

A twice-monthly review dedicated to spirited debate about books and the arts

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"RT @aesopskincare: At thirty-seven years old, the term 'work-life balance' i..." SEP 27



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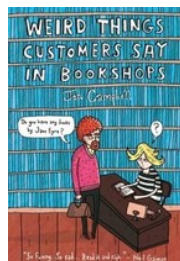


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BOOKS ON BOOKS

LEAH PRICE



**WEIRD THINGS
CUSTOMERS SAY IN
BOOKSHOPS**

Jen Campbell

Overlook, 2012

BUY

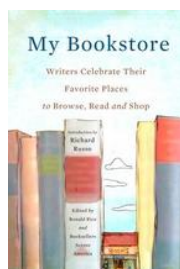


**JUDGING A BOOK BY ITS
LOVER: A FIELD GUIDE TO
THE HEARTS AND MINDS
OF READERS
EVERYWHERE**

Lauren Leto

Harper Perennial,
2012

BUY



**MY BOOKSTORE:
WRITERS CELEBRATE
THEIR FAVORITE PLACES
TO BROWSE, READ, AND
SHOP**

Ronald Rice (Editor)

Black Dog and
Leventhal, 2012

BUY

June 5, 2013 — You need a birthday present, let's say for your cousin's boyfriend. You're bad at guessing shirt sizes, so it might as well be a book. You find a bookstore (if you're lucky). You make for the section that nobody knows what to call: in front of the cash register, between the chocolate bars and fridge magnets, just before you get to the wrapping paper. And here they are: blank books, cat books, books of lists, books of quotes, books of misspelt birthday cake frosting messages, anthologies of AutoCorrect-generated obscenities.

If you want to understand the forces reshaping what and how we read, if you want to understand what new glamor print is acquiring in the digital age, or if you want to pin down what books can do that blogs can't and vice versa, it's worth pausing en route to the Media Studies aisle to browse this unnamed section. Not that anyone has much to say about its contents; elegies for Gutenberg waste few tears on it. What Charles Lamb dismissed already in 1822 as "things in books' clothing" find few defenders. Nor do gift books need any, since they laugh off the forces that threaten other print genres. Their resilience offers two lessons.

First, reading is only one of the uses to which you can put p-books. In the half-millennium when paper reigned supreme, few pages ever made it into the hands of readers; most gathered dust on the parlor shelf before being recycled in the kitchen or privy. Even illiterate servants had their favorite newspapers, based not on their politics but on whether the paper was repellent or absorbent. No sooner were telephone numbers digitized than ads popped up for the Boost, a block of yellow foam shaped like a book but sized for your toddler's behind. Second, books are social media. They can be shared or hidden behind, foisted on other people or confiscated from them. What would an electronic Gideon Bible look like?

E-books have achieved readability; usability, not yet, and so that unnamed section clings to paper. Blank books, as hardy as cockroaches and barely more loved, defy digitization. So do other gift books: you can't wrap a download, in real life at least. In the first volume of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, Christian gives Anastasia a first edition of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*; in the second, a recently released British Library app. The run on Netflix for Polanski's *Tess* prompted by the first was never matched by a similar stamped at the BL.

Once content moves online, the book's resting place becomes the coffee table. As the dust jacket drifted into history's dustbin, marketers began to group any rectangular object wrapped in printed paper into "libraries" (some bookstores vend a chocolate-bar library with flavors labeled down the spines). This fall, 1,848 YouTube "thumbs down" greeted the former reality TV star and current hair model Lauren Conrad's step-by-step instructions for making keepsake boxes out of disbound Lemony Snicket novels. In Conrad's defense, there's nothing new about the book as container: until the filing cabinet came along in the 19th century, books provided the safest place to interleave bills, wills, coupons, and news clippings. And Conrad's box was no worse than the trompe l'oeil bookshelves created at Google, where vertically stacked rows of book spines—sliced off for scanning—decorated office walls.

The front of the bookstore has ideas of its own about e-books and p-books. Although many gift books now begin their lives as blogs, increasing numbers also celebrate the look and smell of printed paper. Would your cousin's boyfriend be likelier to return a memoir by a writer who swears off book buying for a year (Susan

Hill's *Howards End Is on the Landing: A Year of Reading from Home*, 2010) or a sampling of *Weird Things Customers Say in Bookstores?* A volume chronicling the bedtime stories read aloud on 100 consecutive nights (Alice Ozma's *The Reading Promise: My Father and the Books We Shared*, 2011) or a humorist's refusal to read any book unless at least one reviewer has called it "astonishing" (Joe Queenan's *One for the Books*, 2012)? Should the travails of a blogger who reads 366 books in as many days by going heavy on the slimmest of novellas (Jeff Ryan on *Slate*) be republished in the form of a book?

PRINT THIS ARTICLE

WHETHER OR NOT PRINT IS DYING, THE SCENE OF ITS CONSUMPTION HAS MOVED TO HOSPITAL WAITING ROOMS AND FUNERAL PARLORS.

Lists of books to read before you die face competition from a newer subgenre of memento mori. Would your cousin's boyfriend take more interest in the book-a-day habit sparked by a sister's death (Nina Sankovitch's *Tolstoy and the Purple Chair: My Year of Magical Reading*, 2011) or a list of books read together with the author's terminally ill mother (Will Schwalbe's *The End of Your Life Book Club*, 2012)? Whether or not print is dying, the scene of its consumption has moved to hospital waiting rooms and funeral parlors.

Like some sickly organism feeding off itself, books increasingly chronicle other books. Literary critics chronicle the books read by Proust and owned by Wilde, while historians examine the authors who shaped Obama or reveal that Hitler loved books as much as vegetables. Other book books engage in what Mikita Brottman baptized "bibliofessional" and Seth Lerer "biblioautobiography." Call it autobibliography: since Augustine, acquiring a self has meant becoming a reader. In the age of high realism, the prototypical reader was a child, more specifically an orphan. David Copperfield or Aurora Leigh dreams over a book; the child deprived of a mother's love finds solace in fiction. And as literature became the refuge of the socially excluded and physically weak, generations of American immigrants made the public library their fairy godmother.

Today, the rules of autobibliography are even stricter. The narrator must fend off self-congratulation with terms like "book addict" (Julie Rugg's self-descriptor in a 2006 anthology of the same name) or "readaholic" (Sara Nelson in *So Many Books, So Little Time*, 2003). A spouse must complain that the bookshelves are a health hazard. The narrator must remember being nagged to put down the book, to turn off the flashlight, to go outside and play. In real life, of course, children need to get books from someone (most often a parent, teacher, or librarian); in real life, the kids likeliest to be beaten up are the same ones who flunk reading. And whereas autobibliographies pit the library against the family, in real life the defenders of library funding consist of parents of school-age kids.

We like to imagine ourselves tête-à-tête with the author, curled up with a find that no one else would appreciate. But print books are affordable only because they're shared. Libraries amortize cost by spreading it over successive readers. College students are willing to advance the price of that Organic Chemistry text because they trust that several months later some unidentified stranger will take it off their hands.

THE GREAT VICTORIAN NOVELS WERE RENTED MORE OFTEN THAN BOUGHT.

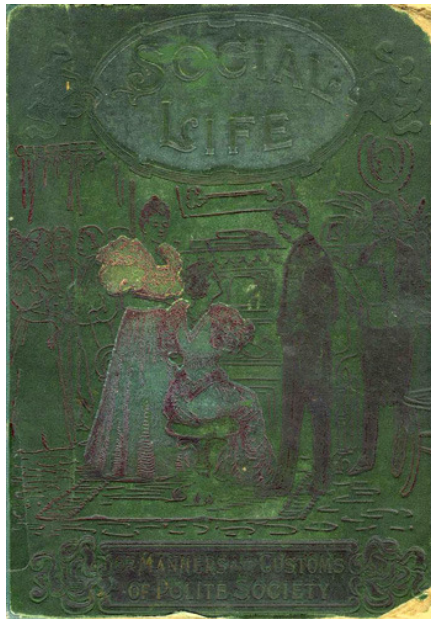
Sharing isn't always heartwarming: there's nothing worse than spotting the novel I assigned last semester back on my campus bookstore's shelves, especially if labeled

"clean copy." But its virtues are becoming more apparent as we move into an era of e-books that can be neither owned nor loaned. When we feel cheated by digital rights management strategies that license a book to a single user, we can no longer take for granted the hand-me-down logic of print. Newspapers were traditionally read first by a wealthy subscriber, then resold to a neighbor who paid cut price for yesterday's news, then passed down to below-stairs users—a seamstress cutting out patterns, an illiterate cook.

The great Victorian novels were rented more often than bought: when Dickens's bookshelves were catalogued after his death, it became clear that however many novels he'd been sent as gifts, fiction rarely made it onto his own shopping list.

Yet for David Copperfield, the book remains a found object—providentially stumbled upon by a rebellious child, not foisted on him by an officious adult or sold to him by a grasping businessman. When Dickens recast a manuscript memoir into the published novel *David Copperfield*, the first thing he cut was any mention of how much his beloved books cost. A few years later, Dickens pilloried pseudo-self-made men in the character of Mr. Bounderby, a rich banker who pretends to be an abandoned child who pulled himself out of the gutter and taught himself to read from shop signs—until his mother arrives on the scene at the end of *Hard Times* to reveal how much she scrimped to pay for his education. Autobiography perpetuates the myth of the self-made reader: its narrators erase the parents who sent them to school, the teachers who taught them letters, the librarians who put books in their hands. For bibliofessors, there is no such thing as society.

Early modern travelers whiled away journeys in dark coaches, bumping along bad roads, by singing rounds. Pepys struck up a tune within minutes of sitting down with strangers, especially if they were curvy. Railways eliminated squinting and vomiting; their passengers could unfurl broadsheets to block out one another's gaze. Books chaperone: a Victorian etiquette expert warned that while "civilities should be politely acknowledged" on public transport, "a book is the safest resource for an 'unprotected female.'" Anthony Trollope approved of reading on the train that took you back from your honeymoon, but not on the way there. We read to combat loneliness, and we read in order to be left alone.



Maud C. Cooke, *Social Life; Or, Manners and Customs of Polite Society* (1893)

Every spine spells "do not disturb." As one fan told Oprah, "my children now are trained that when they see Mom with a book, they just don't bother me." A child burrowing under the covers with a flashlight hides from a parent burying his nose in a book in order to avoid wiping his children's. For them, the book functions less as a Kafkaesque axe to break the frozen sea within than as a Goffmanian knife to carve out me-time.

Books are homewreckers. A child is being browbeaten: "Boys don't make passes at girls who wear glasses," Lauren Leto's mother scolds. Choose between loving books and being loved by boys—not to mention by parents. For Leto, becoming a reader means forsaking your birth family. Bibliofession takes its plot from New Comedy: a heavy father (or, in this case, mother) trying to foil the protagonist's love—for a book.

But what if you haven't yet met the right book? Anyone can afford the Match.com-style services of Goodreads, the social media site purchased by Amazon for close to \$200 million this year; fewer would shell out 80 pounds to be set up by

“bibliotherapists” at the London-based School of Life, which has stripped away the inessential feature of bookstores (stock on the shelves) to keep the things that really matter: wine and cheese, readings, staff picks. Bibliotherapy is the word of the moment in Britain, where one bookstore in Bath has rebranded itself a “reading spa.” Even the cash-strapped NHS has empowered doctors to “prescribe” specific books or a borrower’s card at an equally cash-strapped library.

DON'T THROW OUT YOUR DUPLICATES
UNLESS YOU'RE GAME FOR AN ALTAR-
TO-GRAVE COVENANT MARRIAGE.

Self-help isn't the only genre that should be
filed under “Relationships.” I found myself PRINT THIS ARTICLE
cast as a bibliotherapist a few years ago,
when I was interviewing novelists for a
glossy-paged coffee-table book called

Unpacking my Library: Writers and Their Books (2011). The harder I pumped my subjects about the books they loved, the more they digressed about the people they loved, or used to. Asked whether he liked audiobooks, one novelist volunteered that he'd read aloud to an ex who never returned the favor. Asked whether they interfiled their books, a wife nodded vigorously as her husband shook his head. A fourth writer confessed that his bookshelves reminded him of the former apartment for which they'd been custom-built, filled with books belonging to his now ex-wife. The takeaway? Don't throw out your duplicates unless you're game for an altar-to-grave covenant marriage.

For Leto, the point of reading is not to connect you with a dead or distant author, or even with fellow fans; it's to smooth your interactions with the people around you. Leto's first book originated in text messages and her second in a blog; no surprise, then, that she sees every medium as a social one. Chapters sized for the interval between two subways stops cover which bookstore sections to hook up in, what genres will get you laid, which spines to hide behind in waiting rooms, how to stereotype people by their favorite author. How to judge a lover by her book? David Copperfield uses books to develop an identity; Leto, to signal one.

This works, because books are supremely legible. For years I've been eyeballing the paperbacks that my neighbors leave out on recycling day. Leto gave me second thoughts: had the curb down the street, where *He's Just Not That Into You* gave way to *Brides Magazine*, *What to Expect When You're Expecting*, and, eighteen months later, *Dr. Seuss's Sleep Book*, been staged for the benefit of busybodies like me? Leto's tongue-in-cheek advice is shadowed by the fear that e-readers are killing off such self-fashioning: “you can bring your Kindle into a coffee shop, but unless I position myself right behind you, I have no idea what you're reading ... You'll have to wait to meet fellow fans until the author comes to town.” LibraryThing users might disagree. Even Facebook tells us more about what our friends read and listen to than book jackets peeking strategically out of their purses ever did. Leto's current project, a tool for sharing snippets of online text called Findings, reinvents the commonplace books in which schoolboys from the Renaissance onward used to copy out quotations under headings from *Absence* to *Zeal*.

PAPER, AS ANTHONY GRAFTON PUT IT,
“SEPARATES THE WHEAT FROM THE
CHAFF,” AND LETO'S GENRE IS THE
ANNUAL, NOT THE PERENNIAL.

The covers of children's books list age
ranges; perhaps all covers should.
Americans read differently at different ages:
book sales have traditionally skewed toward
under-21s and over-65 (with men in their
wage-earning years reading least of all), and

even lifelong readers rarely love the same books at 80 that they did at 18. Tagging *Judging a Book by its Lover* “21–23” would up its odds of reaching its target audience, which a generation ago would have subscribed to *Seventeen*. Its Salinger jokes and SAT-prep spoofs make *Judging a Book by its Lover* a good graduation gift; Leto herself broke into print young by harvesting drunken text messages from sorority email chains. Some of her pronouncements would be at home in a valedictorian's speech (“the best books expand and challenge the mind”). Others, like terming Austen “sentimental,” would fit better in *F in Exams: The Very Best Totally Wrong Test Answers*. But the forgettability of everything in Leto's book beyond, well, its cover—or, more precisely, beyond Leto's inspired title—makes clear that what works on a blog falls flat in a HarperPerennial. Paper, as Anthony

Grafton's *Codex in Crisis* puts it, "separates the wheat from the chaff," and Leto's genre is the annual, not the perennial.

Not all p-books serve to connect readers with the illustrious dead; some foster community among the living. This is the unexceptionable ambition of the Kirkus-starred but already remaindered anthology *My Bookstore: Writers Celebrate Their Favorite Places to Browse, Read, and Shop*. Remember those fundraising cookbooks mimeographed and spiral-bound by local ladies' auxiliaries? Remember those volumes of *Who's Who*, whose subscriber list duplicated their index? *My Bookstore* invites 84 authors to plug their local independent bookshops, thus maximizing online hits while ensuring that every offline business named in its pages will stock a copy.

Isabel Allende's contribution to *My Bookstore* invokes residential zoning. "The only place as comforting as a friendly bookstore," she platitudinizes, "is probably your grandmother's kitchen." Your grandma, however, didn't charge. And while *My Bookstore* faults Amazon for undermining local tax bases, bookstores are hardly the only business affected. If I buy books or toilet paper at my local Walgreens I pay 6.25% sales tax; on Amazon, I evade tax on both. For now, at least: a Marketplace Fairness Act aimed at stopping me has just cleared the Senate. My corner bookstore has spent the past six months battling eviction, but similar threats face both my local bodega and that other home to roommate ads and secondhand books, my beautiful launderette.

IN THE 19TH CENTURY, BOOKSELLERS
PIONEERED ADVERTISING,
SELF-SERVICE, AND CONSUMER CREDIT.
IN THE 20TH, THEY WERE THE FIRST TO
TRY OUT BAR CODES.

My Bookstore's homespun folksiness grants short shrift to one of bookstores' characteristic virtues: openness to new technologies, not just for producing books but for selling them. In the 19th century, booksellers pioneered advertising, self-service, and consumer credit. In the

20th, they were the first to try out bar codes. Google catalogued *Buried in Books: A Reader's Anthology* under "Antiques & Collectibles," but *The Late Age of Print* points out that Jeff Bezos might never have had the idea of selling books online if their distributors hadn't already acted as guinea pigs for the digital inventory controls only later picked up by supermarkets. *My* bookstore was founded by an MIT graduate interested in experimenting with pricing algorithms and inventory systems. For the moment at least, its window holds a cathode-ray TV pasted with construction-paper letters spelling out READ INSTEAD.

Hanging out near the cash register brings home our mixed messages about what makes books special. Selling books in drugstores or coffee mugs in bookshops wouldn't have surprised colonial American customers who bought reading material in the same place as lottery tickets and pickles. European laws continue to single out books: French and German laws against selling books below sticker price, for example, block supermarkets from competing with bookshops. The US doesn't go that far, but our postal service does grant printed matter a special rate. And the judge who denied Kenneth Starr access to a Washington bookstore's record of Monica Lewinsky's purchases believed that the books presented to President Clinton deserved greater privacy protection than did the matted poem she'd sent him on National Boss's Day or the sterling cigar holder that the Starr Report lists among her gifts.¹ One 1893 etiquette manual might have approved of Lewinsky's purchases: although "gentlemen, as a rule, do not offer ladies presents," it pronounced books proper to accept even before engagement.

RELATED

Minou Arjomand et al., "Virtual Roundtable on *Fifty Shades of Grey*," *Public Books*, June 5, 2013.

¹ See D. T. Max, "The Last Book," *The American Scholar*, May 27, 2001.

Leah Price's books include *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain* (2012) and *The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel* (2000); she also edited *Unpacking my Library: Writers and their Books* (2011). She teaches English at Harvard and writes on new and old media for the *New York Times Book Review*, *London Review of Books*, *Times Literary Supplement*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, and the *Boston Globe*.

Tags: Digital, Family, History, Internet, Literature, Memoir, Nonfiction, Technology

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COMMENTS (4)

MARKBEYER
Jun 16, 12:47 p.m.

REPLY
FAVORITE
FLAG

Essays should have a point. I'm lost for this one; no more important than the books she mentions one finds near the cash register at bookstores ("if you can find one" ... in fact, there are bookstores EVERYWHERE). Worse, perhaps, is the author's need to parse both "good" and "bad" such that there appears to be a balanced view. Why not simply take a stand? Do you like these "types" of books or not? Hey, that might be the point she has made -- up front -- and simply stuck to it. [PRINT THIS ARTICLE](#)

SOULDAN
Jun 24, 8:36 p.m.

REPLY
FAVORITE
FLAG

I'm not sure of Ms. Price's tone here. As a longtime Borders (R.I.P.) employee, I read with interest her chronicles of books about books which, indeed, used to clutter the register area. It was this clutter, along with "sidelines" like gag gifts and gardening supplies that partly led to Borders' demise. But back to the tone. Mocking? Serious? With this, "Whether or not print is dying, the scene of its consumption has moved to hospital waiting rooms and funeral parlors," it's hard to tell, and that's fine I guess. What is not fine is the fact that she has obviously never heard of the Underground New York Public Library. Reading books is cool, good, and will never go away. It just won't.

LEAH PRICE
Jun 26, 11:36 a.m.

REPLY
FAVORITE
FLAG

Agreed that reading books is cool, but false that "she has obviously never heard of the Underground New York Public Library." I gushed about that addictive blog, "a visual library featuring the reading-riders of the New York City subways," in an essay last year: Leah Price, "Reading in Place," Chronicle of Higher Education, Oct 15, 2012, <http://chronicle.com/article/Reading-in-Place/134946/>. I encourage readers to explore the wonders of the UNYPL for themselves: <http://undergroundnewyorkpubliclibrary.com/>. Check it out on your phone next time you emerge from the subway.

PARATIZE
Jul 8, 5:41 a.m.

REPLY
FAVORITE
FLAG

You 'encourage readers to explore the UNYPL' by directing them to a website which they should look at on their phones AFTER coming out of the subway? Is that meant to be some kind of absurd ironic joke?

PLEASE LOGIN TO COMMENT