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

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My Own PRIVATE LIBRARY

By Melissa Johnson

I wrote a poem several years ago about the most beautiful book I had ever seen. I found it while searching through the American literature section of my college library. It was a six-inch-tall book of poetry with a beautiful white leather cover embossed with flowers. The publication date was 1872. I was in love. I pulled it from the shelf and ran my hand along the flowers on the cover. I held it up to my cheek and was delighted by the fluttering in my stomach. Since this book was not my original goal, I gingerly put it back upon the shelf, knowing that I would return for him, oh, I mean it, someday soon. I should have left well enough alone.

After several days of elation over my find, I returned to the library to check out the object of my affection. I perused through what I thought was this poetic masterpiece and my heart sank. The material inside the beautiful cover was not nearly as wonderful as the outside had led me to believe. I didn't even bother to check it out and left the library disheartened.

One ornately-covered book that has not disappointed me, and is included in my private library, is a copy of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, published by Hurst and Company Publishers in 1893. The condition of this book, with its yellowed pages and frayed binding, would be a collection development librarian's nightmare. Its disheveled appearance, however, does not dissuade me from my affection for this book. It belonged to my maternal grandfather. He grew up with two books in his house, *The Bible* and this Shakespeare book. No matter what the situation, he always found an appropriate quote from Shakespeare. This book contains pencil

underlines of stanzas that touched him in some way and quotes that he frequently spouted. Further down the shelf is another older book. It stands approximately seven inches high and has a plain blue cloth cover. The title is *Luther's Small Catechism*, dated 1943, and the name on the "This Book Belongs To" page reveals the writing of my then ten-year old mother. Inscribed on the inside cover is my mother's writing from ten years ago when she presented the book to me. It states, "This book has been very informative and a source of great comfort to me in my adult life. As a child I had to study it, as an adult I wanted to study it."

Another one of my plainly covered books is *Other Men's Flowers*. It, too, has the bare blue cloth cover that must have been standard in the 1940s. This book was passed down to me when I was a teenager. It is a poetry anthology published during World War II that belonged to my paternal grandmother. It contains works from Browning, Keats, Yeats, Poe, Kipling, Marvell, Blake, and others. I had never seen anything like the disclaimer in the front of the book, prior to acquiring it. It states:

Government wartime restrictions on materials have made it essential that the amount of paper used in each book be reduced to a minimum. This volume is printed on lighter paper than would have been used before material limitations became necessary, and the number of words on each page has been substantially increased. The smaller bulk in no way indicates that the text has been shortened (Wavell, 1945).

How fortunate we are today. And aren't I glad I didn't originally try reading it with forty-something year old eyes.

Some of my favorite books are those that were written and autographed by professors with whom I've had the pleasure to study or work. The covers of these books vary in their style. *Nameless Flowers* adorns my shelves. Its cover is very drab. It contains poetry written by the troubled Chinese poet Gu Cheng, translated beautifully by Aaron Crippen. Next to that book is *A Little Middle of the Night* written by Molly Brodak, winner of the 2009 Iowa Poetry Prize. The cover of this introspective poetry book is very artistic, and her inscription on the title page encourages me to continue writing. Of course, the name Cowboy Mike (Mike Searles) is legendary on the campus of the former Augusta State University. His book, *Buffalo Soldiers in the West: A Black Soldiers Anthology*, has a two-toned pencil-sketched cover depicting two of the soldiers who are so thoroughly discussed within. My copy of his book is just as priceless to me as Cowboy Mike has been to the university.

Works I've studied and kept because they have affected me in some way are part of my library, as well. *The Things They Carried*, with its grey, black, and white cover, contains the original short story that inspired the book. The story initially seems like a straightforward listing of the physical items these men carry with them into war, but it touches the deeper meaning of what these items represent. And what can I say about the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*? What an inspiration. The outside cover of this book has a portrait of the man, but it's the inside "portrait" of his life that provides such inspiration. My favorite book, though, has got to be *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne. The cover, of course, is red. As I read the novel, I marveled at the way

Hawthorne tied his words together to paint passionate pictures: "Love, whether newly born, or aroused from a deathlike slumber, must always create sunshine, filling the heart so full of radiance that it overflows upon the outward world."

Although I prefer hard-cover books I am starting to notice an influx of soft-covers. *Water for Elephants*, one of my newer additions, has a soft cover that looks very much like the circus surrounding the story. And *A Hundred Years of Solitude* has a very vibrant cover. Perhaps, the colorful cover represents the fascinating lives depicted in this Gabriel García Márquez classic. It reminds me that, thankfully, I have led a very dull life.

There are the multitudes of poetry and literature anthologies, the covers of which cannot adequately portray the wealth of words contained therein. There are the library school textbooks, some of which I trudged through and others I relished reading, all with nondescript covers. I still have both French and Spanish textbooks, hoping to one day become fluent in either language by osmosis.

In looking over what I have in my own personal library, I notice the emotional value I've put on my books. I realize, also, it is not so much the cover that determines how I value these items; it is what is on the inside. I guess I really can say that my books are not judged by their covers or their "skins," but by their contents and their character.

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