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Fine and Private Places: An English Professor's Perspective on Evolving Library Collections

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It's called *Wallis Budge: Magic and Mummies in London and Cairo*. What a great subject! Budge, Keeper of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities in the British Museum from 1894 to 1924, wrote *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* (1895), *The Gods of Egypt* (1904), and *An Egyptian Hieroglyphic Dictionary* (1920). Didn’t I tell you Matthew was awesome! He says he will try to come to the Conference sometime soon! You go, Matthew! http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/images/1843822180/ref=dp_image_0?ie=UTF8&amp;keywords=books

Speaking of books! Heard the other day from Maria (Fitzpatrick) Anderson (M.M. Anderson www.werewolfdreams.net), once with Academic Press! Remember her? It’s been a long time since Maria was the Wholesale, Library, and Special Sales Manager for Academic Press. (Remember them?) Well, Maria now lives in Weston, Florida and is involved in publishing BUT as a YA author. Her first novel, *Werewolf Dreams* was released in 2009 and her next book, *Werewolf Love* is due out summer 2012. And to top it all off, Maria has made Lyman Newlin a newspaper reporter in her novel! Of course we all remember Papa Lyman! Maria decided to write me when she ran into an old *Against the Grain* and remembered the Charleston Conferences! And, luckily, we're all happy when, in the middle of a public, or (at least) accessible to people wide and far. All can now access library collections to your door and to make collections yet more so easily accessible. But what about what you do when a virus attacks? We knew her when, like William Morris, once said he was at SAGE Publishing?? Alson has concluded that the press has been publishing too many trade books. She has also canceled publication of a literary-studies series. Talk about *Against the Grain* and stirring the pot!! We are looking forward to interviewing Alison in a future issue of *ATG*! See “At the U. of California Press, A New Director Bucks Traditional Scholarly Advise by Jennifer Howard.” http://chronicle.com/article/HOT- Type-At-U-of-California/128601/
regularly in Baghdad), and your laptop batteries run down? Take your laptop to read it outside? In a famous *Twilight Zone* episode, Armageddon occurs (an H-bomb) and the last man on earth, a bookworm played by Burgess Meredith, consoles himself with unfettered access to the New York Public Library. Then he breaks his glasses and can’t read. In a future scenario, he’d be left with nothing tangible to read in the first place.

One purpose of a library is to encourage people to read. The collective fear that people are reading less than they used to doesn’t make sense; given our public and private schools and our collective addiction to email, texting, and twitting, we’re reading all the time — we’re reading now while driving, for good measure — but we should rightly fear that few people are reading quality creative literature anymore. I’m sure this has always been the case, that the time, education, and enthusiasm to appreciate intellectually difficult and verbally creative works has never been plentiful. It has always been difficult and rare to find golden worlds — or convincing and sensitive, intelligent human worlds — in fiction, until such works become classics.

Nor are we reading enough at a slow, thoughtful pace for the purpose of spiritual and/or intellectual pleasure and stimulation: slow reading to match the slow eating movement. Despite being an English professor, I am (like anyone) rushed to get work done. Graduate school and the tenure-track nearly destroyed my enjoyment of a good book for life. Recently, for the first time in a long time, I read a long classic, *The Divine Comedy*, at a leisurely — that is, thoughtful and intellectually rewarding — pace (I read it while sitting in on an undergraduate class and following the syllabus). I took the Greek root of leisure, or *school*, to heart.

Like many others, however, I have a worry, gnawing like hungry Ugolino at the back of my head, that books as physical, beautiful, skillfully typeset, raggy, musty, textured, leathered, finger-in-the-spine, library-stacked, illustrated, and scribbled-on objects are coming to an end. Popular intellectual journals like *The New York Review of Books* or discussion pages on The New York Times Website are much interested in this topic lately, that is, the disappearance of hard copies in part or entirely from libraries and our lives. I know that this fear is overblown, that more books are published in the world than ever before, but hard-copy disappearance is a fact in many cases.

It is a growing trend in university libraries, including my own at East Carolina University. ECU has been steadily reducing its acquisitions of hard-copy books and is gradually turning its current journal collection into e-only format. This saddens me because a great intellectual pleasure in my life is browsing the journal stacks on a Friday afternoon, finding journals in and outside of my profession, including some with terrific production quality, design, and art spreads, like *Word and Image*. Now we’re down to a couple of short aisles of journals, covering all disciplines. *Word and Image* vanished into the databases (back copies into the stacks) last year. I have less reason than ever to enter the library now, to gaze on hard-copy and to casually meet students and other faculty there. Strangely, I am becoming less social and collegial as a result of becoming less bookish in the library on Friday afternoons.

However slowly I read, I do not enjoy reading off of a computer screen; I do it because it’s practical, not enjoyable. I wonder about long-term effects on my eyesight and health.

More and more novels and poems will presumably go straight to electronic readers like Kindles and Nooks. I fear this means that, sooner or later, in one form or another, especially in worst-case scenarios, many books will come with a permanent, renewable user fee. I am equally worried about the democratic pleasure principle: losing a sense of campus community focused on the library “temple” near many of our hearts. We will also lose the delight in the nature of books themselves, our clasp-able bosom buddies we can smell, take to the beach, stretch under trees, shake sand from, spill coffee on, and read on sultry evenings, or — like a ten-year-old — read half-upside-down in the backseat of a car; or, like the immortal lovers Paolo and Francesca in Dante’s *Inferno*, first fall in love over when reading aloud about Lancelot and Guinevere. I just don’t see those two kindling anything with a Kindle between them. If they did, who would be watching?

Reader, enjoy your hard copy! ✒️

Endnotes

1. Parts of this paper were first presented at the 2010 Greenway Reader’s Day conference remarks to the forum panel on “Reading the Humanities,” part of East Carolina University’s Downtown Dialogues in the Humanities series. The views expressed here are my own.


3. For the view of a university library and especially its rare books room as a “temple” and “citadel,” see Robert Darnton, *The Case for Books*: Past, Present, and Future (New York: Public Affairs, 2009): 32, 33, 41. According to Darnton, “Rare book rooms are a vital part of research libraries, the part that is most inaccessible to Google. But libraries also provide places for ordinary readers to immerse themselves in books, quiet places in comfortable settings, where the codex can be appreciated in all its individuality.” (40) On the PATRIOT Act and Google’s ability to gather information on its patrons, see Darnton page 46.


5. As Darnton writes, “The best preservation system ever invented was the old-fashioned, pre-modern book.” *The Case for Books*: 38.


9. An admirable effort at recreating a temple atmosphere within the library temple, a *sanctum sanctorum* as it were, where computers (but not books, art, or lectures) are absent, is the “Athenaeum” in the Gould Library, Carleton College, MN. http://www.carleton.edu/campus/library/about/athenaeum/.

The awesome keeping-us-informed Ramune Kubilius <rkubilius@northwestern.edu> sends news of the death of Dr. Martin M. continued on page 34

Rumors

Have y’all been visiting the ATG NewsChannel? Did you know that we are putting up a new book every week, along with new article links, questions of the week, stars of the week and hot topics of the week? Check it out! Even had an enterprising author thank us for listing her book! And listen up!

The Book of the Week of August 28th was The Forgotten Founding Father: Noah Webster’s Obsession and the Creation of an American Culture. It so happens that the alert James Marsh <jmarsh@thebookhouse.com> (The Book House, Inc.) noticed and told us about his daughter Jessica who followed her heart to Western Massachusetts to work on her boyfriend’s family farm after both graduated from the College of Wooster. Farm owner Mike Wissenmann and artist Will Sillin started a maze back in 2000 and each year there is a different subject! Just so happens that this year it’s a corn maze in western MA and Noah Webster is the “subject”! Way cool! See — www.mikesmaze.com.