2006

My own private library: The personal libraries of librarians

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Recommended Citation
GLQ (Georgia Library Quarterly) Vol. 43, #3 Autumn of 2006, 5-6.

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In most of the rooms of our unpretentious suburban home there are bookshelves lining the walls to hold a few thousand books. Are these treasures bound in fine leather or enshrined on hardwood shelves? Good heavens, no! Try white particle board and yellow pine. Many of the tomes suffer from The Velveteen Rabbit syndrome. They are coming apart from too much loving, especially some of the paperbacks (The Once and Future King et al), which date back to the 1960s. Like many young people during that decade, I migrated across the U.S. and parts of Canada. Wherever I traveled, my little salt and pepper schnauzer named Georgia-Jonquil, and a portable book collection came along too. These books, mainly from undergraduate days, are with me still. I could not bear to replace such old companions with new “rabbits” nor could I pitch them like pop cans into the recycling bin.

Both the shabby and pristine books, acquired during and since those days on the road, had only one criterion for taking up shelf space, I wanted them. There are countless, sensible reference books-- dictionaries, atlases, encyclopedias etc. for consulting on a regular basis often to settle arguments over dates and definitions with my beloved husband. There is a “silly” section containing Martin Mull’s satirical The History of White People in America to name one favorite. Many titles entertained or enlightened me in some surpassingly special, intellectual or visceral way. Richard Slotkin’s, Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America; Salvation: Scenes from the Life of St. Francis by Valerie Martin; and In the Time of the Butterflies by Julia Alvarez are examples. The “celebrity” section is devoted to signed books by academics, both friends and strangers, who published admired tomes. But mostly it’s filled with autographed childrens’ books for my son. Yes, librarian moms stand in author lines regularly at ALA and GLA conferences for this reason. Now that Paul’s all grown up our grandson, Bryan, will turn the pages of them once he’s beyond the sticky fingers stage.

Inadvertently, the books serve another purpose. They are memory keepers for my personal history. What exactly does that mean? Well, pulling a prized first edition of Cawdor: and other poems off the shelf conjures up memories of a glorious time spent meandering through bookshops in Hay on Wye, Wales in early summer of 1995. I’ll never forget the cashier at the bookstore where it was purchased who informed me that “Robinson Jeffers was a terrible poet!!” Had that nasty Brit ever read “Hurt Hawks,” one of the most powerful poems of the last century? In almost all the gift books received on birthdays and holidays, I find sweet messages from the past written by loving parents now deceased. Their words to a shy teen, who preferred books to baubles, reassured her that it was all right to be a “smart girl” in an era when that was terribly uncool.

Certain categories of books are time capsules for enthusiasms that have diminished but are still of abiding interest. During the 1980s, collecting about quilting and biographies of players in the National Basketball Association predominated. Take a look at Boston
Celtic Bill Russell’s, *Second Wind.* As a youngster, he spent many hours at the Oakland Public Library!

In the 1990s, a substantial body of literature on the intermountain West, especially Nevada, grew up to support an unfinished doctoral dissertation. Oh well, a book may come of it still. My current passion is for books about the environment especially natural histories written by gifted writers. In Peter Matthiessen’s *The Birds of Heaven,* he reports on the welfare of cranes worldwide in the most beautiful, haunting prose. Two seasons ago, I began planting an herb garden. A newer purchase, *The Medieval Garden* by Sylvia Landsberg, may inspire me to recreate a space depicted therein—someday.

Not all of the books are mine. It is a merged collection still growing after twenty-eight years of marriage to an Economics professor. We share many interests in biography, history of all kinds but the emphasis is on American, plus geology and paleontology and poetry.

There is a line from the Navajo Blessing Way Prayer that says, “With beauty all round me, may I walk.” I honestly feel that I am immersed in beauty everyday. When I move through the interior topographies of the book filled rooms in my home and the well stocked bookshelves in the university library where I am a reference librarian, I am doubly blessed.