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My Own PRIVATE LIBRARY

By Jennifer Young

When two people live together—whether family, roommates, lovers, or spouses—their personal effects will inevitably get mixed and shared. The items on the bookshelf are no exception. I’ve had many roommates, and none of them could keep my page-happy hands off their books. If I read a wonderful book, I insisted that they read it too. My mother runs a book club in her neighborhood, and when I lived at home, I would regularly eye the next selection and give suggestions for future group reads. This is behavior you would expect from a librarian.

My husband, Mike, is a high school math teacher. He and I share a total of approximately 200 books (this is his estimate based on the size and volume of the bookshelves).

They’re fodder for our mutual Jeopardy! obsession, a point of conversation when we have guests over, and a cure for boredom on a rainy day. I’m a more prolific reader than Mike, but he is far from non-literary. Our contributions to the collection are about equal. Naturally, he must divide his time between solving complex algebra problems and enjoying a good read.

This summer, Mike and I will celebrate two anniversaries—our third year of marriage and our fifth year as a couple. While these are small sums compared to the years our parents have been together, it seems like so much has

happened in that short amount of time. Looking over our collection, I realized the books tell their own story. The titles reveal snippets of our relationship and, for me, trigger a flood of memories. As with any story worth its words, it deserves a closer look.

When Mike and I met, I was working as a paraprofessional in a public library, where I had access to all the books I could handle when not studying for my MLS. We were introduced through a mutual friend, who is also a reader, as well as a writer. As a general rule, I wasn’t a big fan of being “set up,” but I trusted her and gave it a go. Around a month into dating, Mike and I attended a pool party, which, for me, was a natural place to bring a book. It was *Howl*

and *Other Poems* by Allen Ginsburg—not your average poolside read. “Hey, I have that book,” Mike said, gesturing toward my small black volume by a tortured poet. “I should have known you’d be reading something like *Howl*.” He knew the book *and* he gave me a compliment on it? That was a compliment, right? Maybe this was going to work out after all.

As we spent more time together, we uncovered more literary works we both loved. We also introduced each other to new books, often ones we wouldn’t have picked up on our own. I was never much of a math person, but it was such a



big part of who Mike was that I wanted to like it more (he's also tried to get me into Captain Beefheart and Frank Zappa, but that's never going to happen). I developed a better appreciation for math after Mike suggested I read *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* by Edwin Abbott Abbott. Told from the perspective of "A Square" hailing from the two-dimensional Flatland, it takes the reader on a mathematical journey through the dimensions (first, second, third, and even fourth). In doing so, it builds a criticism of inequality in the hierarchy of Victorian society. I had always thought that math was very concrete and straightforward: in a sense, flat. Yet *Flatland* presented the dimensions and other concepts in such a creative and coherent way—and in its intelligent commentary of nineteenth-century British culture, served as an effective metaphor. I can't say I'll ever be as interested in math as Mike, but now when Neil deGrasse Tyson starts talking space physics, my ears perk up.



Mike and I have many shared interests, and one of them is running. When I was in my early twenties, I started running as a cheap way to stay in shape. I bought a book by competitive athlete and Olympian Jeff Galloway, *Half-Marathon: You Can Do It*, with pipe dreams of crossing the finish line at 13.1 miles someday. Years later, Mike helped me realize those ambitions when we started training together for the Peachtree Road Race, a 10K (6.2-mile) race that he runs with his family every year. As a former high school cross-country athlete, Mike knew what he was doing, and he coached me with patience and determination. We moved on from 10K to half-marathon and beyond. Thanks to both Jeff Galloway and Mike

Young, I've gone on to run five full marathons and hope to train for many more races.

Travel is another big factor in our life plans. We have a long list of places we want to go before we die. There are travel books in our collection from just about every trip we've taken together. Our first big excursion was to San Francisco and LA just six months into our relationship. In another six months we were West Coast-bound again to Portland, Seattle, and then Montana. At the end of June this year, we fulfilled our dream of traveling to Germany and the Czech Republic on a ten-day belated honeymoon. For some reason, we've held on to all the Frommer's and Fodor's guides, perhaps as a

reminder of how lucky we've been to be able to travel. We also have a few books on future destinations—Slovenia, Peru, and Vancouver—to keep the dream alive.

Along with the good times, there have been hard times that we've had to weather, but it's been a lot easier

with the support of a partner and friend. When I was going through a particularly rough patch, I did what I often do in times of distress and retreated to books. Browsing for my next escape, I picked up Mike's copy of *Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl. "You should really read that," Mike said. "It will make you feel better about life." He was right; the book had such a positive impact on me that it managed to get me out of the Great Slump of My Late 20s. I still revisit it from time to time, either in whole or in part, when I need a healthy dose of humanity.

Now that we're settling into our thirties, we're making strides to simplify our lives, and part of

that means buying less stuff. Our book collection has not grown much in the past year, but we're both still reading a lot—mostly borrowed books from the library or friends and e-books that are packed away neatly in Flatland. We're consciously trying to pare down our collection, as well as other material possessions. Book-buying is such a pleasure, though, that I don't think we'd ever give it up completely. Our latest addition, a birthday gift from Mike to me, was the bestselling *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing* by Marie Kondo. It's about a topic we mutually hate—cleaning—a fact that's

evident by the way our books are arranged on the shelves in no particular order (my organizational skills as a librarian don't always transfer over to home life). It's also about choosing to hold on to only the most important things, treating them with care, and gently letting go of everything else. I can get behind that, even if it means getting rid of some of my prized books. The best ones will always stick with you.

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