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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 Diana Hartle

I am a recovering English major. Although I graduated with my English degree more years ago than I care to admit, the vestiges of those days are still evident on my shelves. My favorite classes were taught by Dr. Barbara McCaskill and Dr. Judith Ortiz Cofer—Literature of the

Harlem Renaissance and Modern American Poetry, respectively. From those long-ago days, I have retained *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston, *Cane* by Jean Toomer, as well as an abiding love for the poetry of Stanley Kunitz. For a while, I retained all the books from that era, even those I didn't enjoy, but their demands on my shelf space got to be too much.

In 1996, I moved in with my boyfriend, who later became my husband, and our book collections merged. His collection was heavy on the science fiction side, and as a recently-graduated English major, this did not appeal to my somewhat pretentious tastes. I have since been converted and count Kurt Vonnegut and Philip K. Dick among some of my favorite authors, who, along with my husband's huge science fiction collection, make up a significant part of our library.

In 1998, the Modern Library Association came out with a list of the one hundred best English language novels of the twentieth century. I guess they were confident that one wouldn't be published in the remaining two years of the century. While the list was contentious for its

lack of titles by women, with only nine titles authored by eight women, and its lack of racial diversity, with only three African American authors, all of whom were male, the list beckoned me to take it on, and so I began a journey, still ongoing, to read all one hundred of those novels.



A small sampling of the Modern Library Association's 100 best novels

The list actually contained some series—A Dance to the Music of Time, the Studs Lonigan trilogy, and The Alexandria Quartet—bumping the total number of books to 118. Originally, I intended to purchase all of these books from thrift stores and used bookstores as part of my quest and managed to collect around sixty or so of the titles. These comprise one shelf of my bookcases and also serve as a reminder of my unfinished project. I have read all of the titles on the list except James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* and D.H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow*. While some of these titles were quite a slog to finish (I'm looking at you, Henry James), others became favorites—Wallace Stegner's *Angle of Repose*, Paul Bowles' *The Sheltering Sky*,

Richard Wright's *Native Son*, and Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*.

Rounding out our collection of books, we have titles that reflect our interests—bird watching, vegetarian cooking, pet ownership, and music. Involvement in our Friends of the Winterville Library organization means we have purchased many a bag-of-books at deeply discounted rates. Books that were steals at less than a dollar each now seem burdensome, taking up valuable shelf space. My inclination is to read them and then get rid of them, but this possibility seems less and less likely, as every year more books are published that steal my attention from the forgotten ones on our shelves. Our collection is no longer confined to one room but has spilled over to almost every other room of our house. As a librarian, I have aspirations to organize and catalog the titles,

creating a database to pinpoint location and track any personal observations on the books in my collection. Perhaps this is every librarian's dream?

As a Luddite with a book collecting problem, I have yet to embrace the e-book craze. Conversely, I also consider myself an environmentalist, so the idea of books existing in bits and bytes instead of paper does hold some appeal. While there is a bit of attraction to e-books, I don't think I'm ready to give up my library of memories, failed projects, fleeting hobbies, and books I'll probably never read. They represent my life and provide a sense of home that an iPad simply cannot.

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