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## My Own Private Library: A Peek Inside the Personal Library of a Librarian

Jill Prouty

*Peachtree City Library*, [jprouty@peachtree-city.org](mailto:jprouty@peachtree-city.org)

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# *My Own* PRIVATE LIBRARY

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By Jill Prouty

You are what you read. Never has this rung so true after reading William Kuhn's *Reading Jackie: Her Autobiography in Books*. I remember John Kennedy, Jr., giving a statement to the media shortly after his mother's death. It struck me as odd at the time:

"My mother died surrounded by her friends and her family and her books, and the people and the things that she loved. She did it in her own way, and on her own terms, and we all feel lucky for that."

Books. Inanimate objects that ranked high enough to warrant credit at her death bed. What does our choice of reading material say about us? They expose our personal interests whether it be in politics, art history, or alternative medicine. They reveal how we interpret the human condition. They can shape our thoughts and open up a world of knowledge to us, without ever having to leave the comfort of our living rooms. Forget the medicine cabinet, when I visit people, I snoop through their bookcase!

So what does my personal book collection reveal about me? For starters, it speaks of my heritage. I've enjoyed collecting old books on Maine history. Some of my favorites are:

*Saint Croix: The Sentinel River* by Guy Murchie. New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1947. (This book belonged to my grandmother and contains quite a bit of information about one of our ancestors, Col. John Allan).

*Military Operations in Eastern Maine and Nova Scotia* by Frederick Kidder. Albany, NY: Joel Munsell, 1867. (This book was chiefly compiled from the journals and letters of Col. Allan. My copy is a reprint from Higginson Book Co. in

Salem, MA).

*Documentary History of the State of Maine containing The Baxter Manuscripts*, Vols XIX (1914) and XIV (1910). Ed. by James Phinney Baxter. Portland, ME: Lefavor-Tower Co. (I found this one on abebooks.com at a bookstore in New Hampshire specializing in rare books).

*Narrative of the Town of Machias: The Old and the New, the Early and the Late* by George W. Drisko. Machias, ME: The Press of the Republican, 1904. (Again, a book that belonged to my grandmother. It's in bad shape, and I probably could find a better copy, but it has my grandmother's handwritten notes in it).

*Maine Rubicon: Downeast Settlers During the American Revolution* by John Howard Ahlin. Camden, ME: Picton Press. 1966. (I picked this up at the Colonial Days celebration in Machias, ME in 2006).

*The University of Maine at Machias, 1909-2009: A History* by Randall Kindleberger. Univ. of ME at Machias, 2009. (My mother was the valedictorian of the class of 1965. My grandmother attended in 1931-32, when it was known as Washington State Normal School. I bought this book at the university bookstore in 2010).

*Blueberryland: Taming the Maine Wild Lowbush Blueberry* by Walter Staples. Portsmouth, NH: Peter E. Randall, 2003. (I bought this one in 2010 from Jim's Books in Machias, Maine. Jim sells used books out of his garage).

I also have a small collection of books by Georgia authors. I absolutely love Janisse Ray. I first read *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* for book club not too long after I moved to Georgia.

Her love for nature is genuine, and I can't get enough of her. I bought *Drifting into Darien: A Personal and Natural History of the Altamaha River* at the Decatur Book Festival in 2011. I'd never even heard of the Altamaha River, but now it is on my list of places to visit. Most recently, I bought and read Ray's *The Seed Underground: A Growing Revolution to Save Food*. As a result, my family now shops at least twice a month at our local farmers market, and my husband has big plans for our garden next year.

Although I understand the appeal of popular "beach reads," I tend to gravitate more toward straight human drama - no riding off into the sunset endings for me. I want my fiction to feel true and real. Here are a few that I've kept in my bookcase: *The Almost Moon* by Alice Sebold; *Good Harbor* by Anita Diamant; *The Inner Circle* by T.C. Boyle; *Family Album* by Penelope Lively; and *Away* by Amy Bloom.

Memoir has become a favorite of mine over the past two to three years. Here are a few you'll find on my bookshelf: *The Suicide Index* by Joan Wickersham; *A Three Dog Life* by Abigail Thomas; *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood* by Judith Ortiz Cofer; *Secret Daughter: A Mixed-Race Daughter and the Mother Who Gave Her Away* by June Cross; and *Blue Nights* by Joan Didion.

I try to read at least one classic a year. Some are re-reads from my high school and/or college days that I keep handy: *Tom Jones* by Henry Fielding; *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens; and *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger.

I enjoy attending book talks/signings around the metro Atlanta area. I was thrilled to attend an appearance by Rosalynn Carter at the Carter Center who talked about her book, *Within Our Reach: Ending the Mental Health Crisis* - a subject near and dear to my heart. Salman Rushdie was another favorite at the Carter Center, when his *Luka and the Fire of Life* was first released. Rushdie blew me away with his

insights and charm.

Religious studies has been a life-long interest of mine. I like to keep my Bible within reach, specifically the *Holy Bible w/ Apocrypha* (New Rev. Standard Version). The same Bible I've had since college (22 years), full of notes. I also own and love two books by my former professor, James Tabor: *The Jesus Dynasty: The Hidden History of Jesus, His Royal Family, and the Birth of Christianity*; and *Restoring Abrahamic Faith*. I can't wait to add his forthcoming book to my collection, *Paul and Jesus: How the Apostle Transformed Christianity*, due out from Simon & Schuster on November 13 of this year.

Then I have what I like to call my "tools of the trade." These include books such as: *On Writing Well, 30th Anniversary Edition: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction* by William Zinsser as well as my trusty *Oxford American Writer's Thesaurus*, 2nd ed., compiled by Christine A. Lindberg.

One book I refer to more and more lately is *The Zombie Survival Guide: Complete Protection From the Living Dead* by Max Brooks. I was lucky enough to spot this gem at the last FOL book sale. I live in Coweta County, where AMC's *The Walking Dead* currently makes its home. As it says on the back cover, "It is a book that can save your life."

Many say that the art of the printed and bound word may be in its twilight years. While I recognize the benefits of the e-book (portability for one), I shudder to think that collecting books will one day become an activity for the eccentric neophobe. I can hear it now, "Jill died surrounded by her friends and her family and her trusty e-reader." Doesn't exactly evoke the same feeling, does it?

Jill Prouty is Library Administrator at Peachtree City Library