Why Books are the Best Furniture

My son walked in from school the other day, a new book from the library tucked under one arm.

“What’s the book about?” I asked.

“A book on the Alamo,” he replied. “The librarian said it was beyond my level.”

“What did you say?” I asked.

“Ahhhh . . . I just took it out anyway,” was his answer.

He’s about a third of the way through the book—his second on this subject. I don’t fault the librarian for making assumptions about what an eight year old can or might want to read. In fact, I appreciate her engaging him about his reading and trying to guide him as he sifts through the school’s book collection.

A collection of books—whether it numbers 200 or 20,000—can be intimidating. It’s like a rainforest with multiple under-layers. The luckiest children are guided—by friends, parents, teachers, uncles and aunts, grandparents, and librarians—to find the small treasures hidden beneath the top canopy of popular, bestselling fiction.

A recent BBC article asked, “Is there still any point collecting books?” in the age of wireless e-readers and digital libraries that require no square footage. The answer is probably no if your family has migrated into the increasingly popular “micro-home.” But read through the biographies of some of the country’s greatest intellectuals, leaders, and authors, and you will begin to get a sense of just how important the presence of book collections are to

anyone yearning for enlightenment.

Famed American author Jack London was a devoted student of the Oakland, California public library, where he met (and was mesmerized by) librarian Ina Coolbrith, who would later became poet laureate of California. The library was opened in 1878, and was only the second library in California. In a letter written to Coolbrith in 1906, London tells her that she was:

> *[T]he first one who ever complimented me on my choice of reading matter. Nobody at home bothered their heads over what I read. I was an eager, thirsty, hungry little kid—and one day, at the library, I drew out a volume on Pizzaro in Peru (I was ten years old). You got the book & stamped it for me. And as you handed it to me you praised me for reading books of that nature. Proud! If you only knew how proud your words made me.*

Andrew Carnegie named Colonel James Anderson’s personal library collection as a defining influence, saying access as a boy to Anderson’s 400-volume private library shaped him (and his intellectual curiosity) deeply. When Carnegie began the work of supplying the U.S. with a massive network of free public libraries, he found out that starting libraries was in his blood and was a mission shared by local tradesmen in Scotland:

> *[M]y father was one of the five weavers in Dunfermline who gathered together the few books they had and formed the first circulating library in that town. The history of that library is interesting. It grew, and was removed no less than seven times from place to place, the first move being made by the founders, who carried their books in their aprons and two coal scuttles from the hand-loom shop to the second resting-place.*

To John Adams, a collection of books was a pathway to building

character. David McCullough highlights this line from one of Adams's personal letters: "Fame, fortune, power, some say are the ends intended by a library. The service of God, country, clients fellow men, say others. Which of these lie nearest my heart?" As Adams's health declined later in his life, his book collection became an even greater solace. McCullough writes, "He had his library room, where he slept now among his treasured books. On the table beside his reading chair were the latest novels of Walter Scott and James Fenimore Cooper, the sermons of Bishop Joseph Butler, along with Pascal's *Provincial Letters*."

Thomas Jefferson, our nation's patron saint of book buying and collecting, went on a buying spree when he found himself in Paris. He purchased around 2,000 books for himself in addition to the several boxes of books he shipped home to George Washington, Ben Franklin, and James Madison. Jefferson later sold his 6,487 volume personal library to Congress for $23,950. It would become the heart of the newly formed Library of Congress, which had fewer than 1,000 volumes at the time.

In a recent essay in the *Times Literary Supplement* on the history of libraries, Alberto Manguel says we begin to miss things as they start to fade from the popular landscape—when iPhones replace the books that commuters used to carry, for example. "Today, when electronic technology announces (perhaps prematurely) the death of paper and promises us unfading memory of many millions of texts and images, as well as apparently limitless storage in cyberspace, the question 'What is a library?' pops up with satisfying frequency," Manguel writes.

Manguel finds inspiration in the ancient Library of Alexandria, which, he notes, "has come to embody the answer to the question of a library's identity: a symbol of the society that houses it, an emblem of its power, a depository of its experience." Our homes might not be as grand as the Library of Alexandria, but we should nevertheless value the place of

books in them. As Manguel says, “every library, public or private, incarnates this intellectual greed: to hold materially what can be apprehended mentally, to possess, if not the wisdom, then the possibility of wisdom contained in books.”

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