

Summer 8-1-2022

## The Sum of Trifles

Christopher Andrews  
*University of North Georgia*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/seln>



Part of the [Information Literacy Commons](#), [Scholarly Communication Commons](#), and the [Scholarly Publishing Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Andrews, Christopher (2022) "The Sum of Trifles," *The Southeastern Librarian*: Vol. 70: Iss. 2, Article 7.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/seln/vol70/iss2/7>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Southeastern Librarian by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu).

At one point, House astutely observes that a comic moment he photographed would be “published in a book, archived in a museum perhaps, and viewed by researchers and scholars of Arkansas history” (p. 225). As a primary source, *Remote Access* offers unique insights about contemporary rural life and American society. The occasional snapshots of patrons posing with their dogs, for instance, demonstrates the elevated status many pets enjoy compared to those of times past. Likewise, subtle observations concerning small town public services, particularly House’s assertion that police officers serving communities without full-time administrators are often the “most visible and consistent day-to-day face of local government” (p. 40), adds depth to the work. *Remote Access* is no mere picture book; it presents posterity with a cultural snapshot of 21<sup>st</sup> century life in rural America.

There is one concern worth noting. When discussing historic events, Schmidt and House omit their sources. Readers interested in learning more about Marked Tree’s unique place name, for example, are on their own. Though coffee table books are not academic monographs, the artists’ decision to exclude their sources creates a contrast between their essays and Cochran’s judiciously cited introduction. Citation consistency throughout the book would have prevented this evident demarcation between the introduction and the chapters that follow.

This minor criticism, however, does not detract from the quality of the book. *Remote Access: Small Public Libraries in Arkansas* is a touching testimonial to the significance of small-town public libraries and the dedicated professionals who sustain them. More broadly, this publication raises awareness about the unique challenges that rural America faces in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. General readers interested in libraries, Arkansas, rural life, or photography will find *Remote Access* a pleasurable read. Above all, librarians and library enthusiasts residing in the Natural State will especially appreciate the work and enjoy displaying this attractive volume in their offices or on their coffee tables.

A. Blake Denton, The University of Arkansas at Monticello

### *The Sum of Trifles*



Julia Ridley Smith  
Atlanta: University of Georgia  
Press, 2021  
ISBN: 9780820360416  
256 p. \$22.95 (Pbk)

*The Sum of Trifles* can best be summarized as a contemplation on the relationship between

things, memory, and the importance of family – all with a Southern twist. The author, Julia Ridley Smith, and her brother, Moreland, were tasked with making decisions about what to keep, sell, give away, or throw away of their parents’ belongings after both parents died. Julia’s mother ran an antiques store in North Carolina, so there was an abundance of antiques, paperwork, quotidian objects, as well as family heirlooms that all demanded final decisions.

The beginning of Smith’s book is quite deliberate regarding questions about physical possessions and memories. As such, it is a meditation on material culture and the various meanings objects convey. Because objects are imbedded or imbued with memories, Julia often finds herself struggling to make the decisions about the things that evoke deep and personal memories. She writes, “... if objects have the power to connect me to people who are no longer here, then maybe they really do possess a kind of magic. And if they are magic, how dare I let them go” (p. 17). And there is the rub. The sheer number of her parents’ possessions creates a dissonance for Smith—the stuff has become a weight that holds her down and while also transporting her to the past.

As Smith begins to go through her parents’ possessions, she begins to seriously consider where the family’s money came from. In Smith’s book, each chapter begins with an object and its outcome. Many of the chapters are happy ones, filled with fond family memories. But the chapter, “The Quilt,” relays how Smith came to terms with her family’s slave-owning past through that object. The reckoning began when Smith donated the 170-year-old “Ridley quilt” to the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts. This quilt, cherished by generations of Ridleys, prompted Smith to consider possible scenarios as to who made the quilt, including the enslaved women assisting in the

making of the quilt or providing childcare to free white women to sew. She even thought about how the absence of slave women in the room would have altered the white women's conversations. (Surprisingly, the one scenario she didn't envision was that the possibility that the quilt was made in full by the hands of slaves.) But it was the labor of slaves that created the prosperity that allowed the Riddleys to acquire all those things for well over a hundred years.

The reality of that was often brushed aside when she was young. Growing up, Smith longed to believe that her ancestors were "nice people." Yet, she began to question the contradictions and silences in her school books and in her family's stories. When Smith worked as a copy editor, she realized her ignorance, and worked to rectify it. Smith read histories and novels written by African American authors—and by doing so, deepened her understanding of race in the American South. She also began to see more fully how her ancestors were active participants in the Southern slave society. She recounts Nat Turner's violent uprising, where rebel slaves encamped on the land of her relative, Major Thomas Ridley, noting that had he and his family been killed by the rebel slaves, she would not be here. Yet, she would not let the violence of the slave men absolve her ancestors' embrace of slavery, writing "there was always a choice, and my family made the wrong one" (p. 168).

The end of the book provides a resolution for the reader—spoiler to follow. While still saddled with the ongoing task of finding places for the last of her parents' possessions, an old friend talked Smith and Moreland into having a tag sale of their own. This suggestion resonated with Smith because her parents often had tag sales. But to make a meaningful profit, they would need to run the sale themselves. So after much cleaning, arranging, and pricing, the sale week came. The one thing Smith asked was that she not be there when it all went away. As fate would have it, Moreland had not hired enough help and he needed someone to work the cashier's table. That responsibility fell upon her. At precisely 8 o'clock in the morning, the tag sale started. On breaks she would wander through the house, rearranging the merchandise and listening to her brother talking to customers, telling stories that would end in deals. She wrote that the tag sale "was as fitting a memorial as any to the lives

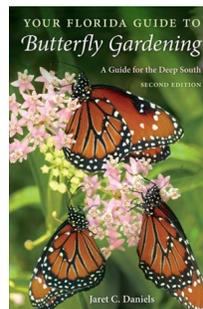
[her parents] had led" (p. 224).

The tag sale also served as resolution for Smith. As the sale progressed, it was as if she had a revelation. Instead of being sad as the objects left one-by-one, there was a sense of relief. She no longer felt the burden of the possessions. Instead, she writes, "My parents' things are not passing away by leaving me and changing owners. They are simply beginning new chapters of their long and storied lives" (p. 227).

*The Sum of Trifles* is filled with sadness and grief. Nevertheless, the book is a wonderfully pleasant and enjoyable read because Smith is such a talented writer. Her whip-smart sense of humor has a way of softening the sting of death and loss. This memoir is recommended for public libraries, and perhaps for those who want to reconsider their relationship to things.

Christopher Andrews, University of North Georgia

***Your Florida Guide to Butterfly Gardening: A Guide for the Deep South, Second Edition***



Jaret C. Daniels  
Gainesville: University Press of  
Florida, 2022  
ISBN: 9780813068534  
256 p. \$24.95 (Pbk)

Covering butterflies and plants, this book provides a two-for-one field guide written specifically for Florida. The first chapter discusses how declining butterfly populations from climate change can benefit from informed landscaping decisions. Even small yards in cities and subdivisions can positively improve the availability of habitats by adding the right plants. The second chapter informs the reader of the four stages of the butterfly's life and that choosing plants supporting both the larvae and adult stages ensures that butterflies will return year after year. Many butterflies require specific plants for their species to thrive. For example, the book describes how the Gulf Fritillary's survival depends on the presence of passionflower varieties. The guide list for the butterfly species includes their identification criteria, behavior descriptions, habitat ranges, flight periods, and larval host plant information.