

Book review: *Metadata: Shaping Knowledge from Antiquity to the Semantic Web* by Richard Gartner. Switzerland: Springer, 2016. viii, 114 pages, ISBN 9783319408910 (paperback), 9783319408934 (ebook)

Reviewed by Anne Welsh, Lecturer in Library & Information Studies, UCL

Where to start in understanding metadata is an often-discussed topic for both the designers of library school curricula and practitioners who want to expand their knowledge from everyday cataloguing to the wider theoretical concepts in which their practice sits. Richard Gartner's book provides a fine introduction, whatever the reader's own starting point.

One of the strengths of the text is its brevity. At only 114 pages, it seems difficult to imagine exactly how it will, as its back-cover blurb claims, "*take us on a journey through the centuries-old history of metadata up to the modern world of crowdsourcing and Google, showing how metadata works and what it is made of.*" Yet Gartner manages it, drawing on his longstanding experience as a Digital Librarian and more recent work as an academic at King's College London and, as part of his remit at the Warburg, at the newly-established Digital Humanities centre at the University of London, DH@SAS.

A lot of the concision is facilitated by the use of (mostly colour) illustrations, diagrams and catalogue records, which are nicely done. The historical emphasis, although important in the first two chapters, is kept to the minimum required for us to understand what is happening now, in the 21st century, and I am sure this approach will appeal to those who are not interested in history *per se*, as well as being helpful for those of us who work in historical disciplines. Do not be deceived or put off by the titles of chapters 2 and 3 – 'Clay Goats and Trees: Metadata Before the Byte' and 'Metadata Becomes Digital.' The author is not telling us about our past merely because it is interesting, but as part of a narrative that leads us through a philosophy of metadata towards an ideological understanding of what it is, and why our mission as its creators and curators is vital to the creation and understanding of our very culture.

All of the usual elements of a book on metadata are present and correct – card catalogues, MARC, taxonomies, ontologies and networks – but Gartner is writing with a message that makes his work interesting, challenging and worthy of wider discussion within the cataloguing community. Metadata is not neutral – we are making ethical and political decisions all the time. As Gartner puts it in his final chapter, titled appropriately 'Knowledge and Uncertainty,' "*Metadata has an essential but often invisible role in the way we build our knowledge. It allows us to bring together its atoms, the single units of data into which we can divide the world, into the information that gives them meaning. It then lets us assemble this information into knowledge.*" (p. 107). Further, "*We can find patterns of meaning to help us fulfil the very human need to interpret what we have and make sense of it. Metadata lets us forge these links and construct our edifices of knowledge from the smallest bricks of data.*" (p. 108).

You don't have to agree with the author's opinions, but I would urge you to read this book if you are new to cataloguing or if you are old in cataloguing and world-weary about our professional mission. It's a book to provoke your own thoughts, and quite possibly to give to your manager if you suspect they are unsure why metadata, why cataloguing and, therefore, why you and your team matter.

