

Culture Hoards

DURING MY LAST move, the folks doing the heavy lifting couldn't help but comment on the box after box of books and printed matter being shifted. Digitization was suggested, as though it were something we might not have considered.

The books took up a lot of space—there were 1,500 by my estimate, and several linear feet of periodicals (including *Amphora*), notes and the stuff of professional lives. A few tense months passed, the books were organized, some marriage counselling was scheduled. A couple, mutual friends and no strangers to the tensions moves can bring, did an in situ assessment. Their eyes shifting between the wall where the majority of the books were shelved and us, we were asked: Have you considered the possibility that you're hoarders?

Readers of *Amphora* will not have to guess at the depth of indignation that followed in response, and the library remained intact.

As this issue was being readied for press, Toronto's *Globe and Mail* newspaper weighed in with its own column on hoarding. The column gave the example of Josie, a 41-year-old secretary in Ottawa, whose apartment was jammed with clothes and books. An e-reader helped rid her of most of the books, but the article noted that she was still dogged by some.

A friend of mine led a lively lament via social media for the stigmatizing of owners of sizeable private libraries as hoarders, with many acknowledging—as Paul Whitney did in the last issue of *Amphora*—that the market even for well-developed personal collections has diminished. And, while Gary Strachan's column in the same issue offered some options for those who wish to shift their working libraries into digital formats, it's hard to overlook the importance of physical books.

Starting my professional writing career in New Brunswick, outside the major urban

centres, I quickly realized the value of having a personal library tailored to my own interests. And today, many online sources go back only so far, making a personal library complete with a run of pertinent periodicals as important as ever.

A great many of my books have no appeal to anyone other than myself, and without kids I doubt they'll have sentimental value as an inheritance (unlike the many books I have that provide living links to upwards of two centuries of my own family's cultural formation).

The importance of physical libraries is something Samuel Jang, who received the first-place prize in this year's National Book Collecting Contest sponsored by the W.A. Deacon Literary Foundation, the Bibliographical Society of Canada and the Alcuin Society, recognizes. Jang, as an article in this issue of *Amphora* explains, sees his collection of editions of Aesop's fables as a repository of the many forms the famous fables have taken through the years. It is as much a hoard of cultural memory as a basis for new interpretations of the stories.

John Maxwell tells the story of Stan Bevington's use of technology at the Coach House in Toronto to produce books that are living elements of Canada's contemporary culture.

Together, between collectors, readers, publishers and designers, books represent more than a forest of dead trees: They create libraries where the seeds of a living culture take root, are nourished, and send forth new shoots.

~ Peter Mitham, editor