



UNPACKING MY LIBRARY: WRITERS AND THEIR BOOKS

Leah Price, ed.
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Review by Matthew P. Brown
UI Center for the Book, University of Iowa

A 2011 trade book from Yale University Press released just in time for the December holidays, *Unpacking My Library: Writers and Their Books* features a set of interviews with contemporary authors about their bookshelves. In the introduction, editor Leah Price writes that “shelves display our most private selves and our most public personae,” a point that might serve as the volume’s thesis (3). While not terribly surprising, this claim bears fruit as we leaf through a work giving equal weight to photographic page spreads of the subjects’ libraries. Indeed, private and public, person and thing—the experience of reading *Unpacking My Library* inverts standard expectations of interview and image. The words give us the public self, rather than the inner life, while the photos—seemingly just the display of mass-produced objects—allow us an intimacy about the interviewee, in their exposure of domestic space and subjective arrangement.

Unpacking My Library prompts a series of important questions for book artists: what is the role of the physical book—as inspiration, as furniture, as property, as gift—in the life of its user? If book artists call attention to extra-verbal meaning in the book format—to the expressive power of all media and texture and language that go into a book, beyond solely its verbal content—then how might the reflections of word-based novelists and intellectuals seed creative work? And does the physique of *Unpacking My Library* itself resonate with book artists, prodding work in response?

Much of the commentary in the interviews is fairly predictable: sentimental advocacy for a past of dog-eared leaves, inky marginalia, and cover colors, in contrast to a present and future of e-readers. But sentiment about the past is occasionally nuanced. Interviews with couples reveal the fraught moment of separating or intermingling books as property when they first cohabit. Stories from childhood glimpse scenes of affection, trauma, or enlightenment that tell us about the symbolic power of the book. More generally, the fact that almost every library on display is a disorganized mess speaks to Walter Benjamin’s larger point about personal collections, from an essay that gives this volume its title. In “Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Book Collecting,” Benjamin notes that personal libraries conjure “the chaos of memories. More than that: the chance, the fate, that suffuse the past before my eyes are conspicuously present in the accustomed confusion of these books.” Chance *and* fate: how better to capture the ways that the personal collection triggers our past selves and their possible and destined directions and how apt to name its present role

in this light as “accustomed confusion”? We cover more ground in this sentence than we do in most of the interviewees’ commentary.

The interviewer’s commentary, on the other hand, is rich in implication. Price provides an introduction that provokes throughout and is well worth exploring. From a rather randy image of a Sartre book spread-eagled on a dorm bed at the start—an image perhaps bringing certain CBAA readers back to the chaos of memories that is undergraduate life at a residential college—to the 1923 neologism “bookaflage,” riffing on “camouflage” as a way to understand the lined shelf as décor, to the observation that digital heatmaps on e-books mimic past activities of indexing and commonplacing, the introduction does not disappoint.

And even in the interviews, there are choice digressions. Jonathan Lethem rightly speaks to the pleasure of the unread book, the anticipatory joy and felt promise of it sitting on the shelf. This might augur the chaos of the future, the promise and unpredictability of what we are still to become. The lack of sentimentality in a Steven Pinker, James Wood, or Edmund White is telling as well. Aside from Philip Pullman, none of the older men in the volume profess interest in the physical copy of a valued book. The following is hardly social science, but we might speculate that age predisposes these writers to lose attachment to the ever-increasing collection of stuff in their lives and that gender might dictate a detachment from the affective life of things. (And there is perhaps the faint, familiar echo of male midlife crisis: “I’ll be as cool and cold about the book as the boy twitterati!”) Women and younger men interviewed in the volume are more open to the emotional registers of the book as property—that is, of the book as belonging.

But what of *Unpacking My Vinyl* or *Unpacking My CDs*? Is Benjamin right, when he suggests elsewhere in his talk that all personal collections are similar in their evocation of feeling and in their temporal measure of past, present, and future? Or are there qualitative differences with book collections? For me, two differences of format immediately surface. First, contrasted with the uniformity of LPs or CDs, the scale of a variety of books makes their arrangement precarious and promiscuous. The other source for Price’s title, which she hat tips in the introduction, is Buzz Spector’s 1994 installation *Unpacking My Library*. Spector placed his entire personal library on a single shelf in a room big enough to fit it, with titles “arranged in order of the height of spine, from tallest to shortest” (1). Spector’s gesture seems at first a comment on arbitrary classification schemes, following his Borge-sian predilections. But he clearly also alludes to scale—a theme he has pursued as well of course—and to the fairly odd fact that books are almost uniformly scaled, as collections go: neither the idiosyncrasies and spatial clutter of, say, salt-and-pepper shakers nor the standardized dimensions of LP or CD. They just resist the shelf (as many interviewees note) and thus stimulate the mind: we are always unpacking our libraries.

Second, the volume of a book contrasts with an LP or CD. The external package of a book taps memories and rouses consciousness—but of course so do the exteriors of LPs and CDs. It is the dimension of volume, of interiority, that seems especially germane to the effects of book collections. Lethem hints at this with the seductive role of the unread book on the shelf. The stretch of word and image, their sequential procedure, the disposition of content from page to page—this quite literal inner life of the book format is always hovering about our experience of a closed book. Read or unread, the book’s interior

is always a mystery. If read before, it encounters a new self the next time it is opened. If never read, that opening and reading is itself the beginning of a series of mysteries. These interactions—between exterior and interior, display and mystery, known and unknown—makes volume determine our response to the book format. Volume—whether actual or virtual—is a trigger for consciousness. Consciousness is retrospective and prospective in reaction to the volume’s content: volume prompts the mind to fill in the inaccessible space, to misremember and invent the volume’s content, to check that content against memory, to produce yet more new thought as content and memory interact, the iterations and preliminaries of search and discover—whether we do any of this with any one book we own is separate from the question of how books incite this kind of engagement.

However we might ruminate on exteriority and interiority in the book format, however we might theorize *opening* as a specific property of the book medium, a step back with some cold water might be due. For *Unpacking My Library* is in tension with itself: on the one hand, it solicits serious thought by public intellectuals and, on the other, it trades as a coffee-table prod for the year-end gift market. Along with its visual aesthetics, its breezy, chatty format, and its eminent browsability, it includes a desert-island-discs feature, where contributors list the Top Ten essential volumes from their libraries. More Nick Hornby than David Letterman, the lists—laid out on separate page spreads with a column on side of the gutter and images of the covers on the other—are conversation starters for the parlor. This is a kind of leisure-class idiom that I am as guilty of as the next reader of this journal (ok, more guilty). But this thumbs-up taste-making, this Facebook-like Likes, detracts from the more searching passages in the work.

Perhaps the point between these extremes of would-be serious reflection and idle idolizing is the photographic formatting itself. Discerningly framed portraits of shelves, with close-ups on single shelves mentioned in the verbal text, provide their own generative commentary and interpretive richness. And I overstate, describing the contributors to *Unpacking My Library* solely as “word-based” writers: the graphic memoirist Allison Bechdel takes pride of place in the volume as a book artist reflecting on her library. It’s more than the alphabet that should situate her as the first voice. Relentlessly organized, Bechdel and her library have the most to say about the physical environment of books. For example, her publication date system results in a shelf where, as she puts it, “the spines create a curiously eloquent timeline of the Zeitgeist over the past thirty years—from Jill Johnston’s *Lesbian Nation* (1973) to *When Gay People Get Married* (2009). I mean, really: what more is there to say?” Her wise embrace of *Roget’s Thesaurus* advocates for it as a tool for discovery, rather than, as many pedagogues would have it, a shaming crutch pointing to a weak writer. And her paragraph on Edward Gorey’s *The Unstrung Harp* is an allegory of the trigger of consciousness theorized above.

Two moments of *Unpacking My Library*’s visual strategy deepen the Bechdel section. A judiciously captured image of a free-standing, bookended, dedicated collection of Gorey titles—works of his that are both self-penned and design-for-hire—hints at the impress of this artist on Bechdel. There’s a dissertation here, or barring that, great food for thought on how an artist animates another. Most compelling, though, is Bechdel’s *Top Ten* page spread. Before we are even familiar with it, she defamiliarizes this lay-out choice by hand-drawing the covers of her ten choices, reproducing the jacket design of, say, *To the Lighthouse* or Sontag’s *On Photography*. The images flicker and pulse. It is as if person and

thing, private and public—the very thesis of the Price collection—converge at this point of art-making, an uncanny evocation of the way books are mass-produced objects with shared displays, all the while subject to the deeply felt markings and memories of users.

We need more Benjamins and Bechdels and who better to play that role than the makers and thinkers in the CBAA. Good people! Might *Openings* be the place where prose criticism takes the book arts into a realm of value, where artists theorize their medium and critique a body of work in their medium? This discourse of value would of course create debate internally within the field, while beginning to make the book arts comprehensible to non-specialists. These are both good things. I mean, really. Controversy and legitimation are two sides of the same coin and, as a new organization, the CBAA might lead with such a mission. What more is there to say? Plenty. ■