

The Virtues of Book Ownership

“Can you spare a dollar so I can buy this book?”

I heard a man’s deep voice ask this question as I raced up a flight of stairs, speeding my way to the second floor of the local public library to drop off some overdue books. His voice was coming from the library’s “sale room” on the first floor—a room that is little more than a closet but where you can score decent books and classics for a dollar or 50 cents.

I couldn’t hear the response of the person he was talking to, but his question bounced around in my head for the rest of the day. I wondered if the individual from whom he’d asked for the loan might have asked why anyone would need to borrow money to buy a book when they were standing inside a *library*—where any book can be borrowed for *free*. Then I wondered which book he wanted to buy, and why, because some books are indeed meant to be held onto for longer than standard loan times, even forever.

There are some books (ok, more like many books, especially in my house) that need to be owned outright. They need to be there on a shelf or in a pile, ready to be pulled out at just the right moment when you need the book (or when you don’t know you need the book until you start reading it again); you even need some of the books you’ve already read, because their presence can rekindle thoughts that were sparked by an earlier reading.

Ownership has always been about more than having the means to purchase a book—though as the man in the library illustrated, the means is necessary to kick off the process. Mortimer Adler, the founder of the Great Books program, [explained](#) in the 1940s exactly how you should go about reading a book and had this to say about book ownership:

When you buy a book, you establish a property right in it,

just as you do in clothes or furniture. When you buy and pay for them. But the act of purchase is actually only the prelude to possession in the case of a book. Full ownership of a book only comes when you have made it a part of yourself, and the best way to make yourself a part of it—which comes to the same thing—is by writing in it.

The provenance of books—a record of ownership of a particular book through the course of time—can be found in antique books by studying bookplates and stamps placed on pages by one-time owners. The [British National Archives](#) recently highlighted some of the amazing antique books in its collection and the trail of owners each book passed between and how they establish this record of ownership.

Ownership today can be tracked more often by scribbles and doodles and less by the elaborate bookplates of barons and earls. I pity the person who one day winds up with copies of some of my books—I am a notes-in-the-margins lady, filling books with arrows, brackets, asterisks, underlining, question marks, and exclamation points. These notes are the heavy traffic of my wrestling with ideas; the library would not abide this.

I asked one of my young sons why we should keep our family books instead of selling them. He explained it this way: “The oldest person in a family needs to pass down the books to the youngest person. Then they pass it down to their youngest kid.” If the process gets repeated again and again, a family achieves the goal of successively (and successfully) educating each new generation.

In a *Financial Times* [article on book collecting](#), city editor Jonathan Guthrie, who purchases old books, maintains that the words are merely one part of a book’s allure. “Words are just one element of a book and not always the best part. Books as physical objects have a charm that also comes from typography,

illustration, format and back-story. That is why collecting books can be such a deep source of pleasure," Guthrie writes.

But in an age when Marie Kondo's best-selling book on the Japanese art of tidying up and getting rid of clutter is a staple in conversations, I fear book piles may be an obvious target for many families.

Last week, I let my daughter cut school so she could join me on what has become an annual pilgrimage to buy more books. Every year, a massive annual [used book sale](#) is held in Princeton, NJ. Typically there are between 85,000 and 125,000 books for sale over numerous days, most for less than \$3. It is book lover nirvana. For two and half hours my daughter and I sat on the floor digging through books, creating "maybe" piles and "definite" piles, books for ourselves and books for other members (and friends) of the family. These books will line our walls with our aspirations—what we aspire to read, what we aspire to know, who we aspire to become through what we know. The books we own may embody the person we want to be. Even unread, they tell a story about us.

As we approached midday, we unfolded ourselves from beneath the tables and picked ourselves up off the floor. We dragged our numerous bags to the checkout line and paid the bill that made us owners of these 162 books. I didn't need to ask anyone to loan me a dollar that day, but if I had come up a dollar short, I would have asked another fellow book buyer to spot me, believing the need to own that particular book would be understood and graciously aided among the community of readers.

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