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Lost in Austin — Wandering the Stacks

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Over the years I have lost track of how many times I have been asked in job interviews about my management style. I have been successful in several of those job quests, so I must have answered the question satisfactorily, but were I asked it today, my answer would be different because on the job, I have discovered that my style is eclectic, pragmatic, and ever-changing with the situation. After all, as **Emerson** suggests to us in his wonderful essay, “Self-Reliance,” “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines.” I am happy to note that I am neither a little statesman, a philosopher, nor a divine, but I would also add that as much as I have admired and taken from this essay going back fifty years when I was still in high school, I have come to realize that none of us are as self-reliant as we think we are, and a foolish consistency about self-reliance can also create a hobgoblin of little minds.

One of the management tools (management style is a misnomer although one can and should manage with style) that I have taken to of late with more frequency than in the past is management by walking around to the extent that I have done away entirely with meetings of the whole, choosing instead to meet on an ad hoc basis with small, dedicated groups that can then go about their business following styles that suit a project and those individuals associated with the project.

But I have digressed in advance as a prelude to what I really want to write about, and that is a combination of collection development and authors whose books I have enjoyed. Once I retire (let me count the days), I will be happy to manage my own life and no one else’s, and the collection development that I do in order to continue reading those favorite authors will be towards my own collections. In the meantime, however, I continue to learn about the books, the collection, in the library that I manage. I have used the same technique as I have evaluated collections, as a consultant, in three other academic libraries.

As I wander the stacks, certain books jump out at me, and they all talk to me, vying for my attention by flaunting their place in a range and by their appearance. Hey, look at me, I am worn and tattered, used and abused for decades. I am tired. Find a new copy, a newer edition, a text that speaks in modern English or German for those who cannot easily read Fraktur.

Others distinguish themselves by their freshness. Look at the covers, look at the date on the classification label; I am of the 21st Century. Others say I am old, but I am still the

authority. I have standing and dignity, but I am being crowded by riff raff. Please remove those outdated, non-seminal, sometimes mediocre (no, all books are not created equal, so use your judgment, dare I say critical thinking?) works so that I can stand out and be discovered by a new generation of users, students, and scholars. Lord bless the true scholars for whom much can be forgiven.

But again, I digress. Here’s what really got me started on this theme of wandering the stacks because I wander the stacks in my library at least once a day, even if it is just on the outer aisles on my way to an office or simply to get away from my desk to get my blood back in circulation.

One problem I have as I wander the stacks is that books jump out at me, speak to me. So I stop to say hello. I will take the book from its place on the shelf and, without thinking, blow the dust from the top edge, and sadly, there is usually some accumulation of dust. It’s inevitable but sad to me. You have been neglected but no longer, at least for this moment. I look at the title page and its verso. Ah, a first edition and in very good condition except for the library markings. Someone sweated blood to write this book, and others worked hard to edit the manuscript and bring it to life through publication, marketing, cover design, and sale. And a librarian or faculty member selected the book, and it was acquired only to sit and gather dust. I confirm this by looking at

the circulation slip in the back or opening the book and hearing it crack much like my bones do when I have been sitting in one place too long. As some sage once remarked, getting old isn’t for sissies. But we can also mellow and improve with age much as a good red wine does or, even better, a fine single malt whisky that

has gained texture, taste, and appreciation as it aged under tender, loving care.

I will often pick out a section and spend as much time as I can spare looking at what is there and rejoicing when I see names that I know and respect. Looking at our HT section that deals with cities and city planning, I found three classics by **Lewis Mumford**. Alas, they hadn’t been touched in more than a quarter of a century. And as an aside, a day later while watching a wonderfully original, eccentric documentary called *The Cruise*, the narrator and star, **Timothy “Speed” Levitch**, tells his tour bus audience the opinion **Mumford** had of the Chrysler Building. Apparently, **Mumford** was impressed, but not really. Judging from the age of almost all of the books in this section, there is no one left who teaches about cities and their architecture and cultures. The weeding

of this section is just around the corner, and although **Mumford** hasn’t been read on campus in years, I am in favor of keeping his books in hopes that with fewer titles to choose from, someone will rediscover **Lewis Mumford** and his voice, his mind, his studied perspective on cities that still have value in today’s society. It is no longer surprising to me how little things have changed in an age when change seems to happen in nanoseconds. Change is good, no? But no, it isn’t always good because all too often we change for the sake of change and lose parts of our history. Be careful when you work to eliminate a tradition because you might be performing a cultural lobotomy that leaves part of your cultural brain deficient.

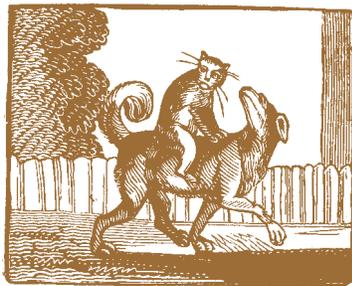
I love digressions, don’t you? Isn’t that what a good conversation is, a long series of digressions? Think about the really good conversations you have had with friends, and you will partially put your finger on why you and that person are friends even though what makes really close, lasting friendships is essentially ineffable. You start out on subject A and soon move on to B until finally you have worked through Z and are back on a variation of A, all without conscious effort or direction. You are exhilarated and satisfied but wanting more. Alcohol may or may not be involved, but if it does involve a meal and a bottle of wine, it will be one of the tastiest meals that you ever consumed and one of the finest wines ever to grace your palate even though, in fact, the food is plain and the wine is inexpensive. It was the conversation and the company that provided the true nourishment and light-headedness. The food and wine provided the excuse to linger over nothing but shared words.

So I have digressed even further in an attempt to explain my digressions. Please bear with me a bit longer as I try again to get to the root of what led me to this topic of wandering the stacks and finding books that speak to me.

What I really want to talk about, or rather who I want to talk, is **Peter DeVries** because it was a shelf of his books that spoke to me in a chorus just the other day as I browsed the American literature section among thousands of books that I will never have the pleasure of reading. So it is not difficult to understand why I often leave the stacks with a book in hand. This time I left with a tight, clean, pristine first edition in its bright dust jacket of *Peckham’s Marbles* and a thin volume called *Peter DeVries: A Critical Essay* by **Roderick Jellema**, a name that **DeVries** himself might have invented.

When I opened *Peckham’s Marbles*, the book sighed audibly because it had apparently never been opened. Instead it had sat there in the stacks since the library acquired it in 1986 — bought and abandoned. That is too bad because it is one of those books that catches

continued on page 77



Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — Print

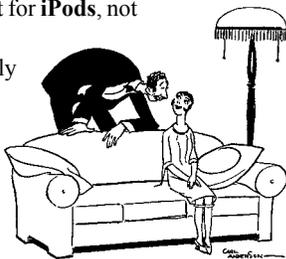
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I'm sure it won't be too much longer before those of us who not only read books but don't own a digital reading device and so read them in print will be having to explain ourselves constantly, since we'll have come to seem a little curious if not completely odd. While we're not at that point yet, I might as well get going and start to think now about how I'll talk about print when that day does come.

I'm not anti-eBook, anti-online, none of that. In fact in my day job I spend a good deal of time trying to make it easier for our customers to buy more eBooks, so that their patrons use more eBooks, so that our customers will buy want to buy more...and so on. And I certainly spend my share of time online, both at work and otherwise, and know all about the pleasures of Websurfing, whether aimless or purposeful.

I'll probably buy a reading device one day. But an early adopter I am not, never was, not for microwave ovens when they came in so long ago, and not since for cell phones or smart phones, not for digital cameras, not for DVDs, not for GPS devices, not for iPods, not for much of anything.

I don't say all of that proudly or due to some matter of principle. Usually I do get around to trying out these things, eventually. I'm just not in a hurry. In the case of reading devices and eBooks, for example, first I'd like to read



more of the printed books on that section of my bookshelf where I line up the books I haven't gotten to yet, the "still have to read" area.

I do fall behind on them. It may take me a few months, a year, well, maybe ten years before I finally open one I placed on the shelf, usually with high anticipation. In the meantime other books come along and some of them jump the line. A couple of weeks ago I finished a book about the jazz pianist **Thelonius Monk** that had been sitting on the "to read" shelf for what must have been close to that ten years. I thought often about reading it — enjoyed the book when I finally did — but even over those years on the shelf it was a small pleasure many times over just to notice it now and again, and to think about reading it.

I've kept the **Monk** book, for now, but don't keep every book I read. I used to, but that got out of hand. I have hauled many box-loads of my own and my kids' (grown now) books to the public library, have sold what I could to local bookdealers, and for years have thought twice before buying a book in the first place. Today I just keep the ones I particularly liked. My bookshelves are crowded, but no longer ridiculous with books squeezed in on top of other books or somehow into spots not quite wide enough, or stored in boxes in some closet or basement.

So despite having hauled

them around during my twenties, my thirties, likely longer than that as I moved from one address to another across several states and one province, in and out of a series of apartments, flats, and houses, I don't believe I any longer own, for example, a single book I read in college as an undergraduate. I can remember a few of those books, but if the copies I owned still exist at all, they're on someone else's bookshelf, not on mine.

The book I do still own and have owned the longest, as I survey things, is one I read in graduate school, *Simple Justice*, a history of the famous 1954 Supreme Court case on school desegregation, *Brown v. Board of Education*. The author was **Richard Kluger**, a former journalist who, while an editor at **Simon & Schuster**, couldn't find an author willing to write about the case and researched and wrote the book himself. He began the work in 1968, according to his Website, and *Simple Justice* came out in 1976. The book was a National Book Award nominee. **Kluger** won the **Pulitzer Prize** for another he wrote, later on.

I read the book in the fall of 1980, when I had just begun an M.A. program in History at the **University of Virginia**. It was assigned reading in a class — or "colloquium," as **Virginia** listed the course, on twentieth-century American history. I can still remember our first session, when the professor, white-haired, toward the end of his career, introduced himself to about fifteen of us, all brand new grad students, as we sat at desks arranged in a square, with one side of the square open.

That's where he sat, giving us our reading list. He wore a tie not quite secured at the neck, and a rumpled seersucker jacket. He told us he was from Alabama, that one day he'd write a book about "what happened to his people." He told us his Ph.D. was from **Northwestern University** and that he'd written a biography of **John W. Davis**, whom I had never heard of. (**Davis** was the Democratic nominee for president in 1924, the loser to **Calvin Coolidge**.) He'd also written a biography of **Theodore Roosevelt**. In fact he had something about him of **Roosevelt**, or "**TR**" as he would usually say, with powerful shoulders and chest, glasses somewhat incongruous to his physical bearing, and a gruff but not really unfriendly manner. He told us he reviewed books for **The New Republic**, and that he had another book in the works, with **Oxford University Press**.

It was all a bit intimidating. But, exhilarating too, as we students settled into Charlottesville to begin this new phase of our lives. I had a sparsely furnished apartment on the edge of campus. I don't believe the apartment had a bookshelf, not one that I can remember anyway. I'd moved all the way from Toronto in a rented van and had left my larger possessions in my parents' basement in upstate New York. In Charlottesville I kept my books in piles, taller

continued on page 78

Lost in Austin from page 76

you off-guard and makes you laugh out loud as this passage did. I am glad that I was alone when reading it and not on an airplane. **Earl Peckham** our protagonist, is trying to win over and marry her for her money, a widow named **Nelly DeBelly**. When **Peckham** mentions having taught college in Wyoming, she offers this:

"Wyoming! I had a grandfather there. He was a minister in a Presbyterian Church. Preached the cowboys, going from ranch to ranch on horseback. In fact, he preached on horseback very often...."

Says **Peckham**, "Sort of the sermon on the mount, you might say."

Replies **Mrs. DeBelly**, "Well, I doubt he was that good. Hardly in the class with our Lord."

She doesn't get the joke, and that is what makes it laughing out loud funny and not groaning out loud funny, had **DeVries** offered us only the pun.

Peter DeVries (1931-1993) worked for *The New Yorker* for forty-three years. He also had an interesting life before *The New Yorker*, a life that contributed as much to his humor and characters as his life as a New York sophisticate.

Another writer that you might be more familiar with who used similar techniques and characters is **Max Shulman** (1919-1988). I can never think of one without recalling the other. **Max Shulman** was best known through his book and television character **Dobie Gillis**, as in *The Many Lives of Dobie Gillis* and *I Was a Teenage Dwarf*, but I first read him in high school beginning with *Barefoot Boy with Cheeks of Tan*, a book so popular in my high school that a group of juniors and seniors formed their own chapter of the book's infamous fraternity, Alpha Cholera. Years later when Animal House came out, it seemed like the resurrection of Alpha Cholera.

That is what I really wanted to say, **Peter DeVries** and **Max Shulman** make me laugh and smile, and laughing and smiling are good for the soul and are just what the doctor ordered to take my mind off my management style, or management by wandering around. I opt for book selection by roaming the stacks. 🐾