

Pandemic 2020: Looking at Bookshelves

Everyone has their perspectives and special interests, don't they? When I walk with my husband (the first Eagle Scout of Troop 45, Warwick, NY), I am always amazed at his sense of direction, knowledge of weather conditions and ability to identify trees by their bark alone. Our oldest child, who collected rocks passionately as a girl and majored in geology, was trained as a hydrogeologist and can casually i.d. and discourse on any rock presented to her. Like her father, she reads the landscape and it speaks to her. Our second child, a former Marine sergeant, has degrees in welding and machine fabrication and speaks authoritatively about metals, chemical processes and weapons. Our third child is a federal agent with degrees in fashion marketing, green building technology and environmental studies. She shares retail horror stories and updates us with facts and alarming statistics on climate and security threats. And our fourth child majored in art history and French, lives abroad and paints oil portraits. She is quick to note the aesthetic roots and possibilities of any situation and to comment on how America looks from the outside (not good.)

And me? I suppose I'm the family expert on identifying plants in gardens and woods, literature and dates in history. If you need to know the dates of wars or historical happenings, I'm your girl. It's been gratifying over the years to see how our obsession with the written word and love of books has fueled the interests, education and careers of our children and is budding in our grandchildren. Of course, the hands-on learning of country kids raised with chickens has been equally important. We all love books and make room for them in our houses. Bookshelves are necessities; we've built plenty and fit them in wherever we can.

As a library director, though, thinking about bookshelves has been more serious than fun. It's a constant preoccupation. If you've ever opened a new library building with all the pleasure and pain that entails, you'll understand. What kind of shelves to order: steel or wood? How tall? (I don't suppose I'll ever forget my 12 times tables after debating 60" vs. 72" vs. 84" tall shelving.) How many 7, 8, 9, 10 or 12" wide shelves to order? What's the best combination? Shelving becomes a weighty(!) issue as if there's a perfect formula to be found. Funny, when the one thing we discover is that the final answer is: there's just never enough.

So, with all this thought about bookshelves, it's been natural to be curious about them whenever spotted and yes, I do have to restrain myself from tidying up shelves at bookstores. And yes, I have been known to leap up and press my nose to the TV to try to identify the books behind the expert being interviewed on the PBS News Hour. But what seemed novel before, is stunningly commonplace now when all the experts are speaking from their homes or offices, Zooming or Skyping in, clearly or fuzzily, to share their opinions. I do find it very hard not to judge them by their bookshelves on display.

Go ahead and be judge-y, you say? All right, if you insist. I have reached some conclusions. East coast journalists and literati seem to favor white, built-in shelves, many with decorative molding, some elaborate. College professors and southerners are more likely to have dark shelves of oak, walnut or cherry and a few teak shelves from the 1970s have also popped up, mostly on the west coast. The nearly bare steel shelf and Ikea creation have also appeared occasionally. A harried ER doctor on the front lines of fighting coronavirus spoke before messy shelves of toppling 3-ring binders. (She is forgiven.) A psychologist dispensing self-care advice before books ranged

in the trendy HGTV-style of strict ROYGBIV order is not. (I muted her.) Now, if she had been speaking on books banned due to LGBTQ+ themes, maybe I would have listened. My patience runs out, too, with bookshelves styled with spines facing in – why? I must believe that books are more than decorative objects and find this blankness and uniformity disturbing.

Joe Biden's shelves, unsurprisingly, feature many red, white and blue books. Barack Obama's shelves are distressingly empty and show more tchotchkes than books. I forgive him, but worry about what he's reading these days. Network anchors and pundits sport a combination of books, awards and static, perfect silk flowers. Even entertainers like Stephen Colbert hold forth in front of tightly packed books. Seth Meyers has a running joke about the copy of *The Thorn Birds* visible behind him, paired with a changing assortment of other titles.

Well, after isolated months of watching the books and bookshelves go by and thinking about returning to the overstuffed ones of my own library, it appears inescapable to me, despite our fears about the future of books and reading, that books really are so important that most of our journalists, experts, professors, doctors, leaders (absent the White House), choose to present themselves in front of their libraries. And sure, maybe some of it is staging or window dressing, but not all.

No, these little glimpses of home studies and office libraries strike me as too real, random and individual to be anything but mostly genuine. And isn't this visual endorsement of reading good news for public libraries when Americans, across a wide spectrum of beliefs, areas of expertise and political persuasions, choose to showcase what is important to them – books? So when those of us with our peculiar, professional, obsessive interest in bookshelves reflect on the history of this strange time, let's remember and celebrate the miles and piles of books that show the love and gravitas still attached to the written word, backing up spoken words and by implication, literature, facts and science. Yes, books are backdrops to the instant spoken words of the cool medium of screen presentations, but they are also heartening reminders of the literacy, learning and respect for knowledge that our world surely needs right now.

Madelyn Folino, Director

Florida Public Library

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Update:

Madelyn Folino is a lifelong resident of Orange County. In 2021, she retired as a library director after 30 years in the library biz. She is also a founding mother of the Black Dirt Storytelling Guild which has met at the Florida Public Library since 2001. Since the pandemic struck, she has been holding monthly campfire storytelling events at her home.

madelynofolino@gmail.com

Cell (845) 324-5801 – text me

Home (845) 258-4693 – leave a message