

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/1

Fred D. White

CULTIVATING A HOME LIBRARY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

My library was dukedom large enough
--Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, I. ii

Lately I've been feeling apologetic about my home library, which extends to every room in my house except the bathrooms (I loathe the notion of "bathroom reading"). Friends gaze bemused at my shelves (*our shelves*: Terry and I combined our collections when we married). *You couldn't have read all those books*, our friends proclaim. (I resist the urge to reply, *True; nor could we have eaten all the food in our refrigerator and cupboards*.) They also want to know why we devote so much space to books when we could download most of them on an e-reader, and at a fraction of the cost. Well, we patiently explain, some books we consult more than read; others we skim or read piecemeal; others we scarf down greedily; others we reread and annotate. (I'm pretty sure I'm paraphrasing Francis Bacon in one of his essays here.) Many of the books are gifts or review copies (Terry reviews works of science fiction, fantasy, and horror on her blogs). In addition to those pragmatic reasons, there are the aesthetic ones: books are beautiful. Books are sensuous. We should never neglect the sensory dimension of the reading experience.

I've grown weary of defending what should be self-evident: books, being a staple not only of a civil society but of a civil family, deserve to have a physical presence in the home. Digital technology seems to have scrambled people's notions of literacy, however. What bothers me most is the growing indifference if not outright disdain toward print, as if digital devices, by virtue of their state-of-the-art wizardry (enhanced by nonstop media frenzy on all fronts), has usurped the collective will to preserve our most precious cultural artifacts, physical books.

In his lavishly illustrated *Living with Books* Alan Powers notes that the literary theorist Walter Benjamin, who died attempting to flee Nazi persecution, understood the symbolic meaning books possess apart from their usefulness, although their usefulness alone gives them a special priority over other possessions. "To know that any book is, in theory, obtainable in a good library," Powers adds, "is no substitute for having your own copy, with its particular history and associations."

Let us chew on that for a moment ...

To be sure, anyone without the financial resources to purchase books (even e-books or used books aren't affordable for people struggling to make ends meet), must rely on their public library. That said, owning the books you want or need to read has many advantages, both practical and impractical. To start with the practical ones: if you value a good story, or a wonderful way of capturing a true-life experience or beautifully worded nuggets of wisdom, you want to have easy access to these verbal treasures; you do not want to risk losing touch with them — and I use the word "touch" quite deliberately. One of those books may have heightened your romantic sensibilities, but it has taken a month or so for you to take pen to journal (or letter to friend, or memoir- or poem-in-progress), and *gosh* — if only you hadn't returned the book(s) in question to the public library!

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/1

Were the book still in your possession, all you'd need to do is pull it from the shelf and turn to the passage you marked in pencil.

I'll use myself as an example, which admittedly is not exactly typical. My home library rivals that of a small public library: fourteen thousand books and growing steadily. Quantity is not as important as range. Name a subject and chances are good that Terry or I will have books on it, including subjects one of us feels we should know something about but has not yet cultivated an interest in. We believe it's important to have some familiarity with as many subjects as possible; the more one learns about the world, the better citizen one becomes. Yes, "A little knowledge is a dang'rous thing," as Alexander Pope warns; but the danger lies in assuming that "a little knowledge" equals *sufficient* knowledge. Anyway, having books of all kinds at my fingertips makes me a better teacher and writer, and Terry a better lawyer, blogger and book reviewer.

There is much pleasure to be derived from dipping spontaneously into books in the comfort of your home instead of in a library—especially given the restricted hours public libraries keep these days because of budget cuts. By their very presences, books nurture reflection. Americans have never collectively regarded themselves as lovers of unhurried reflection—of letting the mind take flight, unimpeded by the time-is-money specter. Books are catalysts; or (to use a more fanciful metaphor) are wings that help us soar into undiscovered territory. Exploring new territory is an American impulse, after all, although it's generally rooted in the pragmatic, venture-capitalist or get-there-before-your-competitors sense of the word. Exploration as an end in itself is quite another matter.

I realize not everyone enjoys being surrounded by books. In her rebuttal to the widespread belief that reading is good for you, Mikita Brottman in *The Solitary Vice: Against Reading* (2008) sees reading as all too often a poor substitute for so-called real life:

The more real life disappointed me, the more I buried myself in books; and the longer I spent reading the more remote grew the possibility of actual escape. Private fantasies were all I had To put it simply, I'd have been much better off if I'd listened to my dad and spent more time in the company of other human beings.

It's the old clichéd argument about "book larnin": Books can't teach you about nitty-gritty living. Life is about getting your hands dirty! Let me share an anecdote about the poet and ex-convict Jimmy Santiago Baca, who explains to Bill Moyers (in *The Language of Life: A Festival of Poets*) that while in prison he was given a book with a protagonist who reminded him of his shepherd grandfather—and all of a sudden Baca wanted to write about his grandfather. But one morning an inmate seeing him reading threw scalding hot coffee into his face. "For an insult like that you have to fight." But Baca chose not to fight, fearing he might never get out of prison. "I began to slam into the walls as hard as I could with my fists, thinking that by imposing enough pain I could take away this ludicrous idea of this stupid book, because books got you nowhere. I mean, sissies read books.... I couldn't fix a '57 Chevy with a book." One day he announced to his fellow inmates, "I'm going to learn how to write. And they said to me, 'You're a coward.' They threw urine at me. They threw feces at me. And I was in ecstasy. I was joyous. Because it was the first time

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/1

I had ever found my own thought.” And so Baca began to write powerful poems about his life — and his poetry, along with the books that helped inspire it, utterly transformed his life.

Surveying my home library is like surveying my life. I spot my copy of Charles Eric Maine’s *Timeliner*, a time-travel novel the sight of which transports *me* through time, back to my early teens when I was suffering over my first crush, unable to eat, yet quite able to lose myself in Maine’s yarn about a physicist whose wife and her lover scheme to murder the narrator by sabotaging his time-travel experiment, but unwittingly sending him into the future, with astonishing consequences. Over here are *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*, Ayn Rand’s perennial best-selling tales of ferocious individuality (at least in the context of the marketplace), shaped by the forces of social Darwinism — tomes I plowed through during my junior year at the University of Minnesota. Now walk over here, to my philosophy shelves: Several of those frayed Doubleday-Image paperback copies of Frederick Copleston’s *A History of Philosophy* were required reading for the History of Philosophy sequence I took as a sophomore in 1962 with Professor T., who lectured with Germanic formality. He’d been utterly unapproachable then; but several years later when I took his course in the philosophy of education while working on my master’s degree, what delightful conversations we would have! Now come with me to my poetry shelves and take a gander at my somewhat battered but still precious copy of Yevgeny Yevtushenko’s *Almost at the End* (Holt, 1987), a memoir in poetry by the poet who for decades dared to speak out against the intolerant views of his comrades in the Soviet Union — views he feared would sound the death-knell of *perestroika*. In 1996 Mr. Yevtushenko gave a riveting reading as part of San Jose State University’s Center for Literary Arts Major Author Series and signed books afterward, including mine (“To Fred, with deep respect, Yevgeny”). Lines from “My Universities,” one of the poems in that collection, continue to resonate with me

*I am a writer for all who don't write
I am a writer
created by readers
and readers are created by me.
My debt has been paid.
Here I am
Your creator and your creation,
an anthology of you,
a second edition of your lives.
[trans. Antonina W. Bouis, Albert C. Todd, and Yevgeny Yevtushenko]*

You can see why I can never part with my books; they define me; at least they define me to myself. Nearly every volume opens a door to some room in my past. Even if that room is a closet or basement, it forms part of the gaudy edifice of who I am. “They [our books] stick to us,” says the narrator of Carlos María Domínguez’s novella, *The House of Paper*, “in that pact of need and oblivion we make with them, witnesses to a moment in our lives we will never see again.”

Now go to your own bookshelf and relive similar moments. I’d be willing to guess that once you do what I’ve just been doing you will want to reassert your own commitment to physical books.

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/1

I'm an insomniac. To get sleepy I gaze in near-total darkness at our bedroom bookshelves. Our SF/Fantasy books are arranged alphabetically, so I glance in the general direction of, say, the L's where Ursula Le Guin's ethnography-inspired parables like *Changing Planes* or her classic *The Left Hand of Darkness* ("I was taught as a child ... that Truth is a matter of the imagination"); and Stanislaw Lem's *The Cyberiad* (clever robots trying to out-invent one another); and Alan Lightman's exquisite *Einstein's Dreams*. More fiction about science than science fiction or fantasy, this parable of a novel is about how the greatest physicist of the twentieth century might have used his extraordinary creative imagination to arrive at his theory of time: "Suppose time is a circle, bending back on itself" begins one of the chapters; "Imagine a world in which there is no time, only images" ... Einstein's dreams are imaginary, but they are filled with insights into the human condition. In one of his dreams Einstein wonders what the world would be like if everyone lived only one day. In such a world "people heed time like cats straining to hear sounds in the attic. There is no time to lose. Birth, schooling, love affairs, marriage, profession, old age must be all within one transit of the sun, one modulation of light ..."

Einstein's Dreams, with its bizarre, whimsical, and sometimes melancholy scenarios, is for me the quintessential Book: a little treasure of wisdom and imagination to reread regularly. I like to think that Lightman's novel could itself pass as one of Einstein's dreams: *What if time were a book, governed only by the way in which it was read? And when you stop reading it, that time dimension closes; and another book you start reading opens another time dimension; and when you're no longer reading—that is, when you open the book of your daily life, you've simply entered another time dimension?*

Not everyone has the wall space to house a substantial home library. Books stacked just anywhere look hoarded, cluttered, and aren't much use. Part of the joy of building a home library comes from deciding how to arrange the books. One's bookshelves should be as aesthetically pleasing as the furniture—but those shelves should also show signs of use. I have nothing against the impulse to show off one's books; they are, after all, works of art. Books reflect the personality and tastes of their owners, and for that reason house guests enjoy perusing them. Even books that have been color- or size-coordinated are appealing ... within limits. (I'm reminded of a *New Yorker* cartoon in which a library has arranged its books according to Small, Medium, and Large.) I do, however, become annoyed at seeing books used exclusively as décor: ultra-neat rows of pristine faux-leather sets of Dickens and Proust from the Franklin Library or the Eastman Press or those *Reader's Digest* Condensed Books or supermarket encyclopedias from the 1950s and 60s. Not a smudge on any of them; they may as well be glued to the shelves. No home library looks genuine to me unless I can detect, say, a slight fraying at the top, a scraping or fading of those gilded edges, a bookmark poking up, a spine crease or two. Aside from collectible recent first editions, books are charmed by their stigmata of use.

The possible ways of arranging one's book collection are many. There is plenty of room for personal eccentricity. Let us pay a visit, courtesy of Estelle Ellis, Caroline Seebohm, and Christopher Simon-Sykes and their folio-sized *At Home with Books: How Booklovers Live with and Care for Their*

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/1

Libraries, to the homes of three of the forty book lovers and their libraries
....

Robert A. M. Stern, an architect to the Rockefellers and other celebrities, who likes to include more spaces for books than his clients currently need. "Even though this is an age of computers and video," he states, "books are going to be with us for a long time" (he's writing this in 1995, alas). In his own home in East Hampton, Stern has built recessed bookshelves on three of his four bedroom walls, and here he keeps books he's read cover to cover as well as books for future leisure time reading. "You look up and you see a title that you've read and had pleasure from and it makes you feel very comfortable."

Victor Niederhoffer, a real estate broker who retreats regularly to his "hushed, reflective society of books" in his Connecticut estate. Niederhoffer's library is spacious—2500 square feet housing 18,000 books covering an incredible range of subject matter. The library is designed for both comfort and stimulation—large windows that flood the room with light; cozy reading nooks; plush leather chairs and hassocks.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, professor of performance studies at New York University, who quips that "books have always upstaged everything in my home." Indeed! The authors have included a marvelous photograph of Kirshenblatt-Gimblett virtually submerged in a sea of books inside her library.

And how, pray tell, does the Fred White / Terry Weyna home library compare to the above illustrious examples? Although we haven't quite been upstaged by our books in our 2600 square-foot Sacramento home, books line the walls in every room, even the closets, but NOT the bathrooms. To keep the bookcases from appearing cluttered, we give the books plenty of breathing room and place vases and knickknacks of varying sizes and shapes on some of the shelves

One builds a home library to relive special moments of our lives, to counteract the passage of time. I suppose it's escapism; but without a means of escaping the soul-deadening grind, we risk becoming like those folks whom Thoreau observed leading lives of quiet desperation. Special books are like diaries; there's a sweet-sorrow nostalgic quality about them. They remind you of a pleasant experience from, say, your grade school or undergraduate days; or of a relative or sweetheart who may have given you the book; or of a life-changing insight that the book triggered; many books conjure up such associations. And then there are the very special books—books that work like beacons to illuminate the dark crevasses of your soul, those facets of your identity that you've forgotten about or repressed.

I'll share three books with you that possess this magical quality for me. I hope that by doing so you will want to rediscover books in your own home library that can reacquaint you with long-hidden aspects of yourself. Return with me to my poetry shelves. See that faded and frayed copy of Oscar Williams's *The New Pocket Anthology of American Verse*? I was fourteen when I bought it—at the Pickwick Bookshop in Hollywood, sometime in 1958. I remember turning randomly to Walt Whitman, to whom Oscar Williams devoted 60 pages, far more pages than he devoted to any

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/1

of the other poets (possibly because Whitman's work was the first to enter the public domain?)—specifically to this passage from "Song of Myself":

*A child said What is the grass? Fetching it to me with full hands;
How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he.
I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven.
Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord ...*

Those lines electrified me; I could not stop thinking about them. The sublime metaphors, the delicious freedom of those expansive lines, still scalps my naked soul, as Emily Dickinson would say. I realized then and there that I wanted to be a poet.

Around that time, I had broadened my dream from becoming a poet to becoming a *writer*. How did one *do* that? How did the whole writing-publishing process work? One day while scanning the magazine racks of a neighborhood newsstand I just happened to divert my gaze from the latest issue of *Playboy* to magazines for writers: *Writer's Digest*; *The Writer*—and it was through the latter that I saw an ad for the 1958 edition of *Writer's Handbook*, edited by A.S. Burack. Here it is: the first of my dozens of books about writing and the writing life, proudly displayed despite its frayed appearance. Long since denuded of its dust jacket, the dark blue cloth has faded, the pages have yellowed around the edges, and the spine wobbly from heavy use over the decades. I wouldn't part with it for a thousand dollars. How I devoured this book when I first brought it home! It was giving me the inside scoop on authorship: Faith Baldwin's "Obstacle Race" ("The stories most likely to succeed *still* deal with young love, glad or sad, and with marital problems."); B.J. Chute's "Rule Number Three" (which is to *be patient*, along with "write the very best you know how," and "work hard."). Udia G. Olsen even explained how to prepare a manuscript ("The day is past when editors will spend time and effort in reading handwritten contributions"; "Be sure the type faces are clean"; "Make a carbon copy of your manuscript").

The third very special book is Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. One of these days I will treat myself to a first edition (unsigned copies of the true first printing/first issue, published by Covici-Friede in 1937 run about \$3000)—for it was the first adult novel I ever read; I was only 8 or 9. My poor schizophrenic Uncle Larry, living under my grandparents' care at the time, had been a voracious reader before his illness, and many of his books were stacked in boxes. One day, I randomly pulled out *Of Mice and Men* and started reading ... and continued reading for hours, and all the next day. When I finished, I was a different kid, with a drastically different view of the adult world.

If digital texts, invisible in their plastic reading devices, signify the next stage in our culture, I will mourn their passing into invisible code, dependent upon machinery to be read. It doesn't feel at all right. It would feel as if a part of me has been reduced to code, utterly dependent upon batteries and rechargers and search protocols. Books shape us, and they reshape us as we grow older. They are our guardians, waiting patiently on our shelves—assuming we still have shelves for them—waiting for us to heed their wisdom and reconcile us to the relentless passage of time.