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A Little Nostalgia — Saying Good-Bye to the Cards in Each Book

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Henry Louis Gates, Jr., chronicling the friendship of Albert Murray and Ralph Ellison, reports that Murray found that whenever he checked out a book at the Tuskegee Institute Library, Ellison's name was on the check-out card.¹ Gates tells us that in earlier days library patrons wrote their names on check-out cards rather than using barcodes, in case no one remembers. My own library at Carleton College did not change to an automated circulation system until 1995. In bidding farewell to the old system, it seems only right to think about what those check-out cards with names managed to do, both in fantasy and reality.

The true lover of libraries will miss these cards, which told the history of each book, building its reputation as it passed from professor to student, from one contented reader to another. A friend at Princeton researching American physicians and their lives in early Morocco, was gratified to discover from the check-out cards that Clifford Geertz had read the same books as an undergraduate. The names not only record the life of a book but often establish its provenance. One would be safer judging a book by its check-out card than by its cover. Librarians who make triage decisions about which books to keep in the library or which to repair know that it's not only the number of persons who check them out, but whose names are recorded there.

Some cards develop their own individual worth apart from the book. A Carleton librarian remembers a student asking to keep a card signed by Peter

Torkelson because his sister was a fan of the rock group, the Monkees. Another Carleton student is rumored to be making a collection of the old check-out cards, hoarding fetishistic objects carrying the magic of the readers' names.

The absence of check-out cards strikes yet another blow against community, for each check-out card with all its names produced a little community of readers. This community can constitute an invisible college, bringing one scholar together with another. One reader describes her pleasure at seeing the names on the books she checks out: "There are certain names whom I know, some I would like to know, at least who they were. It would be great to find these people and learn more about them. The ones whose names turn up repeatedly ... I'd like to send invitations out and get them together and say something like 'I have noticed your name on every book I've ever checked out.'" One Carleton professor was able to satisfy this longing when he used the faculty names on check-out cards to assemble a guest list for his party for a celebrity author. Fewer ways are left to bring readers together. A friend writes of an experience at the University of Chicago many years ago:

Sometimes the check-out cards are not just a connection with others but a confrontation with an earlier, forgotten self.

*Boxed Facts excerpted from
Nat Bodian's The Joy of
Publishing, available fro
Open Horizons Publishing
Co., PO Box 205, Fairfield,
Iowa 52656 at \$29.95.*

"As I checked out a book at the Regenstein Library, I saw on the check out card that Vinda Karandikar, had checked out the book before me. He was a famous Maharastrian poet and my one-time Professor of English in Bombay. My heart was beating fast as I called the English department and was told that he was a Fulbright Visitor that year. He was sharing office space with a woman on the faculty. When I got there, I was embarrassed that



Professor Karandikar was eating a sandwich as if he were doing something unforgivable. He had his back to Miss H. and he had his sandwich in his desk, and his face was thrust into his desk as if this would hide or make up for the lack of courtesy he felt in not sharing his food, which is what he was brought up to do. Always offer an equal share to whoever visits, even if a visitor like me hated the food, and absolutely did not want any. In any case, he wasn't offering any. This was America, but he was embarrassed, and he was behaving in a way that I wish I didn't have to witness. Once he had dispatched the sandwich, he turned around and became more like the quaintly passionate Maharastrian poet from Bombay. During his lectures, when he was younger, he used to dance like a Kathakali dancer on the stage while lecturing. In his youth he looked solid and vigorous, and his dancing on stage was not without his noble madness. He shook his head in joy from side to side and was so overcome at seeing me, that all he could say was 'Little Molly, whom I taught Prosody' over and over again."²

The check-out cards recorded the life of the book. Checking out a book brings it

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to life. Some readers are depressed to see how many books they take out that have never been checked out before, even if the book had been in the library for 20 years or more. Another reader says it another way: "There are many books that have not been made love to for a long time." **Nicholson Baker** writes that the fact that some library books are neglected is part of the "mystery and power of libraries. The books are there, waiting from age to age until their moment comes ... their moment may never come — but we have no way of predicting that, since we are unable now to predict what a future age will find of interest." ³ **Andrew Miller** describes himself as a literary beachcomber, waking books from slumber after many years.⁴ Now there may be no real way to know about such awakenings unless the book gets wet or smudged with jam. The post-1995 books in the Carleton library have a certain antiseptic deadness.


One could once build a fragile reputation as an intellectual by having one's name on all the right check-out cards. Last year I plowed through *Infinite Jest*, but without my name on a check-out card I'm condemned to the loneliness of the long distance reader. There is something about putting one's name on a book that has to do with standing up and being counted. One reader confesses that he had once hoped to have his name on every book in the **St. Olaf College** library before he graduated. There can be fantasies of connection and sharing with future readers. The names on the check-out card not only represent a connection with its author but also with everyone who's read the book. A faculty wife, our town's most intelligent reader, felt that her early shyness with others was often eased when she discovered from the check-out cards that they were reading the same books. When she turned to reading to solve some of life's problems, she was soon comforted by seeing the names of others who had gone before her. Names on the check-out cards bring back memories of readers come and gone, no longer in the library. A Japanese student tells of seeing Japanese names on the check-out cards and wondering about what their lives were like. He also described the pure pleasure of actually seeing handwriting in a world of word processing. Teachers find that the check-out cards bring back memories of their students, year after year, and some enterprising professors have found other uses. It is a little known secret that faculty members teetering on grade decisions might examine the check-out cards from their bibliography and reward those students who were

savvy enough to check out the right books.

Sometimes the check-out cards are not just a connection with others but a confrontation with an earlier, forgotten self. How many readers have not been surprised to see their names on a book checked out 10 years ago, only to speculate about their lives the last time they read it? When the check-out cards were discontinued in our town library, many readers of mysteries had to depend on their small penciled initials somewhere in the book to signify they'd read it. Another professor once confessed that he checked out a good book on how to improve your memory only to discover from the check-out card that he'd read it only a few months before.

The cards can also record the "shelf life" of a book. It can record its prime, or chronicle its revivals. The cards not only reveal the history of each individual book but they are good at recording reading trends. The **Barbara Pym** craze of the '80s is well recorded. In the future, none of us will know who's reading Barbara Pym. Privacy competes with community as a strong value and librarians fiercely protect it. The Unabomber's librarian in Lincoln, Montana, would prefer to go to jail rather than tell what her readers read. An American professor remembers explor-

ing the stacks of the western-language collection in the **Beijing University Library** and finding from the circulation cards that many had not been checked out since the relatively free "Hundred Flowers" period of 1957. It was too dangerous during the Cultural Revolution to leave evidence that one was reading these books.⁵

Free of such worries, we can take comfort that Carleton's reading history has not been erased. Carleton librarians decided to keep the check-out cards in the pre-1995 books, just to safeguard their history. Many of us are immortalized somewhere in the stacks. 

Endnotes

1. Gates, H.L., Jr. "Profile: King of Cats." *New Yorker* 1986 (April 8), p. 70-81.
2. Ramanujan, Molly (Shouri Daniels), unpublished letter, 1996.
3. Baker, N. "Annals of Scholarship: Dis-cards," *New Yorker* 1994 (April 4), p. 64-89.
4. Miller, A. "The History of a Historical Novel," *New York Times Book Review*, 1997 (October 12), p. 39.
5. Entenmann, R. "Mao's Missed Opportunity," letter, *Carleton Voice*, Winter 1996-1997, 62:2.

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