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

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Endnotes


Rumors

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&n=283155&s=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, our great salesman, John Laraway, had Lyman’s family’s address! What a hoot! Wish I could get Maria AND Lyman’s autographs! We knew her when, like J.K. Rowling! (Remember her?)

And speaking of books, heard from the irrepresible Jack Walsdorf who continues on his William Morris quest! An exhibit, “William Morris and the Art of the Book: The Private Library of Jack Walsdorf” is planned at the University of Puget Sound August 26-October 14. A beautiful brochure announces the event!

http://www.pugetsound.edu/news-and-events/events-calendar

Speaking of the University of Puget Sound! They were one of the very first — and I mean it! — subscribers to ATG!

Speaking of people in publishing, just saw an article in the Chronicle of Higher Education (August 14, 2011) about the University of California Press and its new director — ALISON MUDDITT!!! (Remember when she was at SAGE Publishing?). Alison 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/

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

by Thomas Herron (Associate Professor of English, East Carolina University)

But the fruit that can fall without shaking/ Indeed is too mellow for me.
— Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Letters and Works

We live in a tired time of technological saturation, spoil expectations, and not incomconsiderable danger to our moral and political selves. According to techno-prophet Marshall McLuhan, writing well before the dawn of the Internet, if we do not attend to the moral implications of a hyper wired world, then “we shall at once move into a phase of panic terrors, exactly befitting a small world of tribal drums, total interdependence, and superimposed co-existence.” How wonderful it is, then, to retreat to a library and read a book or journal issue on one’s own! Our individuality would seem to depend on it.

Libraries, in truth, are not fine and private places, but very public ones. But, take a book or journal from a shelf and find a quiet corner or nook in the vast “temple” of campus (and civilization) that is the traditionally organized library, and you enter a little paradise that is shielded from daily cares, the PATRIOT Act, and prying eyes.

Electronic databases of course have the angelic potential to bring flowers of learning to your door and to make collections yet more public, or (at least) accessible to people wide and far. All can now access library collections without entering the building or campus itself. Aren’t we all happy when, in the middle of a cabin in the wilderness with our families, we can finally get that pesky footnoting done?

Thanks to off-campus access, we can read when and wherever we like and, if desired, deshabilité. By contrast, most libraries post a security guard at the gate to turn away the shirtless and the thriving. Issues of geographical proximity further restrict traditional patronage, as counted in real bodies entering real library doors.

Once in the library, however, these people are free to travel intellectually wherever they choose. Walled and chartered cities in the Middle Ages insulated the rights and pocketbooks of their citizens from royal depredations, thus becoming cradles of today’s democratic states. Libraries, similarly, can keep out encroachments of authoritarian tyranny prying into our intellectual (and other) habits; they can indeed become fine and private places. They are citadels protecting valuable and controversial ideas, in part because they protect our right to access a (de facto restricted because selective, but nonetheless widely varied and valuable) pool of information, unmolested and untracked by technology (including Kindle) that monitors who accesses what and when. I murmur with secret pleasure whenever I reshelf a book instead of lying it on a cart to be counted.

Thanks to our truly astonishing electronic databases, books and journals are, of course, much more widely available, searched, and archived than ever before. But what if the web comes under central state control? So will books and ideas; there is already a great firewall of China. A “switch” turned off the internet in Egypt during the recent “Arab Spring” of revolution. And what do you do when a virus completely takes over your computer bank, or the power goes out in your city (as it does...
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from page 20
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 twit-tweeting, we’re reading all the time — we’re reading now while driving, for goodness sake — 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 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-aside-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! 📚

Rumors 
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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 <jm@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 Wissemann 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.

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

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Endnotes
1. Parts of this paper were first presented at 16/10 in Greensboro, NC as prefatory 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.
4. 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.
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 “Atheneum” in the Gould Library, Carleton College, MN: http://www.carleton.edu/campus/library/about/athenaeum/.

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