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

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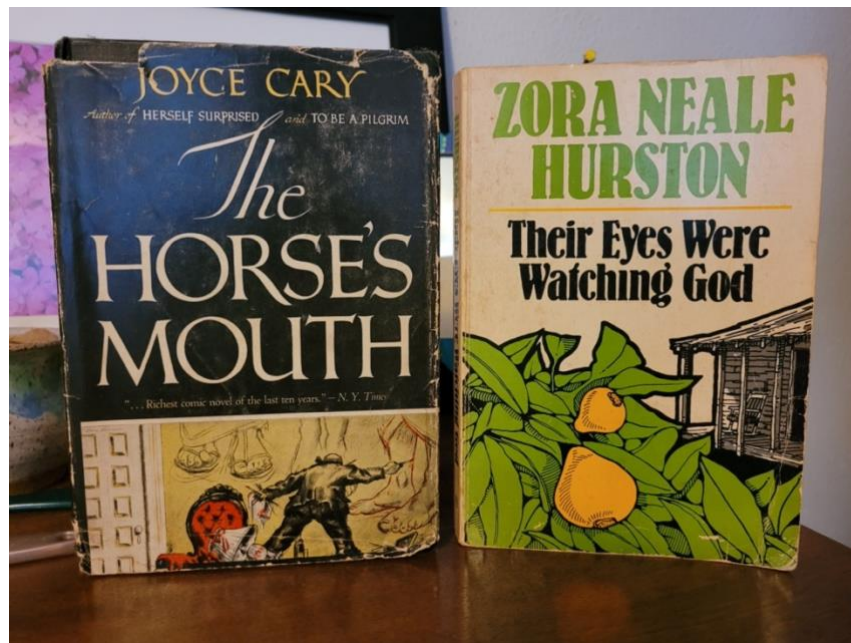
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## My Own PRIVATE LIBRARY

My private library is small, but my access to books has been without limit.

While in elementary school, I took advantage of a program in which we could order books from a catalog at a very reasonable cost. That was fun, and I read these books with great enthusiasm while staying within my small budget. I no longer own these books and I don't remember the titles, but I remember the plots and characters of some. For example, a book about a young girl who was in the foster system and in the end was adopted along with her siblings by the same family, after much worry on her part. Was it called *Ready Made Family*? I do remember what the cover looked like.

Other than the spurt of activity with the elementary school book buying program, I really have not purchased many books over the years. I own maybe a few dozen that I keep handy, along with a box of very old art textbooks that are in the attic (I'm a little attached to my *Gardner's Art Through the Ages*). Much of the reason for my small collection has to do with the constant access to libraries throughout my life, including school libraries, the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, and



the academic libraries in which I worked, all of which I took advantage of extensively.

My first memory of an interaction with a librarian happened in my elementary school library. I checked out a book one day, took it home and read it that evening, straight through (it was really good). I then went to the library to return it the next day. As I handed it to the librarian, she refused to take it. I was nonplussed. Why don't you want the book back I asked? She said, rather haughtily, that she

couldn't take it back because I had just checked it out the day before, so I couldn't have read it all, and I had to take it home and really read it. I told her, yes, I read it last night. She said, no, you can't read a book that fast. What the heck? My first thought was that this

adult is calling me a liar. I was deeply offended and stood my ground. Finally, after a little more back and forth, she said, well if you read it, tell me what happened (basically a verbal book report). I started with the first chapter and talked about the story and the characters, in great detail. By the time I got to the third or fourth chapter, she snatched the book away from my hands, said that's enough, and left in a huff. Despite this negative experience, I continued my treks to the library; it wasn't

traumatic enough to send me back to book buying.

In-home access to free reading materials while growing up also likely influenced my disinterest in book buying. As the youngest of ten children, I not only had access to hand-me-down clothes but also hand-me-down books left in our family home when siblings went off to college. My older siblings were voracious readers with a variety of preferences, so I had many choices. We had a bedroom where many of the books stayed, and I used this room as my private library, wandering in when needed to find a book to read, including ones that were likely not age appropriate. I remember my father telling me that I would have nightmares when he saw me reading *Helter Skelter* by Vincent Bugliosi and Curt Gentry, but he did not take the book away from me. My parents weren't like that; or, by the time I was born, maybe they were just tired.

Going off to university resulted in me giving up reading for pleasure because class assignments and social events filled my time. After graduating, I found a job as the interlibrary loan borrowing supervisor at the University of Georgia Main Library and returned to reading with a vengeance. The third floor of the main library became my personal library, and the fourth floor as well when I was in the mood for historical biography. At the time, I focused on 19th and early 20th century novels by British and American authors. I also read novels by the same author until I grew weary of repeated plot devices and characters with similar backgrounds and families (I'm talking to you, Jane Austen.) I was a shelf browser and found books by Dickens, Wharton, Wolfe, du Maurier, James, and others. Some of the books were quite challenging and improved my reading comprehension—such as *Wings of the Dove* by Henry James, a book with paragraphs that are more than a page long. I also read less



“academic” books, such as the last five books in the Poldark series by Winston Graham. I had no idea these existed until I found them while browsing (serendipity). I uncharacteristically bought the first seven books in the series after watching the original PBS TV series in the 70s.

I accidentally bought, but now treasure, Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and believe that it has the best first sentence in a novel: “Ships at a distance have every man’s wish on board.” I found it at a flea market thinking that it was a different book recommended by a friend, whose title I could not quite remember. I also treasure Joyce Carey’s *The Horse’s Mouth* bought at a used book store. I first read *The Horse’s Mouth* in high school but enjoyed it much more when reading it by choice. As a retirement present, I received a Barnes & Noble gift card and ordered Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (already read twice, but I wanted to keep one handy for future rereading) and Walter Tevis’s *The Queen’s Gambit*. I confess that I bought *Gambit* because I enjoyed the Netflix series and

will also confess that streaming series and movies, especially international ones such as K-Drama and Bollywood, is now definitely taking up more of my time than it should, and I need to get back to reading novels. Ann Patchett’s *The Dutch House* is waiting in the wings; this book I found in a box of free books in front of a house while on a neighborhood walk.

Even though I haven’t bought or own many books, when I look around my home, I am surrounded by massive amounts of books bought by my spouse or inherited from his late parents. He even owns old and out-of-date encyclopedias that I would like to weed, but which are staying on the shelves for now. So, I have access to numerous books that I do not exactly own, but which I can read at any time, for free, much like living in a library. Except for a deep clean of one wall of bookshelves, I have yet to fully explore this library and look forward to browsing.

*Virginia Feher is a retired librarian and the former editor of the Georgia Library Quarterly*