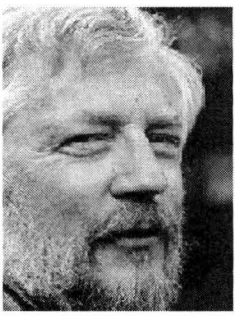




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EX LIBRIS: TOO MANY BOOKS

Rhonda Batchelor

AT HIS DEATH, LESS THAN A MONTH PAST HIS FIFTY-THIRD BIRTHDAY, my husband, Charles Lillard, had accumulated approximately 15,000 books. Housed mostly in our fairly dry, fairly spacious basement, the books multiplied – spawning generations from old Alaskan boyhood stock, down through academia to the baby-boom years of free-lance reviewing and flea-marketing – requiring more shelves, more nooks, more piles on the floor. Incredibly, to judge by the scribbled notes in the margins, the bookmarks, the paper tucked inside, sometimes a review he'd published, or one by someone else, sometimes correspondence with the author, it would appear Charles had actually read most of this library.

Now, when I say 15,000 books, it's a calculation based upon hindsight. It didn't occur to me to start a count until I'd already begun, that late spring of 1997, a tentative exploration and a mini excavation. In order to simply clear a space in which to move and sort books I had taken five station-wagon loads of native studies material to another location. Also, I was dealing with a lot more than books. At any one point in fifteen years of inhabiting our half of this rented Oak Bay duplex the books would have shared space with a VW Beetle, a boat, washer and dryer, a dog's bed, bicycles, tricycles, toys, workbench, tools, more tools, maps, binders, photographs, slides, cameras, darkroom equipment, computer, light table, paper cutter and so on. And, oh yes, Charles also slept among the books he loved, on a huge waterbed. I feared earthquakes; never considered cancer.

His favourite time to write was in the early morning when his family was still asleep. With his thermos of hot and ridiculously strong black tea beside him he would hunch over the day's words. The dog and at least one of the cats would be curled up between his feet and an inefficient space heater. Charles had a loathing of cold drafts, real or imagined. The bookshelves that formed the walls of his office had been backed with heavy black plastic to cut off these drafts. It was always too dark. There was no electricity in his office/library/bedroom except that which he'd jury-rigged from the over-taxed outlet over the laundry area via an elaborate (and I'm sure illegal) system of plugs and extensions. When I began to deconstruct the plastic walls, the wires looped everywhere. I was horrified, but also impressed by the ingenuity he'd displayed – that Yankee know-how, that Alaskan can-do combined with an all-Canadian propensity for duct tape.

I worked, dispirited but doggedly, during my spare, widowed hours.

I found, to my surprise, that I seemed to have time on my hands despite having so much to do and two children. Almost every evening, instead of an hour of after-dinner television or a walk, I'd head to the basement to sort books. I'd be there until late, lost in the complexity of it all. Charles wasn't a collector in any book-snob sense, although he'd had an amazing knowledge of books and had once addressed an antiquarian booksellers' convention in Vancouver. He'd only been interested in fine, first editions if he'd found them serendipitously at a flea market or garage sale. Otherwise, he loved books for what they contained: ideas, information and inspiration. On any shelf I might find rare and valuable volumes wedged between ratty paperbacks and old issues of National Geographic. It was slow going. Apart from native studies there was a collection of British Columbia history and literature that would rival the provincial archives. I also discovered Canadian poetry spanning two centuries, European and American literature, art books, natural history, reference texts, complete runs of literary reviews and treasured copies of Asterix and Calvin and Hobbes.

At least I had an edge in figuring out how best to deal with such a library, having toiled in the retail book trade for several years. I knew approximate values and the most likely buyers for most of what I came across. Many items made their way to the University of Victoria library, including his extensive papers. Lists were assembled and catalogues were issued. A few of the more reputable dealers were invited to peruse the shelves – cash and carry.

And slowly, slowly the space in the basement began to increase as plastic walls came down, the moth-infested rug was thrown away, emptied shelves were dismantled and bricks and boards were hauled away to make shelves for another collector. The “drafty” windows, freed of their curtains and tape, let in natural light. When there was room enough to maneuver I held a garage sale or two with paperbacks for fifty cents, hardcovers for a loonie. The local prison got a donation; I even smuggled in some Gore Vidal.

It was a filtering process. For over a year I sifted down and down until I was left with two distinct groups of books, in about equal numbers: those I wished to keep for myself and the kids, and those problematic ones I couldn't *give* away. I made a few phone calls to recycling centres but none of them wanted books. I was tired and winter was approaching. I didn't know what to do, so I did nothing.

Another year passed. Some of the unloved, unwanted books had been stored outside behind the house. A wrap-around tarpaulin had not fully succeeded in keeping out rain, slugs or nesting spiders from the cardboard boxes underneath. Now it was October and the whole sodden mess had to go. I made more calls until I finally found a sympathetic recycler who said he'd have bins ready if I brought the load to him. A date was set and friends with a truck were enlisted.

Here's where it gets interesting. On the morning of the move I felt a crushing sadness at what I was about to do. Nothing to that point had prepared me for how difficult it was, now that push had come to shove, to be finally parting with the last of the last of my husband's precious library. The mercenary sale of the high-priced items and the bargain-basement give-aways couldn't compare to the anguish of knowing this disposal would be final and absolute. Awaiting my friends with the truck I busied myself filling even more boxes with useless books. I listened to music as I worked – Sarah McLaughlin's *Surfacing* – and found myself weeping at the lyrics. “. . . and I have the sense to recognize that I don't know how to let you go. . . .”

At the recycling depot, under an oppressive, waiting-to-rain sky, we coordinated our efforts. Two of my friends stood in the back of the pickup tossing armloads of books down into a gaping metal bin and then throwing the empty boxes to the pavement where John and I stomped and flattened them for disposal into another bin. Once in a while we'd joke about the titles of some of the books being tossed. A few were held back for even further consideration, but only a few.

At one point, when we were nearly finished our work, both men in the truck threw books at the same time. The books collided in mid-air and one small volume fell to the ground between the truck and the disposal bin. I bent to retrieve it, ready to toss it in as well, but something made me stop to look more closely. It was a water-stained, green, cloth-covered Oxford hardcover: *Selected Modern English Essays*. Peeking from its top edge were two yellow “stick-em” notes that Charles had used to mark certain pages.

The rain was beginning, scant hard pellets threatening a downpour. Gulls and crows that had been circling overhead suddenly began to screech and call, worked up over something. I opened to the first marked page. It was an essay titled “Too Many Books.”

I laughed and shivered all at once. I turned to the second marked page.

It was headed “On Destroying Books.”

There was much head shaking and wonderment when I shared my discovery with my friends. I showed the two pages to the owner of the depot who backed away saying, “You’re creeping me out . . .” Needless to say, I kept this little book.

The rain fell steadily as we headed home. Driving over the blue Johnson Street bridge, I listened intently as John read aloud from the highlighted essays. It seemed essential for me to know, bottom line, what the message was. What *about* too many books? What *about* destroying them?

“Too Many Books” was written by Gilbert Norwood who was born, it said under his name, in 1880 and who was evidently still alive in 1930 when the book was published. The essay is over twenty pages long, but the gist of it was apparent by the end of the first paragraph. “*We are oppressed, choked, buried by books.*”

Mr. Norwood quite rightly argues that too many books are being published, more than even the most ardent reader could possibly keep up with, and too many are simply inferior works that should never have seen the light of day. He proposes a committee screening system that would



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allow certain books to live and others to perish. Any work which had found less than five thousand supporters should be retained for one year if any single person could be found to prove his love for it by making a sacrifice to ensure its preservation. The sacrifices demanded would vary according to the original support. A book with four thousand adherents would escape if a monetary ransom were paid; the rescue of one with only a thousand would mean fifty years' penal servitude. At the end of the scale books with less than ten readers could survive only if one person consented to go to the scaffold.

Satire, yes, but not without a solid basis in an all-too-relevant contemporary issue. I doubt even the authors of some of these "non books" would be willing to die for their creations. Better to just get rid of the bound monsters. But that, as I knew, wasn't easy.

Mr. J.C. Squire (born 1884) had this to say in his essay "On Destroying Books."

"...most people, especially non-bookish people, are very reluctant to throw away anything that looks like a book. In the most illiterate houses ... every worthless or ephemeral volume that is bought finds its way to a shelf and stays there. In reality it is not merely absurd to keep rubbish



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merely because it is printed: it is positively a public duty to destroy it. Destruction not merely makes more room for new books and saves one's heirs the trouble of sorting out the rubbish or storing it: it may also prevent posterity from making a fool of itself."

At the beginning of his fine and amusing essay Mr. Squire tells us that a newspaper article has informed him that over two million books had been collected and presented to the troops by the public. It is noted that people were sending along the oddest things, however, such as twenty-year-old magazines, guides to the Lake District and back numbers of *Whitaker's Almanack*. He imagines that these items were not included by accident, but that people had jumped at the opportunity to get rid of books they didn't want. He then recounts his own fraught experience of disposing of a sack full of bad poetry into the Thames under cover of darkness. As he turned for home he thought of "all those books . . . subsiding at last on the ooze of the bottom, there to lie forlorn and forgotten whilst the unconscious world of men went on."

Horrible bad books, poor innocent books, you are lying there still; covered, perhaps, with mud by this time, with only a stray rag of your sacking sticking out of the slime into the opaque brown tides. Odes to Diana, Sonnets to Ethel, Dramas on the Love of Lancelot, Stanzas on a first Glimpse of Venice, you lie there in a living death, and your fate is perhaps worse than you deserved. I was harsh with you. I am sorry I did it. But even if I had kept you, I will certainly say this: I should not have sent you to the soldiers. So there was my answer, delivered, appropriately, from the marked pages of a book.

I've told this story to many friends and it always elicits the same response: this was more than mere coincidence, this was most certainly a message from beyond. I'd like to think that our dear friend Robin Skelton, Wiccan witch, poet extraordinaire and no slouch in the book collection game himself, who had joined Charles in death that same year, had a spiritual hand in this little joke. But it doesn't matter. I'd been offered forgiveness and release from the pain and guilt I'd felt at disposing of such a large part of my husband's life. I felt a weight lift from me.

I don't miss the books; I miss the remarkable man who had read them all.

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