

June 2022

## Book Review: Freedom Libraries: The Untold Story of Libraries for African Americans in the South by Mike Selby

Claire Kelley

San Jose State University, [claire.kelley@sjsu.edu](mailto:claire.kelley@sjsu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/ischoolsrj>



Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#), [Collection Development and Management Commons](#), [Information Literacy Commons](#), [Scholarly Communication Commons](#), and the [Scholarly Publishing Commons](#)

### Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Donald Westbrook, Nathan Schneider, and George Lakey for feedback on drafts of this book review.

---

### Recommended Citation

Kelley, C. (2022). Book Review: Freedom Libraries: The Untold Story of Libraries for African Americans in the South by Mike Selby. *School of Information Student Research Journal*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.31979/2575-2499.120105> Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/ischoolsrj/vol12/iss1/5>

This article is brought to you by the open access Journals at SJSU ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Information Student Research Journal by an authorized administrator of SJSU ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@sjsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@sjsu.edu).

---

## **Book Review: Freedom Libraries: The Untold Story of Libraries for African Americans in the South by Mike Selby**

### **Keywords**

civil rights movement, library history, Student Nonviolence Coordinating Committee, voting rights, Black Panther Party, Mississippi, Arkansas, Alabama, Philadelphia, American history

### **Acknowledgements**

I am grateful to Donald Westbrook, Nathan Schneider, and George Lakey for feedback on drafts of this book review.

### **About Author**

Claire Kelley is pursuing her MLIS degree at San Jose State University. She is Director of Library and Academic Marketing at Seven Stories Press. She earned her M.S. in Communications Design from Pratt Institute in 2013.

**Selby, M. (2019). *Freedom Libraries: The untold story of libraries for African Americans in the South*. Rowman & Littlefield.**

In *Freedom Libraries: The Untold Story of Libraries for African Americans in the South*, Mike Selby, the deputy director of Cranbrook Public Library in British Columbia, brings the phenomenon of Freedom Libraries during the civil rights movement to life through oral history interviews and archival research. The book won the Outstanding Academic Title of the Year by the Association of College and Research Libraries in 2020. It tells the stories—mostly missing from American and library history—of temporary community libraries staffed by civil rights voter registration volunteers and local citizens. Selby builds on scholarship documenting the Mississippi Freedom Libraries, while also elaborating on his own earlier discoveries of two Alabama Freedom Libraries—one in Selma and one in Haynesville (Selby, 2013). The book's focus on the Southern states (as indicated in the subtitle) includes discussion of a Freedom Library in Arkansas, but also extends north to tell the story of a Freedom Library in Philadelphia that was founded by a civil rights activist and Black nationalist. Selby's research and interviews will be essential for future LIS scholars interested in the civil rights period.

Throughout this book, Selby describes the history of makeshift Freedom Libraries that were founded and maintained by civil rights activists wherever they could find space—in rented buildings, homes, and basements. During the Freedom Summer of 1964, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) volunteers saw how African Americans in the South did not have access to information and were unable to pass literacy tests that were designed to prevent them from voting. In response, SNCC helped create Freedom Libraries as a political strategy. While the size of the library collections, length of existence, and experience of the staff at the Freedom Libraries varied, they all provided access to information for many Black citizens who were denied equal access to their public libraries, despite paying taxes for them. African Americans who attempted to enter segregated public libraries used by white people during this time faced violence, intimidation, harassment, and police brutality. Freedom Libraries thus served as both literacy centers and symbols of hope and courage in a terrifying climate of white supremacy.

The oral histories recounted in *Freedom Libraries* build on Karen J. Cook's thorough dissertation (2008), which provided the first documentation of the Mississippi Freedom Libraries, including the Greenwood Freedom Library, the Meridian Freedom Library, and the Hattiesburg Freedom Library, based on archival research in Wisconsin, Georgia, and Mississippi. Cook, like Selby, was a graduate of the LIS program at the University of Alabama. Her research focused only on the fifty Freedom Libraries in Mississippi that originated during the summer of 1964—groundwork that Selby enhances with activists' testimonials in *Freedom Libraries*. Through his use of direct quotes gained from his correspondence with SNCC volunteers, Selby adeptly conveys the ways in which they felt threatened, scared, and surprised by violence from hate groups in the South. The book portrays the bombings, kidnappings, arrests, and murders during the civil rights era in these towns, demonstrating the danger that organizers and workers for the Freedom

Libraries faced while attempting to provide information and resources to marginalized communities.

In addition to being a professional librarian, Selby also has experience as a newspaper columnist. He sometimes adopts a conversational tone when recounting these stories, dropping phrases like “a bit of history” or wondering “where to begin?” When explaining the positions of Mississippi Library Commissioner Lura G. Currier, he concludes, “Her actions regarding library services to African Americans remain questionable at best,” and interjects that “the logic of this is astounding” while describing her support for segregated libraries at a time when the American Library Association was not taking a stance on the issue (Selby, 2019, p17). The colloquial tone, while unusual in a scholarly context, matches the conversational nature of oral history. This book is clearly a passion project for Selby. His style and his dramatic storytelling skills will help it reach beyond an academic audience to a general audience as well.

Relying on letters, photographs, news clippings, typed book wish lists, diary entries, news accounts, and police reports, as well as his own interviews throughout the book, Selby pieces together a narrative of each Freedom Library’s story, which is often challenging due to limited documentation. Freedom Libraries often existed for only a short time, from months to a few years. For instance, Selby was unable to determine exactly how long the Selma Freedom Library lasted or what happened to the books that volunteers gathered for its collection. Alabama and Arkansas—like Mississippi—were particularly hostile to the Freedom Library project, as illustrated by the terrifying end of the Haynesville Freedom Library in Alabama. Pattie Mae and Leon McDonald, a Black couple who were residents of Haynesville, ran the Freedom Library out of their home until it was attacked and shot at by the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) late in the night of September 1, 1965. After the KKK incident, Pattie Mae burned the book collection because the harassment and violence troubled her, and she wanted to protect her children. The destruction of the library’s collection is evidence of the difficulty of preserving the legacy of the Freedom Libraries. The book includes a photo of the author with Pattie Mae McDonald from 2013 when he went to visit and interview her; she was still living in the same home where the Freedom Library was housed. Thanks to Selby’s efforts, McDonald’s story is recorded for future generations.

While the SNCC organizing efforts in the South explain the existence of the Freedom Libraries in the Southern States of Mississippi, Alabama, and Arkansas, one of the most interesting chapters in the book—chapter six—describes the Freedom Library in Philadelphia founded by John Eliot Churchville, a Black nationalist and musician who was influenced by meeting Malcolm X in Harlem. He joined SNCC and volunteered in Georgia, where voter registration efforts in Black neighborhoods also focused on teaching African Americans to read so they could pass the literacy voting requirement. When he founded the Philadelphia Freedom Library, his fellow organizers wrote a letter to James Baldwin asking for book donations. Selby cites a Library of Congress oral history interview with John Churchville (Mosnier, 2011), but no direct correspondence. Churchville confirmed that Selby never contacted him for an interview (J.E. Churchville, personal communication, May 12, 2022). Selby apparently did not spend as much time

investigating Churchville's recollections for *Freedom Libraries* as he did for the Southern SNCC activists and Freedom Library workers. In a section titled "Growing Pains," Selby (2019) expresses discomfort with Churchville's brief identification with the Nation of Islam and later the Black People's Unity Movement. Similarly, Selby (2019) also suggests Stokely Carmichael's coinage of the phrase "Black Power" at a rally signaled that "the heroic phase of the movement had come to a close" (p.144). The author sometimes seems to lionize white civil rights activists while discounting organizations devoted to Black autonomy. This risks presenting a "white savior" narrative.

From an LIS perspective, *Freedom Libraries* presents stories that have been ignored in American library history, while leaving open the possibility that future scholars will continue to add to this research. In particular, future study might focus on examples of literacy programs operated by Black people themselves, such as the Black Panthers' famous free breakfast programs for children. *Freedom Libraries* nods in that direction at its conclusion. For example, the book *From the Bullet to the Ballot*, a definitive account of the Chicago Black Panther Party, mentions that the organization's chairman Fred Hampton, who was murdered by the Chicago police in his sleep in 1969 at the age of twenty-one, "helped to establish and run a cultural center on Madison Street in Maywood that contained books relating to the black experience" (Williams, 2013, p. 57). Hampton's cultural center could fit Selby's definition of a community-run Freedom Library responding to information needs. However, reconstructing its history, library collection, and community impact would be a daunting challenge for future LIS scholars. More recently, the poet, lawyer, and MacArthur fellow Reginald Dwayne Betts has demonstrated the ongoing necessity to address gaps in information needs with his initiative to bring collections of books he calls "Freedom Libraries" to prison inmates—another example worthy of LIS study (Hilton, 2022).

In addition to being a story of hope and struggle, *Freedom Libraries* offers a cautionary tale. It demonstrates the problems that can arise when LIS professionals address limits to information access with patchwork solutions rather than systemic change. Such issues are relevant today for those seeking to address widespread disparities evident in the "digital divide"—the reality that online access is limited in marginalized communities with "wide disparities in computer and Internet access along numerous demographic lines, including income, race, education, and geographic region" (Kinney, 2010). Selby declares in the book's introduction that "American libraries were born out of the twin ideals of democracy and hope; Freedom Libraries were their finest embodiment" (p. xiv). More libraries could embody these ideals of democracy and hope by acting as "public commons," therefore reducing the necessity for underserved communities to establish, as Mattern (2019) puts it, "their own independent, itinerant, fugitive libraries." Regardless, the temporary and fleeting nature of the Freedom Libraries recounted in this book illustrates how they have been instrumental tools for social movements, which makes their study and documentation that much more valuable. *Freedom Libraries* is an important contribution to civil rights and library history in the United States.

## References

- Cook, K.J. (2008). *Freedom Libraries in the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer Project: A history* (Publication No. 3334610) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Alabama]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.
- Cook, K.J. (2013). Struggles within: Lura G. Currier, the Mississippi Library Commission, and library services to African Americans. *Information & Culture*, 48(1), 134–156. <https://doi.org/10.7560/IC48108>
- Hilton, J. (2022, March 16). Freedom Libraries aim to transform prisons, 500 books at a time. *Washington Post*.  
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2022/03/16/freedom-libraries-prison-national-building-museum/>
- Churchville, J. E. (2011). *John Elliott Churchville oral history interview conducted by Joseph Mosnier in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 2011 July 15*. [Video interview]. Civil Rights History Project; Library of Congress.  
<https://www.loc.gov/item/2015669132/>
- Kinney, B. (2010). The internet, public libraries, and the digital divide. *Public Library Quarterly*, 29(2), 104-161. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01616841003779718>
- Mattern, S. (2019). Fugitive libraries. *Places Journal*.  
<https://doi.org/10.22269/191022>
- Selby, M. (2013). Freedom's reading: The discovery of two Alabama Freedom Libraries. *The Southeastern Librarian*, 61(3), 11-16.  
<https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/seln/vol61/iss3/5/>
- Williams, J. (2013). *From the bullet to the ballot: The Illinois chapter of the Black Panther Party and racial coalition politics in Chicago*. The University of North Carolina Press.  
[https://doi.org/10.5149/9781469608167\\_williams](https://doi.org/10.5149/9781469608167_williams)