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Something About Books— Why Do You Have All Those Books?

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Visitors to my house, especially those who do not know me well, are confronted with a dilemma. Do they acknowledge the thousands upon thousands of books, and therefore ask the inevitable question: "Have you read all these books?" and the even more personal question: "Why do you have all these books?" Or, as is most likely the case, do they ignore all these books, pretend they don't exist, and save themselves the trouble of an explanation.

Sometimes even I question my buying habits. Why for example, did I buy that copy of **Allegra Goodman's** *Kaaterskill Falls*, even before I had read a review or heard that it was a finalist for the **National Book Award**? Because I liked the dust jacket, one of the most interesting I have ever seen. And why do I now own two copies of *The Man Who Once Played Catch With Nellie Fox*, a novel by **John Manderino**? Because I bought the first copy after reading the blurb, which said the author lives in Madison, Wisconsin. Having graduated with my M.L.S. from **University of Wisconsin** in Madison, I couldn't pass up what turned out to be a very good baseball novel. My second copy came from Atlantic Books in Charleston, bought because it was signed by the author. And why do my bulging book shelves now contain a copy of *Ambrose Bierce: A Sole Survivor*, edited by **S.T. Joshi** and **David E. Schultz**? Because one of the editors, **David E. Schultz**, is the son of a longtime friend from Milwaukee. My copy is signed by both editors, and inscribed "To John J. Walsdorf, bibliophile."

All this leads me to a new pile of yet unread books, the result of a chance encounter on a cross-country flight. Normally I board the flight with one thought on my mind; get an aisle seat with nobody in the center seat, and settle down to read a book. This time the man in the seat next to me was plowing through **Richard Ford's** *Independence Day*, and I casually remarked that I had just finished and greatly enjoyed his latest work, *Women With Men*. We chatted a bit, and before I knew it, we were exchanging titles of recently read and enjoyed books. The deal was struck: I would give him four titles of books I recently read and enjoyed, and he would do the same. His list included **Isabel Allende's** *Eva Luna*; **Ian McEwan's** *Enduring Love*; **Andrew Miller's** *Ingenious Pain* and **Francisco Rebollo's** *Rasero*. My own list included the **Richard Ford** title, plus **Kent Anderson's** *Night Dogs*; **David Guterson's** *Snow Falling on Cedars* and **Donna Tartt's** *The Secret History*.

So, four more books are now added to my shelves, four more un-read books. Which finally leads me to the book I was reading when the flight started: *Ruined by Reading: A Life in Books* by **Lynne Sharon Schwartz**. Originally published by Beacon Press, Boston, 1996 and now released in paperback, also from Beacon Press. Here is a book that starts off asking the right questions: "Lying in the shadow of the books, I brood on my reading habit. What is it all about? What am I doing it for? And the classic addict's question, What is it doing for me?" (p.1)

Here is an author/reader who confronts the basic question of "not finishing a book." As she puts it: "In truth I have made some tentative steps towards freedom. Over the last ten years or so, I have managed not to finish certain books ... I take up the new book in good faith, planning to accompany it, for better or for worse, till the last page us do part, but ... it stops being fun." (p. 5) She continues by saying that there are so many delectable books in the world, why linger with one that doesn't offer new delights.

Here, also, is an author/reader who can share that special feeling that book lovers have. As she puts it: "There is nothing to match the affinity of people who were defined and nourished by the same books, who share a fantasy life." (p. 47)

"So," she asks, "what has been the point?" Not to amass knowledge, and not to kill time. "For in the end, even if all my books were to vanish, I would still have them somewhere, if I had read them attentively enough. Maybe the words on the page are not even the true book, in the end, only a gateway to the book that recreates itself in the mind and lasts as long as we do." (p. 85)

I guess the next time someone asks why I have all those books, I'll try to remember these words of **Lynne Sharon Schwartz**.

Computer Science Bestsellers from page 56

Solomon, James D. *Mobile IP: The Internet Unplugged*. Prentice Hall 1998 \$46.99 Cloth 0138562466

Software Visualization: Programming as a Multimedia Experience; ed. by John Stasko. MIT Press 1998 \$55.00 Cloth 0262193957

Nichols, Kenneth, 1954- *Inventing Software: The Rise of "Computer-Related" Patents*. Quorum 1998 \$55.00 Cloth 1567201407

Hansen, Brad. *Dictionary of Multimedia: Terms & Acronyms*; 1998. Fitzroy Dearborn 1997 \$40.00 Cloth 1579580173

Arnold, Ken. *Java Programming Language*. Addison-Wesley 1997 \$37.95 Paper 0201310066

Flake, Gary William. *Computational Beauty of Nature: Computer Explorations of Fractals, Chaos, Complex Systems, and Adaption*. MIT Press 1998 \$45.00 Cloth 0262062003

Neural Networks and Pattern Recognition; ed. by Omid Omidvar. Academic 1998 \$49.95 Cloth 0125264208

Gross, Thomas, 1954- *Iwarp: Anatomy of A Parallel Computing System*. MIT Press 1998 \$45.00 Cloth 0262071835

Glass, Robert L., 1932- *Software Runaways*. Prentice Hall 1998 \$29.99 Paper 013673443x

Levy, Pierre, 1956- *Becoming Virtual: Reality in the Digital Age*. Plenum 1998 \$26.95 Cloth 0306457881

Szyferski, Clemens. *Component Software: Beyond Object-Oriented Programming*. Addison-Wesley 1998 \$44.95 Cloth 0201178885