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(Furniture) books and book furniture as markers of authority

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EITHER OF THESE SETS: IF YOU AGREE TO BUY [3] SECTIONS OR ALTERNATES FROM THE CLUB WITHIN A YEAR



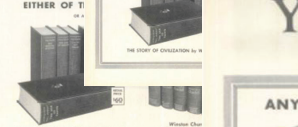
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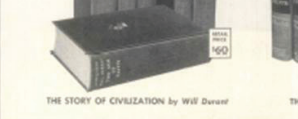
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[2] ADDITIONAL BOOKS FROM THE CLUB DURING THE NEXT YEAR



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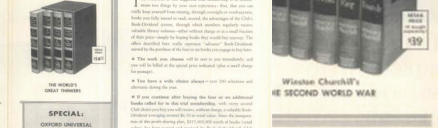
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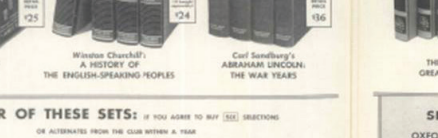
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FROM THE CLUB WITHIN A YEAR



THE WORLD'S GREAT THINKERS

SPECIAL: OXFORD UNIVERSAL DICTIONARY '6

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GOOD SENSE FOR EVERY READING FAMILY

The purpose of this suggested annual membership is to decrease your two things by your own experience: first, that you can really keep yourself from missing, through oversight or carelessness, books you fully intend to read, second, the advantages of the Club's Book-Of-The-Month system, through which members regularly receive valuable library volumes—often without charge or at a small fraction of their price—simply by buying books they would buy anyway. The offers described here only represent "advance" Book-Of-The-Month offers by the purchase of the four or six books you agree to buy later.

* The work you choose will be sent to you immediately, and you will be billed at the special price indicated (plus a small charge for postage).

* If you have a wide choice always—over 200 selections and alternates during the year.

* If you continue after buying the four or six additional books called for in this trial membership, with every second Club choice you buy you will receive, without charge, a valuable Book-Of-The-Month averaging around \$6.50 in retail value. Since the suspension of this profit-sharing plan, \$27,000,000 worth of books (retail value) has been turned and received by Book-Of-The-Month Club members as Book Dividends.

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3. THE WORLD'S GREAT THINKERS	\$1.00	\$14.00
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(FURNITURE) BOOKS AND BOOK FURNITURE AS MARKERS OF AUTHORITY

Corinna Norrick-Rühl

Corinna Norrick-Rühl, assistant professor of Book Studies at the Johannes Gutenberg-University Mainz, received her MA in English and Book Studies in 2009 and her PhD in Book Studies in 2013.

In a humorous blog post about the 2015 Frankfurt Book Fair, Andrea Diener (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*) wrote about a workshop she attended at the world's largest book event. The workshop dealt with photographs of authors and one of the tips Diener shared was, 'No, please do not stand in front of your bookshelf so that everyone can see you are capable of reading. That is a no-brainer. Choose a neutral background.'¹ Diener's humorous comment aside, presenting one's filled bookshelves is about much more than proving that one can read. 'Certainly they have not written all the books before which they stand,' mused the engineer Henry Petroski about authors and bookshelves, 'Perhaps they want to show us how many books they have read in order to write theirs.'²

Book historian Ursula Rautenberg explains that besides its 'primary function' as reading material, the book is also a 'cultural object' with a variety of attributions, social actions and ritual practices. This short paper will explore the authority that we attribute to teeming bookshelves and to those who surround themselves with books, how bookshelves 'command thought, opinion, or behavior',³ and how the book as a cultural object establishes and perpetuates positions of authority.

The book as a cultural object

In her work on the cultural significance of book ownership in the United States of America, Megan Benton describes an attitude that became widespread in the USA in the 1920s. The book came to be understood as 'a cultural emblem, [...] its particular content [...] often regarded merely as one ingredient in the larger iconographic package'.⁴ Benton cites Henry Seidel Canby, *Saturday Review of Literature* editor, who noted disapprovingly in 1930 that 'one owns books for

many reasons beyond a desire to read them'.⁵ Canby was worried about the trends of the time. Rather than existing merely for the pleasure of reading, books as physical objects were used increasingly as a sort of self-fashioning device. Canby bemoaned that 'too many books are used as a "color note", books as paper weights, [...] books kept as feeble proof that someone is educated'.⁶ Benton emphasizes that 'Sometimes color, size, or binding were the chief qualities considered; at other times genre or specific authors and titles rendered the desired effect, selected as a brand-name assertion of personal style much like the whiskey that one drank or the car that one drove.'⁷

This understanding of books as cultural emblems and markers of style, authority, intellect and power is certainly not limited to the 1920s. We know that private libraries have brought 'social prestige' to their owners for centuries.⁸ Physical book ownership has always been valued highly and well-stocked bookshelves in a private home continue to be associated with authority and power. Above all, this relates to intellectual authority. Petroski wrote that 'The bookshelf, like the book, has become an integral part of civilization as we know it, its presence in a home practically defining what it means to be civilized, educated, and refined.'⁹ Writing about the cultural history and significance of the bookshelf, historian Lydia Pyne states that 'Bookshelves are among some of the most obvious props to convey authority, advantage, and social status'.¹⁰ As Pyne says, 'books and their shelves (or, even scrolls and their shelves) have implied access to knowledge' for thousands of years and '[w]ith this access comes everything associated with it—power and privilege.'¹¹ Rautenberg reinforces this interpretation, writing about the development of bibliophile collecting in France and England from the mid-eighteenth

century onwards, leading to the ideal of a ‘Gentleman’s Library’.¹² Rautenberg explains that this is an understanding of book culture as a lifestyle, granting cultural prestige to the collector. Additionally, as Pyne contends, a ‘Gentleman’s Library’ can underscore patriarchal authority, as in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, where Mr. Bennet’s fondness for books results in his library becoming ‘a masculine hideaway’.¹³ Reinforcing this masculine association, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in 1860 in *The Conduct of Life* that ‘Indeed, a man’s library is a sort of harem’.¹⁴

Book clubs, furniture books and book furniture

The radical increase in availability of books following the industrialization of the book trade in the early nineteenth century made owning a private library a realistic goal for a much larger group of people than before. The twentieth century marked another change with regard to book ownership. Step by step, the book turned into an object of mass culture. Countless series of affordable books – hardbound and paperback – entered the market. Examples in the Anglophone world include the *Five-Foot-Shelf of Harvard Classics* (Collier, 1909) and the runaway success *Everyman’s Library* (originally published by J. M. Dent from 1906 onwards). It goes without saying that the introduction of paperback series such as the Penguin Books (published since 1935 in the UK) and the rororo paperbacks (published in Germany from 1950 onwards) changed attitudes toward book ownership as well.

At the same time, popular book clubs like the Book-of-the-Month Club in the United States (established 1926) and the Bertelsmann Lesering in Germany (established 1950) specialized in the marketing of books to new, ‘middlebrow’ readers and prospective book owners. The book club concept originated in Germany; book club members were essentially mail-order subscribers with some sort of minimum annual purchase. Book clubs could calculate print runs much more easily on the basis of their membership and to a certain degree, had a guaranteed turnover.

Their production costs were thus much lower than in traditional publishing. This often resulted in lower prices for the members. Success factors also included the anonymity of mail-order culture and the independence from urban infrastructure, which was a particular bonus

for potential readers without access to (book) stores. Hence, they were able to cater to a wider demographic than traditional publishers.¹⁵ While the structure of the diverse range of book clubs on both sides of the Atlantic differed slightly, they usually built upon and continued the original German book club tradition of selling affordable, attractive books. For book club purposes, a ‘hybrid understanding of the book’ was necessary.¹⁶ Book clubs marketed books as commodities for consumption, removing their academic aura and promoting leisurely reading, while simultaneously advocating book ownership for a wider audience.

Harry Scherman, an advertising agent and founder of the Book-of-the-Month Club, did not feel that the book was too precious, special or culturally valuable to be marketed like any other commodity. Sherman quickly understood that he ‘could sell types of books which it had never been thought possible to sell by mail – Conrad, Oscar Wilde, and so on’.¹⁷ But the key to unlocking this market was that the books had to be sold as ‘expensive sets’ or as Scherman later called them, ‘furniture books’.¹⁸ American literary scholar and member of the Book-of-the-Month Club Janice Radway analyzed the club and its impact on American society. Commenting on furniture books, Radway says that the ‘raw, unrefined quality of this upstart literature’ was outweighed by fancy embossing and the smell of leather bindings. She believes that Scherman ‘understood that people bought the fine book sets [...] not simply because they wanted to read them but also because they wished to display them as prized possessions’.¹⁹

As far as the presentation of books was concerned, the book club editions celebrated the traditional book in its elegant, codex form: The editions were often elaborately cloth-bound and embossed, highlighting the advantageous price in comparison with the books available in traditional bookstores. In fact, as Lynette Owen states, the ‘normal model of recruitment’ for book clubs built upon sales of furniture books, initially offering a book or a selection of books at a very low price. These so-called ‘premiums’ were ‘loss leaders for the book clubs’.²⁰ These premiums spoke directly to prospective book owners: ‘[A] boxed set of a famous children’s series, three lavish art books or a set of desk reference books traditionally generated a significant number of new members’.²¹ In a 1960s ad, for instance, the Book-of-the-Month Club advertised ‘valuable library sets for \$1 a volume in a short trial membership’.²²

“The bookshelf is steadfast, immobile and permanent.”

Part of the authority that bookshelves emanate certainly comes from their sheer size and weight. In an age of flexibility and fluctuation, allegedly flat hierarchies and blurred boundaries, the bookshelf is steadfast, immobile and permanent. '[W]hether earned, inherited or otherwise ascribed to a person or place,' Pyne remarks, power 'is most easily symbolized by the presence of bookshelves in a social space.'²³ One volume at a time, the impression of authority, experience, knowledge, permanence and stability increases. 'A private library [...] immediately connotes economic security and social advantage.'²⁴ Upmarket bookcase and bookshelf manufacturers do not pretend that they are just selling their customers storage space. Rautenberg affirms that in 'upscale home decorating, arrangements of books are an expression of the inhabitants' lifestyle.'²⁵ For instance, Paschen GmbH, the leading German manufacturer of upmarket bespoke bookshelves, bookcases and complete home libraries, sells its wares with the motto: 'For collectors and treasure hunters, for sensitive souls and lateral thinkers.'²⁶

On their website, they confidently claim that 'Paschen libraries are more than mere storage spaces, but instead serve in equal measure as storage and display solutions.'²⁷ They are, as the Paschen website implies, 'For people who love their books. And everything they associate with them.'²⁸

Petroski describes the complex relationship between books and their shelves from an engineer's perspective: 'Books and bookshelves are a technological system, each component of which influences how we view the other. Since we interact with books and bookshelves, we too become part of the system. This alters our view of it and its components and influences our very interaction with it. Such is the nature of technology and its artifacts.'²⁹ Pyne's argument leads us further, into the emotional and historical significance of what we might call 'book furniture', analogously to Sherman's term 'furniture books'. Bookshelves are a cultural cue. They indicate 'how we ought to interact with a room and how much importance or power we assign it.'³⁰

Unread books and fake books(helves)

If bookshelves are such powerful cues of power and authority, it may not come as a surprise that they are sometimes manipulated by their owners. A 2011 survey in the UK allegedly showed that 'the average Briton owns 80 books which they haven't read but are there only to make them look more intellectual'.³¹ According

to this survey, up to 70% of books in private libraries 'remain unopened, and four in ten of those questioned confessed that their works of literature were purely there for display purposes.'³²

Rautenberg notes that 'a book collection degenerates into book wallpaper' if books are only bought to fulfil 'an outside, representative function'.³³ An extreme example of this degeneration are the elaborate built-in bookshelves that were trendy in the first half of the twentieth century. In order to fill them, 'mimic books' were successfully produced from pieces of cardboard or wood, covered with imitation leather or cloth to look like 'a row of bound printed volumes'.³⁴ Fake bookshelves continue to be sold today. The US department store chain J.C. Penney is currently selling a set of two 'faux bookshelves', encouraging customers to 'Add an intellectual design to your living room or study with this set of wall hangings that resemble bookshelves.'³⁵

“Up to 70% of books in private libraries remain unopened.”

The Maryland-based company Books by the Foot specializes in selling ready-made solutions for interior designers 'with shelf-ready books that will display attractively.'³⁶ These 'instant libraries' are made of used books that are grouped by

category and sold by a unit of length for 'new homes, corporate offices, vacation homes, clubrooms, senior living facilities, and even clients too busy to build their own libraries.'³⁷ Books can be ordered by subject, size or condition, e.g. ranging from premium vintage to so-called highly distressed vintage books – '[a]ntique books showing all of the ravages of time [...] published in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries'.³⁸ For interior decorating purposes, colour is an important category: '[B]ooks will be unjacketed, cloth-spined hardbacks as shown or customized to match your swatches or general color scheme'.³⁹

Journalist Friederike Haupt has noted that in most cases furniture books do not have any titles and if they do, these tend to be generic coffee-table book titles, such as 'Monuments of Forever' or 'The Age of the Renaissance'. With regard to these dummy books Haupt remarked, 'In real life, no one reads these types of book. Neither do people read them in the furniture catalogs. [...] The coffee-table books are merely there to be there. They make their owners seem attractive to others, they do not spread joy.'⁴⁰ Haupt also mentioned that the type of books that are not considered adequate furniture books may tell us more about someone's reading habits.

For instance, she said that *Fifty Shades of Grey* (5.7 million copies sold in Germany alone) must be the ‘most commonly hidden book in the history of the *Bundesrepublik*. It is not suitable as furniture.’⁴¹

Finally, there is still a large variety of bookshelf wallpaper available to those who desire to increase the authority of their surroundings without investing time, money and energy in the establishment of a private book collection. A decorating website wrote in 2012, ‘A library is a stately addition to any home, but few people have a collection of books that could fill floor-to-ceiling shelves. Consider instead library look-alike wallpaper to cultivate the appearance of a well-read intellectual without showing off a thousand tomes.’⁴²

Social media and the authority of the book(shelf)

In 1923, the author Thomas Masson coined the term ‘domestic bookaflage’ to describe the practice of placing ‘a few highbrow books at a strategic point, so that as the guest enters his eye will fall upon them at once.’⁴³ In today’s digitalized world, ‘domestic bookaflage’ turns into ‘social media bookaflage’. It is possible to have an impressive book collection on an e-reader, but it is only visible to you, hidden on a hard drive. Therefore, other ways of presentation must be found to emanate authority and impress others. Readers can document their reading experiences and make them visible to followers and friends using platforms like LovelyBooks and GoodReads. As the scholar Lisa Nakamura explains, ‘GoodReads user profiles feature virtual bookshelves to be displayed to friends, creating a bibliocentric as well as an egocentric network of public reading performances.’⁴⁴

People are not always honest on social media. In 2010, journalist Dylan Hicks discussed ‘The Perils of Literary Social Networking’ in the online magazine *The Millions*. After logging off, he ‘turned off the computer and read more of the book [he]’d just advertised while advertising [him]self on GoodReads.’⁴⁵ Hicks is well aware that social media platforms like GoodReads are a place to present oneself. No wonder then that he suffers from insomnia because he is trying to find the perfect combination of books to read, not for the sake of reading them, but for the sake of posting about them online.

‘Selfies’ are ubiquitous on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. In 2013 a new trend known as ‘shelfies’ became widespread among book enthusiasts. *The Guardian* asked its readers to submit ‘shelfies’⁴⁶ and the US literary magazine *The Believer* started an online series in which it featured photographs of poets’ bookshelves.⁴⁷ In 2014 the *Wall Street Journal* discussed ‘The Rise of the Shelfie’.⁴⁸ The online *Urban Dictionary* credits author Rick Riordan with inventing the term and defines a shelfie as ‘A picture or portrait of your bookshelf. Showcasing literature in all it’s [sic] glory’.⁴⁹ However, this definition falls short, since not only literature is being showcased, but also the knowledge, cultivation and intellectual authority of the shelf’s owner (or in fact designer).

But even before the shelfie craze took off, the internet offered plenty of opportunities to exhibit and experience the symbolic value of books. From 2009 to 2012, an online TV series called *Stacked Up TV*. *Writers show off their shelves* interviewed contemporary authors, asking them to showcase and share their bookshelves in a self-proclaimed ‘mashup of MTV’s *Cribs*, Oprah’s *Book Club* and *The Paris Review*.⁵⁰ Furthermore, the somewhat questionable terms ‘bookporn’, ‘bookshelf porn’, and ‘library porn’ are regularly used to tag images of bookshelves and library architecture. ‘These sites are, in part, reinforcing books as mere trophies, souvenirs for a checklist-happy generation,’ says Shan Wang on the news website *Mic.com*.⁵¹ ‘Aligning physical books with porn’, she says, gives books ‘yet another layer of unattainability.’⁵² We are left to wonder whether this additional ‘layer of unattainability’ is also projected upon the owner of the depicted bookshelf.

Books in bookcases and shelves trigger a variety of reactions and emotions in their observers. Observers tend to assume that the owner is well-read, perhaps intellectually superior and therefore holds a position of literary or scholarly authority. Observers may also be impressed by the sheer economic investment in books and custom-made furniture for books of all shapes and sizes. They associate these prestigious and immobile bookshelves with security, wealth, experience, success and therefore with the types of authority we ascribe to people who have ‘made it’. Looking inward, though, full bookshelves can also make bystanders feel inconsequential

“They associate [...] bookshelves with security, wealth, experience, success and therefore with the types of authority we ascribe to people who have ‘made it’.”

and uneducated. As Alan Bennett wrote in a reflection on the significance of libraries, ‘A scene that seems to crop up regularly in plays that I have written has a character, often a young man, standing in front of a bookcase feeling baffled. He – and occasionally she – is overwhelmed by the amount of stuff that has been written and the ground to be covered.’⁵³ As mentioned before by Shan Wang, there is a ‘layer of unattainability’ associated with bookshelves which is reprised here.

However, in closing, it is important to mention that there are plenty of people in this world who are neither baffled nor belittled, and possibly not even the least bit impressed, by bookshelves and their contents. For instance, in George Orwell’s well-known dystopian novel *1984*, books and bookshelves have lost their authority, ‘There was a small bookcase in the other corner [...]. It contained nothing but rubbish. The hunting-down and destruction of books had been done with the same thoroughness in the prole quarters as everywhere else’.⁵⁴ The authority associated with books as well as book furniture can only be felt and perceived by those whose value system allows for it.

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