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Poor at twenty; Rich at forty;

Internationally famous at fifty

You are invited to have FREE a booklet that tells what few great books make a man think straight and talk well

POOR, friendless, with no education, Benjamin Franklin walked through the streets of Philadelphia alone. Yet at forty he was independent; at fifty his company was eagerly sought by the leaders of two continents.

What was the secret of such phenomenal success? Something mysterious? Not at all. His secret was nothing more than this: Every day of his life he added a part of some other man's knowledge to his own. He picked the few really great mind-building books and read them systematically a few minutes every day.

Are you bigger to-day than yesterday

You have so few minutes in the day for reading: so few days in a busy life. Will you spend them all with the gossip of the newspapers, or the mere entertainment of fiction? Or will you, like Franklin, start now to make the great thinkers of the world your servants? Will you increase your own brain power by adding their brain power to it?

What are the few great books—biographies, histories, novels, dramas, poems, books of science and travel, philosophy and religion, that have in them the power to make of their readers men who can think clearly and talk interestingly—men who will not only be ambitious for success, but who will have acquired the broadness of vision necessary to achieve it?

All of these questions, so vital to you, are answered in the free booklet pictured below. You can have a copy of it for the asking. In it Dr. Charles W. Eliot, who was for forty years president of Harvard University, gives his own plan of reading. In it are described the contents, plan, and purpose of

Dr. Eliot's Five-Foot Shelf of Books

Every well-informed man and woman should know about this famous library. The free book tells about it—how Dr. Eliot has put into his Five-Foot Shelf "the essentials of a liberal education"; how he has so arranged it that even "fifteen minutes a day" are enough; how, in pleasant moments of spare time, by using the reading courses Dr. Eliot has provided for you, you can get the knowledge of literature and life that every university strives to give.

Every reader of Life is invited to have a copy of this handsome and entertaining free book. Merely clip the coupon and mail it today.

Send for This Free Booklet That Gives Dr. Eliot's Own Plan of Reading

P. F. COLLIER & SON COMPANY
416 West Thirteenth Street, New York

Mail me the free book, "Fifteen Minutes a Day," telling about the Five-Foot Shelf of Books, and containing the valuable article by Dr. Eliot on what and how to read for a liberal education.

Name _____

Address _____

_____

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Harvard Classics/Dr. Eliot's Five Foot Shelf advertisement published in *Life*, November 23, 1922. Photo: Colleen A. Bryant.

These books aren't made for reading: Creating identity with ready-made libraries

giulia moriconi

A January 1927 advertisement from the American magazine *Collier's* reads:

> What should a family's very first investment be? Bonds? A home? Insurance? There is one thing even more vital than these. Their future success is going to depend principally upon his or her mental growth. Will their social acquaintances find her interesting, or mentally commonplace? Will men in business be impressed with his range of information, his capacity to think straight and talk well? More than 250,000 families have found the answer to these questions with the help of Dr. Charles W. Eliot, for forty years President of Harvard. These families are spending 15 minutes a day with the most famous library in the world.
>
> – Dr. Eliot's *Five-Foot Shelf Of Books*

The books advertised here were considered 'the essentials of a liberal education', books that should be owned by all American families. This kind of advertisement promised not only knowledge and education, but social prestige and professional success. The prerequisite for attaining all this was to possess a pre-assembled personal library, whose mere presence in the home symbolized a well-educated family. The books were chosen by somebody else, somebody who was considered to be an expert. These kinds of advertisements were directed at families with relatively modest incomes, the so-called middle class, that came into prominence at the beginning of the twentieth century. The middle class had higher salaries, and disposable income. The ability to acquire non-essential goods was evidence of social climbing. This explains the emphasis on the social prestige of owning such books: books were seen as a status symbol.

Following the explosion of mass production during the industrial age, companies needed to promote widespread consumption of mass-produced consumer goods. In the United States in particular, increased personal incomes allowed a higher standard of living, industries started to produce consumer goods at unprecedented levels and mass media were able to market their products to an unprecendented number of consumers. These factors determined the birth of a consumer society. Although the book industry was certainly part of this

process, books are not simple commodities. Their status as sacred cultural objects, symbolically charged, sets them apart from other mass-produced goods. However, by entering the circle of mass production, their status became ambiguous: on the one hand they were culturally revered, on the other hand they were being produced, marketed and sold as any other commodity.

Two kinds of opposing strategies were used in American advertisements from the 1920s: firstly, books were advertised by promoting the importance of education. As mentioned earlier, advertisements stressed the social advantages of being well-read. In a seeming contradiction to the first method of advertising, books were also promoted with the implication that mere ownership could be sufficient to represent cultivated sophistication. Books were included in the background of almost thirty percent of magazine advertisements during the 1920s, communicating messages of distinction, culture and social prestige with their mere presence. Cultural and social benefits were perceived as deriving from simply owning books. Books seemed to imbue these qualities apart from their content, and beyond the actual reading: 'the benefits gained from actually reading the texts were considerably more vague, harder to acquire, and harder to exploit [...] New bookbuyers wanted only the effects of culture without its substance—it was felt—just as they rigorously sought to style the surfaces of their selves and their homes for a particular "look"'.

Using extensive marketing campaigns, the book industry contributed to disseminating the idea of social mobility and social prestige being inextricably linked to the ownership and display of books, rather than to actual reading and education. Selling books to the rising middle class, which suddenly had buying power, was logical and necessary for the book industry. In the 1920s and 1930s 'built-in-bookshelves' campaigns were widespread in the United States. They followed the logic that 'where there are bookshelves there will be books'. Architects and interior decorators were persuaded by publishing houses to design and install book-shelves in houses, and public figures were used in advertising campaigns to endorse the importance of books to society. Bookshelves are the symbolic means of ownership, accumulation and display, and these three concepts are also integrally related to consumerism.

Let's now look at another advertisement:

> Are you looking to have a library created just for you? We can assemble a great book collection for you that will satisfy the mind and please the eye. We can supply books on any subject, including art, biography, literature, New York, history, music, film, etc. We have put together libraries for thousands of clients including the Waldorf-Astoria, Steven Spielberg and Ralph Lauren Polo.

These words appear today on the website of The Strand, a New York bookstore, ninety years after the 'built-in bookshelves' campaigns and Dr. Eliot's *Five-Foot Shelf of Books*. This bookstore offers to assemble personalized libraries for customers, according to their thematic or aesthetic criteria. The service is called 'books-by-the-foot' and it is also offered as a rental service for movie sets or other events requiring the appearance of libraries. Clients can choose between pre-assembled collections (for example 'English Language Antique Leather books' for 500 dollars per foot of shelf space, or 'Bargain Paperbacks' for 15 dollars per foot) or they can ask for specific characteristics depending on their interests.

> Bass Wyden, the third generation owner of Strand Book Store [...], began the service by selling bargain books for ten dollars a foot. When she noticed customers buying shelf loads—even library loads—of books they were never going to read, she knew she had the makings of the latest must-have interior-design service for busy city sophisticates.

The 'books-by-the-foot' selling strategy is clearly related to the marketing strategies of the 1920s. At that time, promotion of books also meant promoting education for people who wanted to climb the social ladder. However, social advantages of displayed culture were stressed more than educational advantages, permitting ownership to supercede actual reading. The specific socio-economic reasons justifying these kinds of marketing campaigns in the 1920s are no longer present now to justify 'books-by-the-foot' libraries. Therefore, what are the similarities and differences between marketing strategies of the 1920s and the Strand's current offer of 'books-by-the-foot'?

In both cases ownership and display, rather than reading, are the focus. These marketing strategies were—and still are, in fact—aimed at selling books to people who will probably never read them. Libraries can be assembled by somebody other than the owner. The Strand offers to assemble personalized libraries, but letting a complete stranger choose topics and genres for you, and not deciding which titles are going in your "personal library" seems rather impersonal. Paradoxically, in both cases books are used to create and project an image of the library's owner. They are used to build and to represent personal identity—or, as in the 1920s, social identity—regardless of whether those identities are real or fictional. Moreover, in the 1920s, the display of books was used to claim membership in a certain social class. Nowadays, the 'books-by-the-foot' library is still a way to exhibit cultural prestige, but it lacks the strength of such a social status claim. Nevertheless, the persistent phenomenon of displaying book collections as a status symbol proves that the symbolic capital of books prevails, and can therefore be used to market books regardless of whether or not they're

meant to be read.[1]

The symbolic capital of books (by which we mean that, historically, they bestow perceived prestige and sacrality) is their universally recognized association with certain cultural values. This transforms books into status symbols, and it also means that books are objects that can be sold independently from the actual reading, and therefore from the content. At the same time, ownership and display of books, two concepts employed and empowered by a consumer society, are associated with symbolic capital, necessarily making them objects that testify to one's personal culture and constructed identity.

Notes

1 Bourdieu, P. *La Distinction*. Paris: Les Edition de Minuit, 1979. The symbolic in Bourdieu's terms is the value that things assume for the subjects. It therefore concerns the subjective perception and representation of things according to the specific class/social context.

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