

ON OWNING SO MANY BOOKS: A JUSTIFICATION

Guy Robertson

MISS JENNIFER HINZE, age nine, visits my daughter Amanda, ditto, for an afternoon of dolls and dress-up. Miss Hinze gazes at my library shelves and asks why I have so many books. I reply:

In the universe of publishing, a few thousand volumes is not a large number, young lady. Several professors in our neighbourhood have much larger libraries. But your question is fair. Allow me to answer it as sensibly as I can.

Since I rarely watch television or listen to the radio, and I'm not a frequent Internet surfer, reading has become my passion and pastime. A personal library offers an abundance of choice. If I decide on the way home from my office that I want to read about Napoleon, I have several standard works on his career. When I find myself eager for knowledge of the life cycle of wasps or spiders, my biology section will give me what I need. Should I long for a viewing of Turner's paintings, I have a coffee table book that's the next best thing to a tour of the Tate.

Recipes for lobster tart and flipper pie? An overview of Scottish gardens? The private life of Adam Smith? I have them at hand, along with much more. And that's just my non-fiction. Look at what Amanda calls the story shelves: epics, folktales, short stories and novels, from Gilgamesh and Homer to John D. MacDonald and Beryl Bainbridge. I don't separate children's books from supposedly adult literature, because some years ago I discovered that many children's books are better written and more adult than those intended for adults. As for what we call genre fiction, I find that mystery writers such as P.D. James and Dorothy Sayers are superior in numerous ways to so-called literary novelists, and that there are westerns, horror novels and science fiction titles that are as well-crafted and intelligent as anything that wins a Booker Prize.

Whatever topic strikes my fancy, I have books in my library that discuss, analyze and illustrate it. Thus owning a few thousand volumes is a convenience. You cannot point to my all-colour book of biker tattoos or my atlas of Mars and accuse me of impracticality. I may not be sure when I'll want to look at such items, but when I do, they'll be quickly available. With this library, I'm prepared for anything that could stimulate my curiosity or tumble into my imagination.

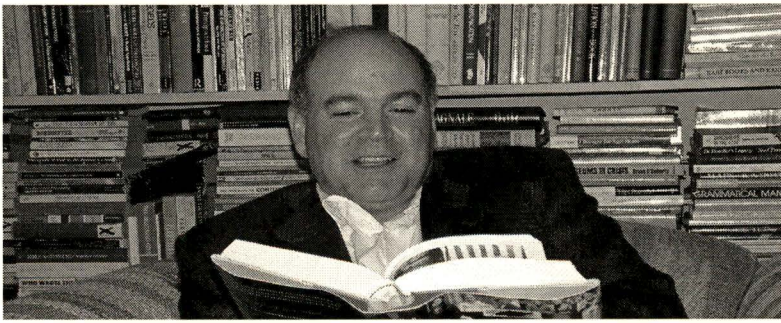
Moreover I like surprises. You'll note that I haven't catalogued my collection, and that my attention to subject order is lax. I wouldn't want it any other way. While I have a rough idea of where most of my books

live, I don't record their exact addresses. Usually I must hunt around for what I want, and in doing so I stumble (sometimes literally) on what I'm looking for. Along the way, I find all sorts of treasures. This evening, for example, I was looking for Gertrude Bell's letters when I rediscovered R.H. Bruce Lockhart's *Memoirs of a British Agent* ("Being an account of the author's early life in many lands and his official mission to Moscow in 1918.") What a pleasure! And look: this copy, which I found in a church rummage sale, was originally owned by one of Canada's Depression-era robber barons. He has made numerous underlinings and pencilled comments; obviously he's no fan of Lenin or Trotsky, whom Lockhart describes at length. I'll get to Gertrude shortly, but for a few minutes I'll savour these angry, anti-red marginalia. They're as revealing as the text itself.

My library fosters serendipity. You can look up this word in any of my dictionaries; I have 20 or so. You'll discover that Horace Walpole coined the word in 1754, in a fairy tale entitled *The Three Princes of Serendip*. I have a copy of it somewhere; I found it at a library discard sale in San Francisco. We can examine it another time. Inevitably it will turn up when we least expect to find it.

But I don't want you to think that I'm a dilettante or a lotus-eater. My library is utilitarian. It contains business information and hard data. It contributes to my bottom line. I use various reference materials to compile proposals and reports. I have enough economic history, management science and auditing textbooks to impress the most demanding robber baron. I have computer programming manuals, volumes on organizational behaviour, and an entire shelf of risk analysis journals. It's all here: biographies of stock market wizards and investment pros, true crime paperbacks on the careers of legendary frauds, wonder-filled tales of bulls and bears. When I drag myself away from my fiction shelves, I can concentrate on the hard reality of my business interests. Although some would suggest that economics is the purest form of fantasy.

Aside from providing ready reference and financial information, my library instills in me a profound humility. Of course nobody would be able to read and comprehend every volume on these shelves. It's unlikely that anyone would want to. I acquire many of my books in the hope that I might get around to them at some point, but I realize that I will never open some of them. Others are beyond my understanding. I



own a good translation of Hegel's *Phenomenology* and several books on how to study it. Having tried several times to absorb its contents, however, I find myself no better informed. Count me among the plethora of readers who cannot scale the heights of Hegel, and must settle for something at a comparatively lower altitude—such as Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* or Heidegger's *Being and Time*.

With oft-reread and never-cracked volumes arranged side by side, my library forces me to recognize my limitations as a human being. I have only so much brainpower and only so much time on this earth; I shall never read and learn as much as I should like. Perhaps others are smarter and more ambitious, but inevitably they will run up against their personal Hegels. In the end, unopened books can be character-building; they also serve that stand on shelves unread.

Some people call me a book collector, which is not strictly true. I have small collection of desirable volumes: first editions of Dickens, Henry James and Malcolm Lowry, a smattering of West Coast poetry, some militaria, some travel books that dealers underpriced decades ago. But I lack the true collector's focus and determination, and I'm too busy reading to find time for serious collecting activities. Besides, I'm put off by the greed that drives the current book market and flips an early edition of Tennyson like a piece of real estate. I do not believe that a book collection necessarily imbues its owner with taste and discernment. While I respect many collectors of my acquaintance, and assert that their collections contribute as much to the survival of culture as various libraries, I don't want to become an avid member of their team. I prefer to be a well-informed fan at the game rather than a dedicated player. Incidentally, the one Hegel collector I know tells me that he has never bothered to read any of the titles in his collection. He has more Hegel on his shelves than ten full professors of Philosophy, but he prefers John Grisham. This, young lady, is what grown-ups call irony.

Still, you will find on my shelves the same title in several editions. It's true: collecting different editions is something collectors do. But it's also the practice of a diehard reader. Different editions appeal to me at different times. Depending on where I read—in bed, a favourite chair or a traffic jam—I might choose different editions or issues of the same title. In bed, for example, I prefer a hardcover first edition. In that chair by the fire, I prefer a softcover. Trapped in traffic on a local highway, I like an old

paperback edition: for example, any Penguin. Leatherbound volumes, folios, damaged or otherwise fragile books I read at my study table, on which I can support decrepit bindings and examine texts under a strong light.

In summer, I take Everyman editions to the beach. I take Signet editions of American classics to a lakeside bed-and-breakfast every spring. Although I am font-blind, I still consider the various typefaces old friends. I know several bartenders well, but I don't know their names. Nevertheless I always look forward to seeing them.

If there are deep psychological reasons for these edition choices, I can't tell you what they are. They could be nothing more than personal habits. This, however, is not a question that I strive to answer. As long as I have an Everyman edition when my toes hit the sand, I'm content.

Don't think that my accumulation of books is selfish. In fact it entails sacrifice. I love Emily Carr's paintings, but my shelves occupy the spaces where I might hang prints. I would enjoy listening to the neighbouring soprano practice Verdi and Carl Orff, but I can't hear her with so much insulation lining the walls. My library imposes silence and privacy whether I want it or not. Occasionally it becomes a lonely place. But the sacrifice is worthwhile, and happily small. Besides, I can take a break—when that bed-and-breakfast beckons—and take whatever I want to read with me.

But why not use the public library? Why not sell off these books, hang Carr, listen to Orff and rely on the branch two blocks away? In fact I visit the branch almost every day it opens. I love the public library, its librarians, its shelves and books. I borrow heavily. I find, however, that the public library serves the general public, and cannot cater to all of my personal tastes. It does not provide the older editions that I want, nor the more obscure titles. While I wouldn't want to live in a neighbourhood without a public library, I couldn't be content without a collection of books that met my specific needs.

There's an answer to your question, or part of an answer. Tomorrow I might give you a dozen different reasons for owning a library, but trust me: they're all honest attempts to justify a harmless and at times laudable obsession. Now tell me why you've dressed up as Mata Hari, and what you intend to do with that ray gun. Don't try to answer sensibly.

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