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My Own PRIVATE LIBRARY

A peek inside the personal library of a librarian

by Charlene Hsu Gross

“The Library at Netherfield, I’ve heard, is one of the finest in the country.”

~Elizabeth Bennet



“Now, what’s so important about the problem of access to the shelves? One of the misunderstandings that dominate[s] the concept of libraries is that you go into one to look for a book whose title you already know. In reality it often happens that you go to a library because you want a book whose title you do know, but the principal function of the library, at least the function of the library in my house and of that of any friend we may chance to visit, is to discover books whose existence we never suspected, only to discover that they are of extreme importance to us.”

De Bibliotheca by Umberto Eco
Found in Candida Höfer’s Libraries

When I think of the libraries of the world, my thoughts ramble to the New York Public Library, the Library of Congress, Harvard’s Widener Library, Yale University Library, the Bodleian Library, Bibliothèque Nationale, Trinity College in Dublin, The Vatican Library, and many more. A library represents the owner in a wonderful way. I always enjoy perusing the books in a friend’s (or stranger’s) space because of the discoveries one can make.

Words, language, stories, and visual art are my truest delights. I’d like to suggest some perambulating in my library instead of a “peek” and persuade you that “my own private” library is neither my own nor private at all. Everyone gets to share all the books in our household. Let me assure you that the numerous books I enjoy in my home are a family venture whether they reside on the various bookshelves or in piles on desks, tables, at bedside, or on the floor.

Come up the back stairs to the deck entrance and enter in. The main bookshelves in the living room contain art books, books on China, Southern literature. The South is represented by Walker Percy, Doris Betts, Lee Smith, Reynolds Price, Bailey White, Eudora Welty, Josephine Humphreys, Charles Frazier, Clyde Edgerton, Elizabeth Spencer, Toni Morrison, and the seminal *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. We acquired many of the books on China our first year of marriage. There is the classic, *China: A History in Art, In China* by photographer, Eve Arnold, as well as *Chinese Encounters* by Inge Morath and Arthur Miller. I have to mention *Journey Into China* produced by National Geographic—all of these are visual wonders.

Two recent acquisitions are from the latest sale by Atlanta Book Exchange, now, unfortunately, out of business. I am pleased to have added Stokstad’s

Art History, Revised Second Edition (2005) and *The Grammar of Ornament*. Another worth mentioning is Sister Wendy's *The Story of Painting*.

Through the hallway, do notice the mantle where a place of honor has been given to several women writers whose work and lives my husband and I have appreciated over the years. At present, you will find Annie Dillard, Jane Kenyon, Kathleen Norris, Lauren Winner, Lee Smith, Luci Shaw, Madeleine L'Engle, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Phyllis Tickle. There is plenty of room for others to join—perhaps Jhumpa Lahiri.

Upstairs in the master bedroom is a beloved bookcase full of poetry. Words are turned into images and all the senses by Wendell Berry, Billy Collins, Dickinson, Eliot, Donald Hall, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Jane Kenyon, Denise Levertov, Mary Oliver, Linda Pastan, Rilke, Roethke, Shakespeare, Richard Wilbur, Yeats, Adam Zagajewski, and more. *Oxford's One Hundred Years of Poetry for Children* also has a place here.

The upstairs study has a wall of bookshelves of mostly religion, theology, liturgy, and the Christian life with a healthy smattering of civil rights. The Inklings are here along with Henri Nouwen, Anne Lamott, Thomas Merton, Mother Teresa, Karl Barth, Dorothy Sayers, John Stott, Marva Dawn. There is *A Different Mirror* by Takaki, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, W.E.B. DuBois, *A Quiet Revolution* by John Perkins, and Penny Lernoux's *Cry of the People*.

Take a look at the handsome book, *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage*, featuring the lives of Flannery O'Connor, Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, and Walker Percy.

Tucked away on the small nook shelves are books of all kinds from the Michael L. Printz award-winner for young adult literature, *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang to Rachel Carson's classic, *Silent Spring*. If you look carefully, you will come across another variety of non-fiction such as *Markings* by Dag Hammarskjold, Pomerantz's *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn*, Stanley Karnow's *Vietnam: A History*, and *Walk to Freedom* by Nelson Mandela.

Now, let me showcase the C.S. Lewis hardback collection and Madeleine L'Engle collection that are kept on the shelves with the glass doors at the top of the stairs. These are designated the sweetest treasures because of the power of the stories and the authenticity of the authors' lives. In case of fire, I

imagine that these would be swept up and taken out only second after the art on the walls (not to mention the dogs).

If you happen to wander all the way downstairs, you'll find a mess at my desk. But on the shelves are the likes of J. R. R. Tolkien, Brian Jacques' Redwall series, Harry Potter, Jane Yolen, Malcolm Gladwell's *Blink* and *What the Dog Saw* as well as Nietzsche, Kant, Kierkegaard and deToqueville's *Democracy in America* and *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years* by Donald Miller. The New York Public Library's *Books of the Century* sits comfortably by John Ciardi's *A Browser's Dictionary*.

There you have it. I've wanted to offer you a good selection of the printed gems in our home. Perhaps you have recognized some of the richness in the names and titles or have been enticed to consider taking a book off the shelf. I hope you will.

Charlene Hsu Gross is a Circulation Assistant at ACA Library of SCAD Atlanta and a 2010 ALA Emerging Librarian

