

October 2009

My Own Private Library: A Peek inside the Personal Library of an Almost Librarian

David Baker

Georgia Public Library Service, dbaker@georgialibraries.org

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/glq>

 Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Baker, David (2009) "My Own Private Library: A Peek inside the Personal Library of an Almost Librarian," *Georgia Library Quarterly*: Vol. 46 : Iss. 4 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/glq/vol46/iss4/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Georgia Library Quarterly by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu.



My Own PRIVATE LIBRARY

A peek inside the personal library of an *almost* librarian

by David Baker

Within minutes of signing the lease on my first and only apartment back in 1983, I headed for the furniture store to purchase the furnishings I'd need to fill it. The initial list of requirements was short: bed, sofa, stereo hutch, desk and bookshelves. Thanks to the ingenuity of Scandinavian design, numbers four and five came joined: a 36-inch-wide unit of bookshelves with a desk built in. By adding another shelf unit to each side, I was remarkably good to go — fully able to sit, sleep, eat (off the desk) and be entertained by both a wall of sound and a wall of books. What more could a new grad in his first job need?

If your answer was “books to fill the shelves,” there could be a job waiting for you in the fortune-teller booth at the Georgia State Fair.

Having been gainfully employed for fewer than 10 months, I resorted to desperate measures, filling one shelf with college textbooks and another with books about movies, rock music (both of which I had reviewed in college and for a few local papers in the years immediately afterward) and baseball. Current and former paperback bestsellers probably filled two or three more shelves. The reasonably complete works of F. Scott Fitzgerald were certainly there, as were Nathaniel West's *The Day of the Locust* and Jerzy Kosinski's *Being There*. The rest of the shelves displayed knickknacks alerting visitors that they had entered the realm of a die-hard St. Louis Cardinal and South Carolina Gamecock fan.

So what has changed, you ask? Location, location, location. And size, size, size.

The three bookshelves with the built-in desk have moved from my Greenville apartment to a succession of houses in Greenville, Columbia and Atlanta, where today they

remain the overfilled focus of the Cardinal-and-Gamecock-filled spare bedroom that is my home office. Enabled by 27 years of steady income, of course, I have brought in more shelves and bookcases to join them. Books constantly threaten to — and often do — overflow them. Collections have multiplied as interests have expanded. The number of volumes exceeds 800 and grows, it seems, whenever I'm not looking.

Joining an upgraded Fitzgerald collection are the complete travel writings of Paul Theroux and all of Armistead Maupin's novels. The baseball collection now covers the Cardinals (the prize being an autographed copy of David Halberstam's *October 1964*, thanks to a prized co-worker), statistics and lore (Vince Staten's *Why Is the Foul Pole Fair?*), novels about baseball players (Selden Edwards' *The Little Book*), histories of the textile leagues and multiple biographies of “Shoeless” Joe Jackson, whose shoes I have dutifully visited at the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum in Cooperstown, N.Y.

I grew up in the same neighborhood as Shoeless Joe and played with absolutely none of his skill on the same diamond where he caught his first pop up (and where he is now commemorated), behind the old Brandon textile mill in West Greenville, where the grandfather who died before I was born served two terms as mayor. From what I understand, Granddad was never any too pleased to have a liquor store smack in the middle of “his” Pendleton Street — even if it was owned by the locally-idolized-but-nationally-disgraced former Black Sox outfielder. My uncle Bud, from the fun side of the family, was apparently a semi-regular at Joe's establishment, though, and he shared many a first-hand Shoeless Joe story as I was growing up.

From the baseball shelf, we can move over to books about birds and birding (including one devoted to the avian cardinal), lighthouses, elephants, the sinking and recovery of the Titanic, vintage wristwatches, decadent Berlin and architects Frank Lloyd Wright and Antonio Gaudí. Travel-related books, including several about Gaudí's Barcelona and Robert Hughes's excellent 1993 history of that city, take up four shelves.

And lest you fret that I've left behind any part of my past, be assured that music and movies are still well represented on my shelves. Although many such books are scholarly examinations of one or the other, I can't pretend to be faithful to the intellectual. For every serious examination of the cultural impact of Billy Wilder's comedies, the "Star Wars" series or "Blade Runner," there's at least one seriously dishy — and often autographed, which makes all questionable "facts" they contain seem somehow more truthful — autobiography by the likes of Lauren Bacall, Jane Fonda, Joan Collins, Minnie Pearl, Martha Reeves, Carrie Fisher, Ray Davies, Lulu, Tab Hunter, Mary Tyler Moore, Jane Pauley or Barbara Walters.

My lust for celebrity anecdotes is exceeded only by my inexhaustible craving for the sort of historical fodder capable of making me Georgia's version of Slumdog Millionaire. For instance, Chicago might be home to the odious

Baby Bears of the National League Central, but I'm thrilled to know so many juicy, behind-the-scenes details about the city's spectacular architecture, its notorious Everleigh sisters and its World Columbian Exposition of 1893, for which my mayoral ancestor, Royal Columbus "R.C." Baker, was partially named. This esoteric knowledge comes from numerous sources, chief among them Karen Abbott's *Sin in the Second City: Madams, Ministers, Playboys, and the Battle for America's Soul* and, more importantly, Erik Larson's *The Devil in the White City*.

At my first American Library Association convention in Chicago in 2005, I had the opportunity to meet Larson. He said that he was inspired to write what I consider the single best non-fiction book I have ever read "by reading a little novel called *The Alienist*" by Caleb Carr. With the exception of *The Great Gatsby*, *The Alienist* is my favorite work of fiction. To discover that one of my three all-time favorite books directly led to the creation of one of the other two was a moment not unlike watching the Cardinals win it all in '64, '67, '82 or '06.

And I would have missed that moment if I wasn't almost a librarian. ►►

A fan of books, birds and baseball for nearly five decades, David Baker is director of communications for Georgia Public Library Service in Atlanta.

