their work with 'unloved' collections and strategies for giving stored objects a new lease of life. Artistic 'rummaging' through museum storage to generate imaginative response (Chapter Four, Woodall); social media campaigns using humour and emotional connection for public engagement with natural history specimens and models (Chapter Five, Carnall); and 'expert volunteer' interpretation of 'mundane and impersonal' medical instrument handling collections (Chapter Six, MacLeod) provide examples of initiatives that have revived the image, status and use of stored collections. These chapters direct our attention to the power of collaborative and creative practice, and the possibilities of using more informal modes of engagement (e.g. play, humour, imagination, experimentation, personal response, intergenerational conversation, sensory hands-on encounter), for collections (re)interpretation and access.

Section Three continues this self-reflexive approach; here through chapters written by academics reflecting on the role of emotion and care in their own research with museum collections. By examining personal response to 'lost objects', or those items for which little historic contextual information is known (Chapter Seven, Watson), or emotional reaction to archival materials encountered through collections research (Chapter Eight, Church), this short section opens a much bigger discussion. It prompts us to consider how museum professionals working with 'unloved' collections might similarly recognise – and productively harness (e.g. for collections research and access) – their own emotional responses to such objects (p 15).

Overall, the book encourages reflection on how different forms of expertise might be better acknowledged and integrated into mainstream curatorial practice and public engagement to address the challenge of reviving the interpretive, research and/or display potential of stored collections. However, chapters also demonstrate complexities of reconciling knowledge practices that, while holding powerful potential to reconnect collections with their 'social and emotional lives, biographies and agency' (p 103), may significantly differ. Hess' account (Chapter One) of lock collectors, for whom accessing the meaning of objects 'is often about touch and taking things apart' (p 28), vividly illustrates the differences between enthusiasts and professional conservation and collections management understandings of care. Moreover, while the book offers commentary on successful examples of institutions caring for 'unloved' collections 'in a shared and distributed way' (p 76) (see, especially, Woodham and Kelleher's discussion of a co-managed collection), critical questions regarding non-professional agency in collections care are also raised. This is a topical theme in museum/heritage studies where scholars have queried how (and if?) efforts to increase public participation in heritage can 'avoid exploiting volunteers or devaluing professionals', and what needs to occur to avoid 'changeless change', or the reinforcement rather than renegotiation of existing power structures ([Fredheim, 2018](#)). This book connects, implicitly, with these kinds of broader debates by arguing that caring for collections is as much about caring for people and relationships as it is objects.

Another theme underpinning the book is value. To describe a collection as 'loved' or 'unloved' is to evaluate its perceived wider relevance, interest and significance. Yet by delving into the 'cultural ecologies' (p 198) of collections care, the book reveals how there is nothing inherently 'unlovable' about collections of slag, locks and fastenings, microscope slide specimens, agricultural tools or medical instruments. Whether these items are loved is neither given, nor intrinsic to the qualities of objects (e.g. subject matter, visual appearance), but emerges from 'shifts in taste and fashion, changing research cultures, changing notions of aesthetics, or certain politics which might marginalize specific objects and spaces' (p 197). Moreover, as the book's chapters vividly illustrate, the different degrees of visibility accorded to a collection (i.e. if things are put on display, or into storage on- or off-site), and specific practices of care (including research, access and preservation activities) also attribute value. As the editors summarise, 'if collections are placed in storerooms which cannot be readily accessed or viewed, then we are never giving those who don't care an opportunity to love these objects' (p 198). While claims about the emergent nature of value are

well-established within the wider scholarly field (Jones, 2017), a nuanced insight offered by this book is the observation that collections do not easily fit into straightforward binaries of being 'loved' or 'unloved'. These are tantalising prompts, yet remain somewhat implicit with scope for further conceptual work to engage more directly with value debates, as the editors acknowledge (p 197).

Certainly, while there is real 'hands-on' insight in this book for museum professionals wanting to 'put a little love' in their stored collections (p 197), one of its main contributions is in establishing a research agenda. In the final pages, the editors note several areas ripe for further exploration, including further work on how to conduct emotional (collections) research (p 202). By arguing for material culture and museum/heritage studies to pay much greater theoretical and empirical attention to stored collections (in ways that go beyond understanding these simply through the lens of collections management issues), the book ultimately demonstrates how 'unloved' collections provide a rich nexus for wider debate on themes such as expertise and public agency, the politics of participatory heritage, concepts of care and affective, emotional modes of heritage engagement. In sum, this is a nicely written and illustrated book which offers a stimulating and original take on museum collections. One can imagine a wider readership to include museum/heritage studies scholars interested in collections, professional stewards who are trying to enhance (or simply identify!) the societal relevance of stored museum collections, and a general readership tantalised by the behind-the-scenes glimpse into museum storerooms.

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Author information



Jennie Morgan

Lecturer in Heritage and Programme Director, University of Stirling

[Contact this author >](#)

Dr Jennie Morgan is a Lecturer in Heritage and Programme Director of the MSc Heritage at the University of Stirling. Trained as a social anthropologist, her teaching and research focuses on museum practice and theory. Recently she worked on the Profusion theme of the Heritage Futures project (<https://www.uclpress.co.uk/products/125034>) to investigate how social history museums and householders decide what (and what not) to keep for the future. Her work is published in a range of international, peer-reviewed sources including the *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, *Museum & Society*, and the *Journal of Material Culture*