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My Own PRIVATE LIBRARY

By Charlie Bennett

"I read that book, every page, and then I threw it away." – "Bellringer Blues" by Nick Cave

This story ends with no lessons learned, just habits broken.

My own private library grew for fifteen years as I moved from city to city, each move requiring a few extra paper boxes (my preferred storage for the books) until my collection maxed out at just over a thousand books. I bought compulsively from used bookstores, and I never turned down the offer of a free book. I bought books I'd read so I could read them again, and I bought books I'd heard of in case I wanted to read them some day. I bought complete series of mystery novels in paperback because I liked looking at them all together on a shelf. I knew I had too many books -- textbooks from my undergraduate career, used books bought in Boston, Paris, and San Diego, books my parents had owned, books my roommates had owned, books from places I couldn't remember, and gift books from people I no longer knew -- but I couldn't get rid of any. I couldn't stand to reduce my collection. Eventually, I kept a web catalog on LibraryThing so I would know exactly how many books I had and where they were.

When my wife and I moved into our first apartment, we combined our two bibliomaniacal collections, and I instantly lost track of how many books we had. At least two thousand, with more coming in each month: cookbooks, art books, library school textbooks, hardback mystery novels that I could finally afford, frayed paperbacks of beloved children's

books next to new editions of the same books with anniversary forewords, duplicate copies of novels of all kinds from *Frankenstein* to *Fight Club*, and three copies of *Naked Lunch*.

We loved our books. We decorated our rooms with overburdened shelves stuffed with browned paperbacks, ragged hardbacks, and the occasional pristine replacement copy of an old favorite. We kept the duplicates, and we kept the damaged; we kept the ones we read and the ones we hoped to read.

Then we decided to have a baby.

There were many ways we had to change our lifestyle to prepare for a baby. Our budget tightened, and we knew we had to move to a smaller place. To prepare for the move, we started our personal weeding project. The very first step was a moratorium on buying books. That was easy as soon as we added up the price of our book habit. The next, harder step was

reducing our collection.

At first, we resisted getting rid of books. Gathering a stack of ten books to send out of the house (to friends, to the used bookstore, to the library, to Goodwill) took weeks. Then we started to plan where the bookshelves would go in the new house and realized we'd have to get rid of at least two shelves. We began to fill boxes with books: do we need two copies of *The Time Machine*? Is it important for our child to have instant access to Sartre, Camus, and Bukowski? Why did I think I needed all that Bukowski anyway? We spent weekends looking through our books and debating the merits of



keeping a paperback edition of *Down and Out in Paris and London* or a second copy of *Zen & The Art Of Motorcycle Maintenance* (Orwell stayed; the extra Pirsig went).

Classics we read in high school, pulp novels that were truly terrible, kitschy biographies of movie stars and professional bowlers: they all went into the boxes by the door, waiting to be sold or donated. Books on MS-DOS and HTML 3, duplicate copies of Palahniuk and Dickens, moldy German editions of Kafka: out the door. Heartbroken at all the lost books, we packed up our collection and moved to the new house. As soon as we'd unpacked, we realized how many books we still had. Once again, we overstuffed bookshelves and filled our little house with books. "We'll keep getting rid of them, slowly," we reassured each other. "We're not buying any more books. This is okay."

Then my wife got pregnant.

We got rid of books like a library closing down. If I hadn't read it in ten years, it was out. If I hadn't ever read it and couldn't remember why I bought it, it was out. If it wasn't good enough to recommend to someone else, it was out.

When we couldn't stand to give away any more books, we still had too many. We took six

hundred books to my in-laws' house and established a Mississippi branch of the Bennett library. I stashed a hundred books in my office at the Georgia Tech Library (a collection of writing manuals, literary theory, psychotherapy, postmodernism, library school textbooks, and the novels of Walker Percy and Umberto Eco).

By March of that year, the weeding was done. We had enough room to put together a nursery, and our own private library was reduced to five hundred books.

And now we use the public library as we should, bringing books into the house when we want to read them and getting them right back out when they're read. We carefully consider additions to the private library and try to maintain a "one book in, one book out" policy. Of course, our daughter has her own private library, which we add to regularly, but we're sure that single shelf of Dr. Seuss, Margaret Wise Brown, and Roald Dahl won't get out of hand anytime soon...

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