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My Own Private Library

Sara Miller

I am not a librarian who is neat and orderly in my private library, or even in my work library, for that matter. My desk is covered in piles, and my bookcases at home have books on top of books. I moved recently, so most of my books are still in boxes at the moment. However, if you asked me where my copy of Ian McEwan's *Atonement* is, my fingers would know just where to find it. My piles may not look organized, but they are. It's just *my* organization system. Within those piles there are some groups of similar books. There are the textbooks that were not worth anything at buy-back in college or grad school. I have quite a few over-sized, glossy-picture-filled movie books, various classics I've fallen in love with over the years, and a plethora of mystery and crime paperbacks that often are traded out through online book trading sites.

The main part of my collection, though, is two groups of widely dissimilar books. A good chunk of my shelf space is dominated by Civil War books. A budding historian at a young age, I started collecting Civil War books on my first trip to Gettysburg for a family reunion trip while in elementary school.

Some are standard texts like James McPherson's *The Battle Cry of Freedom* and Shelby Foote's *The Civil War* which make my shelves respectable. I have Civil War family research guides and a guide to the Union records at the National Archives. I purchased the cumbersome but picture-rich *The Civil War* by Ken Burns on deep discount at Barnes & Noble. I can still imagine the violin solo from the television miniseries playing when rereading the first chapter or two.

I discovered while in school that my great-great-great-uncle was the head of the United States Military Telegraph during the Civil War, and I have a collection of books covering this niche topic. A great many were out of print, and I have discovered an interesting niche of publishers who reprint out-of-print books for a fairly small fee. *The Military Telegraph, During the Civil Wars*, and *Sketches of War History, 1861-1865*, were just some of the out-of-print books I was able to buy. Books new enough to have ISBNs included *Manufacturing the Future: A History of Western Electric*, *Lincoln in the Telegraph Office*, *Spies and Spymasters of the Civil War*, and *Mister Lincoln's T-Mails*. All of these titles are marked copiously in pencil, with post its, and with small pieces of paper, for an article I just never got around to writing.

I saw *Glory* when it was released, and set about collecting a small stash on books on the topic, including a book with the collected letters of Colonel Robert G. Shaw, Blue-Eyed Child of Fortune. While collecting these books — at the age of 12 or 14 — I came across a set of mass market paperbacks known as the *Eyewitness to the Civil War* series by Bantam. Each book featured the personal recollections of different soldiers, North and South, general and private, who fought and wrote about the Civil War. John Worsham's *One of Jackson's Foot Cavalry* is a fantastic day-to-day description of what it really was like to be a Confederate soldier with lots of interesting (if sometimes mildly disgusting) details of soldier life. The spines are broken on all of these and pages are falling out in chunks, but they were an inexpensive way to read first-hand accounts of the Civil War. Multiple readings of these works was one reason I chose to earn my B.A. in history.

There are also three shelves of my most loved, well used, and in many cases, nearly destroyed, children's books. These were my first loves: books my parents read to me before I could read, and others I read myself as a child. Some I continue to reread, resulting in a collection of books

that, as a librarian, I would weed from any collection except my own. The bottom shelf of my old college bookshelf (only recently replaced when I moved a month ago) was home to my favorite childhood series. I have every copy of the original *Black Stallion* series by Walter Farley and all of Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* books. Every spine in these series shows wear and tear and chunks of pages are falling out. I have bought replacement books, but keep the originals, as the 1980s covers appeal to my childhood self. I do, every few years, grab the first books in these series (*The Black Stallion* and *Little House in the Big Woods*) on a cold or rainy Sunday and somehow find myself with the final books (*The Black Stallion Legend* and *The First Four Years*) in my hands as I go to bed. Sometimes, too, I just read my favorites, *The Black Stallion's Filly* and *These Happy Golden Years*. Well, read might be too strong of a word as they are nearly memorized. Skim and enjoy might be a better description.

I also have a collection of picture books that I still enjoy flipping through. Whenever I see a lost or loose dog somewhere, I always think of *Harry the Dirty Dog*. I loved the pictures of him trotting home, brush in mouth, so his family could give him a bath and recognize him. As a kid, I often felt that way! I also have the *Collected Stories of Winnie the Pooh* by A. A. Milne. As a child, my mom had a collected set with the four different original books: *Winnie the Pooh*, *The House at Pooh Corner*, *When We Were Very Young*, and *Now We Are Six*. I have had a life-long love of silly old Pooh, even if I do relate more to Eeyore sometimes, and I was even able to see the original Pooh, owned by Milne's son, at an exhibit at the New York Public Library while I was in library school at Rutgers. Pooh looks nothing like his Disney version, but he certainly looked loved. I also have my original copies of *Make Way for Ducklings* (who knew Richard Nixon could look so animated?), *The Velveteen Rabbit*, a collection of all the Peter Rabbit stories by Beatrix Potter, and *The Little House* by Virginia Lee Burton.

My books about animals, horses in particular, have a shelf all to themselves. Besides my ode to the *Black Stallion* series, I have all of Marguerite Henry's books. I have read each of her horse books at least ten times. What I really loved about Ms. Henry's books was that they brought together horses and history, through the real life history behind the individual horses. I grew up in Orlando, and there used to be harness racing track there named for one of the characters in *Born to Trot*, Ben White. *King of the Wind* dealt with the start of the Thoroughbred breed in England in the 1700s. *Justin Morgan Had a Horse* was also set in the 1700s, and dealt with Justin Morgan and his namesake breed. I have managed to wear out the binding on every one of the twelve books by Ms. Henry that I owned.

The books on my shelves are not arranged in any real order. Not even by author. However, they are my books and I know just where every title is on my shelf. I also know they are loved and well read. Ok, maybe a tiny bit abused at this point, but loved nonetheless.

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