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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

Like many of my fellow library workers, I've been a voracious reader and consistent library patron since childhood. Lack of disposable income for much of my life meant that personal ownership of a book has always been a small luxury, a gratification sometimes deferred for years, particularly in cases of patiently searching for affordable used copies of artistic coffee table books. Eugene Richards's *The Blue Room*, for example, sat on my wish list for nearly a decade. Thus, have I curated my collection: only the very best, most favorite, most profound-to-me works of art and writing, pieces that are (or once were) so important to me that I felt compelled at some point to own a reference copy.

I've had to be brutal in culling the collection at times, making snap decisions as I skipped from one cheap rental to another, often due to circumstances beyond my control. Once, in a furious burst of confidence, I left an abusive partner, taking only what I could fit in the back of a friend's compact car. Once, on the verge of eviction, I transported my things via wheelbarrow to my new last-minute home down the road (the reality of this chore was not as quaintly charming as it sounds). My books have lived in rickety shelves in closets and storage units, while I lived on couches, in punk houses with too many roommates, in borrowed guest rooms, and in tumbledown shacks. It wasn't until my mid-30s that I finally grasped a

foothold of financial stability and could actually maintain some semblance of settling down. To mark the achievement, I purchased a brand-new bookcase and relegated the old, secondhand shelves to the basement.

On one shelf, titles are filed according to a deeply personal timeline of experience, starting with *The Day on Fire*, a fictionalized biography of Arthur Rimbaud I'd snagged from a book sale at my local branch library when I still lived in Pittsburgh, an angsty teen desperate to burst into the world in a Rimbaudian derangement of the senses. The copy of *Rimbaud Complete* I carried while hitchhiking the eastern United States at age 21. Codrescu's essays about New Orleans, where I was determined to move after falling in love with the city on a spontaneous road trip, which has since come to represent the zenith of my adolescent experience. Some travel memoirs of a sort: *Off the Map, Into the*

*Wild, A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. The books that carried me through my late 20s and into my early 30s: Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* helped me heal from abuse, and Ann Fessler's *The Girls Who Went Away* sparked the realization that the root of my PTSD ran deeper than the dysfunctional relationship I had escaped.

The next shelf holds my favorite, most eye-opening experiences with literary fiction. Most



of the titles I own, I probably couldn't recall many details about the plot, but I could describe in depth who I was and what I felt when I read *Bastard Out of Carolina* (September 2008, age 24, living with an alcoholic, naïve but gaining awareness), or *Catch-22* (2001, in high school, protesting the war and feeling very intellectual about it), or *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (summer 2006, age 22, having recently relinquished my daughter to adoption, unsure of what to do with myself; and read again in winter 2012, age 27, on the verge of finally completing my thrice-deferred BFA, again unsure of what to do with myself). I remember reading, no, consuming Thomas Wolfe in my mid-20s when I worked in the tiniest shack of a coffee shop, sweltering in a barely air-conditioned box for \$5/hour plus tips—but I don't remember if that was the year of *Look Homeward, Angel* or *You Can't Go Home Again*. I remember reading *Carter Beats the Devil* in 2012, almost a decade after receiving the book from a longtime internet pen pal.

The most treasured aspect of my library is not housed in this bookcase but nearby in a set of three 16-inch storage baskets: a couple hundred zines collected over the past 20-odd years. I first discovered zines in high school, when my best writer friend and I began publishing (in photocopy) prank flyers proclaiming absurdist accusations against faculty. We quickly advanced to newsletter format, and it wasn't long before the internet led me to the discovery of a highly active community of independent authors and artists making, selling, trading, and giving away an



endless variety of zines. I haven't kept every zine that's passed through my hands; those that didn't hold my interest typically found their way to libraries, donation bins, and punk houses. But what remains is a record of sorts, a bit awkward, sometimes illegible, postage-stamped and stained with the rubber band residue resulting from poor storage—a personal archive of past lives.

I've now lived in my current home for nearly five years, by far the longest I've stayed put in any one place during my adult life thus far, and it's taken me about that long to feel comfortably secure enough to stop hoarding all of my books in my room, ready to pack up at a moment's notice, just in case. My library has tentatively branched out to include a small selection of cookbooks in the kitchen, a couple shelves of thrifted to-reads in the living room, even sharing shelf space in

the bedroom with some of my partner's books, the commingling of such personal items itself a novel experience of intimacy. It feels strange to express these sentiments of safety and security in the midst of a pandemic that has forced so many, not excluding myself, to contend with an increasingly unstable reality. But although past experience has taught me that nothing is certain and nothing is guaranteed, the books I've lugged around for years from place to place, now finally settled into a permanent address, symbolize both a reflection and an assertion of survival.

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