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

Stephen Michaels
stephen.michaels@ung.edu

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My Own PRIVATE LIBRARY

For many years, my private library existed in a fragmented state. While much of the shelf space in my childhood bedroom was occupied by books (*The Hardy Boys*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Way Things Work*, the *Funk & Wagnalls New Encyclopedia* that my father brought home from the grocery store two volumes at a time), there was ample room left for my boombox, cassette tapes, a few comic books (before they required their own boxes to be stored elsewhere), trophies, and various odds and ends. Conspicuously absent from my shelf was *The What's Happening to My Body? Book for Boys* by Lynda Madaras which, obviously, I kept hidden from view in a lower cabinet, covered by heaps of papers even though it was given to me by my parents. It served as my guidebook through puberty and as a successor to *Where Did I Come From?* by Peter Mayle and Arthur Robins.

Some other books from childhood were similarly kept out of sight out of the fear of someone accusing me of having “baby stuff” on my shelves. I simply could not part, however, with my copies of Arnold Lobel’s *Frog and Toad are Friends* or Charles Schultz’s *Christmas is Together Time*. They held too many warm, fuzzy memories. Many years later I was to come across Schultz’s holiday classic in the compact shelving while working at Swilley Library at Mercer University. The unexpected jolt of

nostalgia I received at that moment was remarkable.

After I went off to college, many of my books, and—most disappointingly—my comic books, vanished into thin air. I was now free to build a new collection from scratch, beginning with the used paperbacks I bought at the University of Georgia (UGA) bookstore for my comparative literature classes. How lucky I was to sidestep the expensive organic chemistry and anatomy textbooks for which my more science-oriented friends were required to take out loans. To top it all off, my books were fun! Well, they broadened my literary horizons anyway. Several of my comp lit professors at the time were focused on postwar Eastern European literature that often dwelled on the banality of life and meditated on crumbling communist ideals. While my friends spent their

free time giggling their way through *A Confederacy of Dunces*, I was desperately trying to hold on to the narrative threads of books like Witold Gombrowicz’s *Trans-Atlantyk* and wrap my head around the fundamentals of Marxist hermeneutics. I kept some of these books on my shelf the way some hunters mount heads on walls; I fought these books and I won, meaning my eyes moved over every word contained therein but, in the end, comprehension often eluded me.



These were the books of an intellectual, however, so they remained on my shelves over the years—if for no other reason than to anchor an otherwise aimless collection of cookbooks, art books, comics, and zines—and I gave them little thought. A few of the authors from my comp lit days did become favorites, and my Milan Kundera, J.G. Ballard, Yukio Mishima, and Haruki Murakami sections grew. My library grew stagnant in the few years between graduating college and beginning my career in libraries. Predictably, once I began working as a library assistant in a public library system, incidental books started to appear in my hands and on my shelves. The library would partner with a local book distributor during the Friends of the Library book sales and they would donate pallets of extraneous books that had been collecting dust in their warehouse. This is how I ended up with such shelf-fillers as *The Corn Cookbook*, *The Zucchini Cookbook*, and an outdated edition of *Bicycling Magazine's Complete Guide to Bicycle Maintenance and Repair*. Similarly acquired books through subsequent jobs include *The Magician and the Cinema*, *Analyzing Children's Art*, and *A History of Industrial Design*. Maybe one day I will open these books again and blankly stare at a few pages before putting them back on the shelf, maybe not.

A defining moment in the life of my library occurred the day I lugged home the pieces for an Expedite 5x5 cube bookshelf from Ikea. Finally, I had one shelf—the shelf—to store most, if not all, of my modest book collection. No longer would I have to sit in front of boxes

of books and decide which ones would make the cut and be displayed on the shelf and which ones would remain in a half-empty box being crushed by another, heavier box. Hours after bringing it home and assembling the monolithic shelf, the air still charged by a torrent of inspired cursing, I looked up at what Ikea hath wrought and realized that I didn't even have enough books to fill this thing. This was a good thing, however, because I wanted to store my LPs on it as well, and this shelf is a popular choice for record owners, with good reason. While I enjoyed having most of my media in one place, the shelf proved to be an imposing and sometimes impeding presence in some of my smaller apartments over the years. It was satisfying, however, to see most everything together in one place, like a family reunited.

The organization schema of my reunited media collection is roughly grouped across fiction/nonfiction and genre. Nonfiction groups include memoirs, primarily by or about comedians and musicians—my current favorite among them being *Will Not Attend* by Adam Resnick. The books on peak oil that somehow dominated my reading list a few years ago triggered a couple of years of collecting books on self-sufficiency, gardening, and food storage. Being a dedicated city mouse, I file these under “just in case.” The other nonfiction is too varied to properly categorize and the cookbooks live in the kitchen, so that leaves fiction on the big bookshelf. Currently, comics/graphic novels and “literature” are neck-and-neck in the race for shelf space, with the comics growing at a significantly more rapid pace. I've taken to



reading one or two good reviews of a comic series that has been around long enough to produce a few trade paperbacks and filling my shelves with multiple volumes without having read a single page. I guess that's the collector in me. My current dilemma involves the popular series Saga. I am struggling with the decision of

collecting the content of its first 54 issues in trade paperbacks or a 1,328-page compendium. I like big books, and I cannot lie, but that much book on my lap might put my legs to sleep.

*Stephen Michaels is Reference Services Librarian
at University of North Georgia*