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My Own PRIVATE LIBRARY

A peek inside the personal library of a librarian

by Elizabeth Leslie Bagley

My collection of books is marked by personal significance rather than by quantity. Since my late mother was a college English professor and her mother was a public librarian, monographs always were important childhood influences. Still, I take pleasure in borrowing from libraries and in loaning what I own instead of hoarding books at home. My husband takes the opposite approach, so as we've moved around the state during two decades of marriage, we've compromised on the books that remained with us. In our little bungalow in midtown Atlanta, we keep our volumes on wrought iron folding bookcases with rectangular wicker baskets on each shelf, enabling easy access to a shelf at a time. There is a little overflow in piles that decorate the house and at my office on campus, but that is the extent of our collection until we fulfill our dream of someday having a study with built-in bookcases on all four walls.

My library can be grouped into three categories: autographed children's picture books, works that stem from my college courses and interests, and those that have a family connection.

The first category, children's books, generally dates from an ironic period. We did not have children yet, but I was working as a children's librarian for less-than-rich library systems, so I took every opportunity to obtain new materials to share during storytimes and school visits: large-format picture books, Caldecott winners, young adult novels and items autographed by authors and illustrators at conferences. Until I met a charming three-year-old (with whom I've kept in touch – she's now a sophomore in college), I was not convinced that I'd make a good mother. She changed my mind, so my son, a brother-in-law who teaches pre-K, and nephews and nieces have benefited from my acquisitiveness. I've kept the books with stories or autographs that held meaning

for me: Carmen Deedy's *Agatha's Feather Bed* and *The Library Dragon*; Jon Scieszka's *Math Curse*, *The Stinky Cheese Man*, and *The Frog Prince, Continued*; Robert Munsch's *The Paper Bag Princess*; Rosemary Wells' adorable *Max* series; and others by Steven Kellogg, Mem Fox, plus all the Harry Potter tomes. The shelves also hold books I loved as a child: E.L. Konigsburg's *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*, E.B. White's *Trumpet of the Swan*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers*, and *The World of Christopher Robin*. Our son's arrival 14 years ago brought the addition of all of Shel Silverstein's poetry, lots of Avi, Eric Carle, Sendak, Carl Hiaasen's *Hoot*; *My Friends' Beliefs*, car books and seasonal collections for Easter, Halloween, Thanksgiving and Christmas. Every child should get to play with pocket-part books like *The Jolly Christmas Postman* or be able to listen to *Mean Soup* on a bad day. Stories illustrated by Audrey and Don Wood, Richard Egielski, or J. Brian Pinkney are also treasured.

Having been an expatriate in England for five years, I have distinct memories of driving my mother nuts by reading *Gone With the Wind* during a family vacation in Cornwall, while choosing to read Jane Austen at Edisto Island, S.C. Naturally, I was drawn to Brit lit in college. I gathered Victorian novels, as well as South African works by Nadine Gordimer and Athol Fugard. Other favorites dating from my English major years include Joan Didion's *A Book of Common Prayer*, Lillian Hellman's *Pentimento*, Flannery O'Connor's *The Habit of Being*, Eudora Welty's "Why I Live at the P.O.," Robert Frost, and World War I poetry. Two courses that really stayed with me were a Vietnam War seminar and the "History of Photography." From Beaumont Newhall, Susan Sontag and Jill Krementz's *The Writer's Image*, I developed my wish to purchase museum quality photographs should I ever win the lottery. (Perhaps that dream is tied to my encounter

with Kurt Vonnegut to whom Kremenz was married — but that's a job interview story.) The Vietnam class prompted the very few times my father and I conversed about his experiences there, so *Going After Cacciato*, *The Things They Carried*, David Halberstam's *The Best and the Brightest*, Stanley Karnow, Bobbie Ann Mason, Barbara Tuchman and accounts of the My Lai massacre added to our shared images. A happier shared interest is reflected in the Bill Bryson books Dad has given me, such as *I'm a Stranger Here Myself*, or works by Jesse Stuart, the Kentucky writer who was a close friend of Dad's parents, with whom I spent many idyllic summers.

The Carolinas have their rightful place here too. We have most of Pat Conroy's titles and the moving *Secret Life of Bees* by Sue Monk Kidd. Charles Frazier, Jan Karon, Padgett Powell, Reynolds Price, Dori Sanders, Lee Smith and Nicholas Sparks are represented as well.

Other books with family connections include Harry Crews' *A Childhood: The Biography of a Place*, Janisse Ray's and Amy Blackmarr's odes to south Georgia, *What Every American Should Know About American History*, Plato's *Republic*, *Literary Trips* and cookbooks. Since the cookbooks were handed down through my grandmothers, I should note the matriarchy's place in spurring my education at a women's college, which led me to collect things like Adrienne Rich's *Diving Into the Wreck* and Suzan-Lori Parks' *Getting Mother's Body*. One book came to me from my formidable Agnes Scott alumna grandmother. *The Women of the Confederacy* by John Levi Underwood (her grandfather) was published originally in 1906; she had it reprinted and distributed to libraries in 2003. While parts of it are not "politically correct" for today, I am proud of his preservation of period thought about as "the War Between the States" and its brave women. The second most important work from the Bainbridge/Cuthbert contingent is an 1855 *Shakespeare's Complete Works with Illustrations* still intact in its brown leather binding. A favorite great-aunt gave it to my mother, who taught drama throughout her career, and now this librarian has it for safekeeping.

Of course, there are reference books such as *The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*, *The Elements of Style* and *The New York Public Library Desk Reference*; atlases and almanacs; dictionaries and thesauri; *Algebra for Dummies*; and *The Georgia Tech Trivia Book*. *Leadership Secrets of Santa Claus*, *Library Disaster Planning* and

Recovery and *Who Moved My Cheese?* are included as professional references.

My latest collecting interests include the authors who appear at the Georgia Center for the Book and at the Decatur Book Festival (held the past two Labor Day weekends) — a great new tradition for Atlanta. Jack Riggs' *When the Finch Rises* is beautifully written. Terry Kay's *To Dance With the White Dog* has always been a jewel, so I anxiously await his latest to add to his others on my shelves. Lastly, I am intrigued with the concept of "First Year common reads," the books that entering college students read and discuss across the curriculum. I have compiled a list, starting with *The Mercury Thirteen*, *On Beauty* and *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. I am diligently working my way through buying those multifaceted works of fiction and nonfiction. ►►

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