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The Subconscious Shelf

By LEAH PRICE

As a teenage baby sitter, I went straight for the books. No sooner did the door close behind the spruced-up parents than I was on the prowl: the bedside table for erotica, the kitchen counter for cookbooks, the bathroom for magazines, and finally the official living-room shelves. Only then did I scan the refrigerator.

The French gastronome Brillat-Savarin began “The Physiology of Taste” (1825) by declaring, “Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are.” You are also what you read — or, perhaps, what you own. In my college dorm, a volume of Sartre was casually spread-eagled across the futon when I expected callers. We display spines that we’ll never crack; we hide the books that we thumb to death. Emily Post disapproved: her 1930 home decorating manual compared “filling your rooms with books you know you will never open” to “wearing a mask and a wig.”

To expose a bookshelf is to compose a self. The artist Buzz Spector’s 1994 installation “Unpacking My Library” consisted of all the books in his library, arranged “in order of the height of spine, from tallest to shortest, on a single shelf in a room large enough to hold them.” Shortly after the 2008 election, a bookstore in New York set out 50-odd books to which Barack Obama had alluded in memoirs, speeches and interviews. The resulting collection revealed more about the president-elect than did any number of other displays of books by and about him.

Of course, not all the spines we display have real books behind them. In the 1830s, the poet Thomas Hood devised a set of painted spines for a door to a library staircase in the Duke of Devonshire’s grand country house at Chatsworth (the original for Pemberley in “Pride and Prejudice”). Puns traditionally painted on dummy spines, like “Essays on Wood,” stood next to titles of Hood’s invention, like “Pygmalion, by Lord Bacon.” A few decades later, Charles Dickens had a door in his study painted with fake spines bearing titles like “History of a Short Chancery Suit” (in 21 volumes) and “Cat’s Lives” (in nine).

But why display fakes when you can buy real books you have no intention of reading? More than a millennium before print, Seneca criticized “those who displayed scrolls with decorated knobs and colored labels rather than reading them,” noting, “it is in the homes of the idlest men that you find the biggest libraries.” And before there were coffee-table books (a 1962-vintage replacement for “grand-piano books”), “furniture books” had already attracted scorn. An 1859

article of that title compared bibliophiles who cared more about bindings than about words to lovers who “think more of the jewels of one’s mistress than of her native charms.”

Lord Chesterfield, writing in 1749, agreed. “Due attention to the inside of books, and due contempt for the outside,” he pronounced in a letter to his son, “is the proper relation between a man of sense and his books.” A century later, an evangelical magazine contrasted the good child who “puts books into his head” with the lazy child whose books are “only on your shelves.”

Because books can be owned without being read and read without being owned, bookshelves reveal at once our most private selves and our most public personas. They can serve as a utilitarian tool or a theatrical prop. For a coffee-table book of my own, I recently toured a dozen writers’ book collections. Gazing at the shelves of a novelist whose writings lie dog-eared on my own bookcase, I felt as lucky as a restaurantgoer granted a peek at the chef’s refrigerator. The Duke of Devonshire’s library, in contrast, with its *trompe l’oeil* bookshelves, bore more resemblance to a Viking range littered with takeout cartons.

For centuries, portraitists posed sitters with a book; today, subway ads for ambulance chasers picture the lawyer against a backdrop of leather-bound law reviews, and the Strand bookstore in New York City sells leather-bound multivolume sets to interior decorators and set designers seeking to connote old money, along with more prosaic books by the foot, for sale or rent. In the 1940s, the Irish humorist Flann O’Brien proposed a “book handling” service for clients who liked the look of a well-stocked library but lacked the time or ability to read its contents themselves. If you joined his book club, O’Brien explained, “we do the choosing for you, and, when you get the book, it is ready-rubbed, i.e., subjected free of charge to our expert handlers,” at a series of different price points:

“Popular Handling — Each volume to be well and truly handled, four leaves in each to be dog-eared, and a tram ticket, cloak-room docket or other comparable article inserted in each as a forgotten book-mark. . . .

“Premier Handling — Each volume to be thoroughly handled, eight leaves in each to be dog-eared, a suitable passage in not less than 25 volumes to be underlined in red pencil, and a leaflet in French on the works of Victor Hugo to be inserted as a forgotten book-mark in each. . . .

“De Luxe Handling — Each volume to be mauled savagely, the spines of the smaller volumes to be damaged in a manner that will give the impression that they have been carried around in pockets, a passage in every volume to be underlined in red pencil with an exclamation or interrogation mark inserted in the margin opposite, an old Gate Theatre programme to be inserted in each volume as a forgotten book-mark (3 percent discount if old Abbey programmes are accepted), not less than 30 volumes to be treated with old coffee, tea, porter or whiskey

stains, and not less than five volumes to be inscribed with forged signatures of the authors.”

Today, even as virtual bookshelves find new homes on Web sites like Shelfari.com, the tradition of fake spines lives on, including at Google Books. In Google’s office in Cambridge, Mass., a dozen flat strips of plywood are glued to the wall at right angles to equally flat vertical strips of paper, each bearing the title of a book. These strips were once spines, sliced from volumes disbound for scanning as part of Google’s enormous digitization project. Like a taxidermist’s trophies, the wall décor attests to a successful slaughter.

Still, the rise of e-books may have a silver lining. Once “content” becomes available online, the only place left for its erstwhile containers is the coffee table.

Leah Price is a professor of English at Harvard and the author of the forthcoming “How to Do Things With Books in Victorian Britain.” This essay is adapted from her book “Unpacking My Library: Writers and Their Books,” to be published later this month.