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My Own PRIVATE LIBRARY

A peek inside the personal library of a librarian

by William A. Richards

When I started thinking about this article I wasn't sure whether to present it in the form of a confession, a boast, or a plea for help. So I imagine it will appear to be a mixture of all three, along with a certain amount of rambling due to late-onset attention deficit disorder.

First, let me get rid of the boast part right off the bat (or maybe this is the confession part). My library consists of approximately 3,500 volumes. (I say "approximately" because I decided some time ago that it was more fun to read 'em than to count 'em, and reading took less time.) Many of these are hardcover books bought new. Do the math. There's a lot of money sitting on those shelves — hundreds of shelves. I am currently converting a garage into an office/library combination with almost 300 linear feet of shelf space. The room is lined from floor to ceiling with shelves. And still there isn't enough room. The overflow lives on shelves in at least six other rooms and one hallway. If the doghouse could be climate controlled, I might even put some in there and get a smaller dog.

Well, since size doesn't matter, I'll stop talking about the number of books and shelves in my library, and move on to the more interesting 6XX fields. My library is less a systematic "collection" than an accumulation reflecting the changes in my personal and professional interests over more than 35 years. I still have some of the books I acquired in the late 60s and early 70s, when many of my friends and I were interested in politics and wanted our leaders to give peace a chance. One of my favorites from that era is *The Arrogance of Power*, by the late Senator J. William Fulbright. His book is even more relevant now than it was in the 60s.

You can trace the number of times I changed majors in college through some of the older books in my collection, particularly those dealing with politics, philosophy,

literature, and psychology. Speaking of psychology, I must digress a little here. What strange obsessive compulsive disorder causes people (like me) to collect books or anything else for that matter in unusually, insanely large quantities? Certainly there is a qualitative difference between collecting books and, say, collecting Coca-Cola memorabilia. Or rather, the difference lies in the nature of the objects collected, not so much in the neurotic compulsion to collect them. What do we accomplish by surrounding ourselves with the stuff we collect, whether it's books or baseball cards? Why do some people (myself included) keep a book after they've read it?

In my case I do actually re-read or at least consult many of the books I own and have already read. The books that have most affected me in the past usually are worth re-reading. Why bother re-reading a book? Obviously the stories don't change. No matter how many times you read *Moby Dick*, Ahab and the White Whale will never become friends. What changes is me, the reader, and the lens of experiences I bring to each reading results in a different reading and understanding of the book.

On a much more superficial level, I enjoy the look and feel of books. Even the smell of new books is delightful. They are also wonderful props for decorating a room and making people think you're an interlektual, as Flannery O'Connor would say. Have you ever noticed the carefully arranged shelves of books used as a backdrop for interviewing "experts" on TV news programs? If you look closely you may even spot some Readers Digest condensed books, so you know they're used strictly as props. Naturally I never consider the books in My Library as mere props or décor. Looking at the ones I've read evokes memories of the ideas or fine writing they contain; the dozens of books I probably won't live long enough to read are my own spooky *memento mori*.

My reading tastes in literature are rather conservative and perhaps dull. An avid reader herself, my mother-in-law once observed that despite all the books in our house, there wasn't anything to read. Perhaps that's because there is virtually no "fiction," as it's classified in bookstores and public libraries, in my private library. I recently read *The DaVinci Code* to find out what all the fuss was about. It was just OK—better than the movie—but it reminded me why I don't waste time reading much contemporary "Fiction."

I guess that makes me a book snob. Favorite authors extensively represented in my library include Shakespeare, Twain, Hawthorne, Hemingway, Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Alice Walker, Joel Chandler Harris, Southern authors in general, and books about them. A lot of these books are "classics," the kinds of books that people talk about but don't read, as Twain said. In the 70s I was especially fond of Hawthorne, so much so that I wrote a master's thesis on his symbolism. Only later did I learn the extent of his influence on Faulkner and O'Connor. Faulkner, much like Hawthorne, usually wrote with passion about "the human heart in conflict with itself," as he said. O'Connor's characters, if not always conflicted are usually afflicted in strange but compelling ways. My favorite is Hazel Motes in *Wise Blood*. When he proclaims that "nobody with a good car needs to be justified" I expect divine lightning to strike at any moment.

I recently finished reading the entire works of Mark Twain, as published in the Library of America series. That's eight volumes of about 1,000 pages each. My library includes almost all of the Library of America titles, as well as the complete works of Charles Dickens (another of my favorites). Another large set of books in my library is *Great Books of the Western World*, bought by my parents for my sister and me when I was barely old enough to read comic books. This set truly does include many great "classic" books. I know this because every time I find a copy of this set for sale in a book store or library book sale the volumes are in pristine condition, confirming Twain's definition of a "classic."

In addition to literature (with a capital L) and much literary criticism, my library also includes a large number of history titles, particularly Southern history. I became interested in Southern history when I was Director of the Atlanta History Center Library and Archives, an interest which continued while I worked on a doctorate in American Studies at Emory.

My library includes more than just the *Norton Anthology* Hall of Fame authors. How boring that would be for some people. One of my "special" collections is the

bibliographic equivalent of "The Gong Show." *The Wit and Wisdom of Spiro T. Agnew*, for example, consists of 100 blank pages. *The Lucretia Borgia Cookbook* claims to have authentic favorite recipes of notorious historical figures, such as Pancho Villa's yummy recipe for Chicken Federales. Want to know how to escape from quicksand, wrestle an alligator, or win a sword fight? Consult my copy of *The Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook*. One of my favorite weird books is *Porno-Graphics: the Shame of Our Art Museums*, by satirist Dan Greenburg. It includes color overlays so the reader can see how much better famous paintings of "nekkid" people look clothed. Another favorite of mine is Philip Garner's *Better Living Catalog*, featuring pseudo-serious descriptions of "62 absolute necessities for contemporary survival," such as solar-powered earmuffs or low-rider roller skates.

Many GLQ readers know my wife, Jane, who is also a librarian. Although she doesn't suffer from bibliomania as I do, she has been largely responsible for our growing collection of cookbooks and smaller collection of children's books. Among our favorite cookbooks are the 26 volumes of *Southern Living Annual Recipes*. Two of our more unusual cookbooks — not counting *The Lucretia Borgia Cookbook* — include *Southern Cooking* by the late *Atlanta Journal* columnist Mrs. S. R. Dull and *The Congressional Club Cookbook*. Originally published in 1928, our copy of *Southern Cooking* is one of a reprint edition published in 1988 that was reproduced from a rare original copy in the Coca-Cola/Shillinglaw Cookbook Collection at the Atlanta History Center. Our copy of *The Congressional Club Cookbook* has a personal inscription from the late Senator Paul Coverdell.

Among our small children's collection are several pop-up books by Robert Sabuda, including *America the Beautiful* and *The Christmas Alphabet*. Given the location of our home in the neighborhood of Brer Rabbit, we naturally have several Joel Chandler Harris books as well.

Unfortunately, even if I take early retirement, do nothing but read, and live to triple digits, I doubt that I will be able to finish all the books in my library that I haven't read, especially since I'm still adding to the collection and enjoy re-reading old favorites! By the way, have you ever had someone look at your personal library and ask that most annoying of questions — "Have you read all these books?" I think everyone with a large collection sooner or later gets this question. I like to answer as Danny Kaye once did in an episode of "The Twilight Zone": "Why would I want a library full of books I've already read?" ►►

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