

The Shelf Life of Books

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When I retired from Delaware, I moved back to Maine with a couple of boxes of books selected from those I had on shelves in my Memorial Hall office. Those books joined others in my study at home in the mountains and in a small condo in Portland, where we had built ample shelves for them. When we sold the condo last year, we bought another, but it had no bookcases. We moved our Portland library, in 35 heavy boxes, into what would become a study in our new condo. In doing so, we promised that we would sort them at leisure but with rigor. We took the lack of bookcases as an incentive to reduce our number of books. Our job fell neatly into the currently fashionable move toward tidying advocated by Marie Kondo. While the *KonMari* method seems to apply mostly to clothes, shoes, and household goods, it is easy to make it fit books. Books lend themselves to making piles; they are inherently both folded and upright for placement in containers; they can be grouped by size and thrive in categories.

Those books have provided abundant pleasures for us as readers of other people's writing and as writers. But we had to decide, to shift the metaphor, their *shelf life*, on the very limited shelves of the new bookcases we installed in the condo. Food and medicines have expiration dates beyond which they are no longer suitable or safe, requiring merchants to remove them from the shelves. Books can expire, too, if they are, say, eaten by mice, or moldy or mildewed, or water damaged or faded by exposure to light. But unlike food or medicine, the books in our 35 boxes were still safe for handling and reading—by someone.

From our days in graduate school, where we created bookcases with bricks and boards, books have been a major part of our physical environment. We've designed rooms around bookcases, and books, wherever we've lived. They have also been objects of our identity. You can know a

lot about us by reading our bookshelves. We had fun, for example, placing *The Joy of Cooking* next to *The Joy of Sex* on the bookshelf in our kitchen. At other people's homes, we've indulged in a kind of voyeurism as we've read their shelves for insights into their private worlds made evident in this seemingly public display. So one big criterion for keeping a book was how much of us was invested in it or, in Kondo's terms, whether it "sparked joy." My husband, for example, once a scholar and teacher of colonial American literature and culture, decided he wanted to keep the books he had accumulated in that pursuit. These items had remained mostly closed for the 20 years we were in the Portland condo. But he had been immersed in their silent presence then, and he wanted to keep that aura, even as his career took a different path. Unboxing and shelving books like *The Selected Letters of Cotton Mather* inspired him to read some of them again.

We also kept books that had special value because they were rare, like first editions of novels and expensive art books and exhibit catalogues, especially those signed by the artists. We also kept groups of contemporary books centered on historic events of our interest, like the 1876 Centennial and World's Columbian exhibitions. We devoted a new credenza, with tall shelves, for such books in the living room.

Once our objects devoted to the colonial past of America had emerged and been placed on the shelves, we unboxed other books of the American literary past, up through Thoreau, Emerson, Twain, James, and Howells, and we continued shelving. There were many duplicates, especially at the point chronologically where my brief excursion into the scholarship of American literature began. There were also discoveries. As we opened books, we sometimes found notes or old bookmarks that reminded us about how far we had read at some time in the past. Several books had our names in them, some with just my name, handwritten, or my husband's, or some

stamped with our then newly joined names. Many books were underlined or otherwise bore the imprint of us as readers and teachers of the item. We'd linger a bit over those. While most of our books on architecture and material culture are housed in my study at home, we rediscovered some I'd forgotten and transferred them to the condo. Sometime a signature on a gift book made us think of a friend or family member, and we put that book aside as a keeper. Sometimes a book overlooked for years took on new relevance in today's political or intellectual context and we felt it warranted shelf space. We selected out books that we thought might interest friends and created a pile of those, to be mailed to them. We devoted one of our now-empty boxes to our collection of books about Southern US literature and history that now await the visit of a colleague who specializes in such matters.

But the more we worked through the piles of books on the floor, the more we realized: no, we don't need it now. We realized we don't need anthologies, most literary criticism, popular social history, a lot of urban planning, folklore studies (once a passion of mine. Done). We seriously considered how many copies of textbooks we had written, some jointly and some just mine, we needed and pared down to a couple of copies of each.

It became easier and easier to discard books, especially once we had designated empty boxes for them. In the end, we created four such boxes, which we brought to our local Goodwill store. We began to feel better, too, as we thought about the readers who could enjoy books that had given us pleasure but, we realized, we were unlikely to do so again. Their shelf life had expired for us. But they themselves had not expired. We now look forward to rediscovering the delights of books forgotten but newly attractive. We also like how our new matching bookcases look. There's less shelf space than in the ones we left behind, but they hold a newly enlivened

selection of books. To cite the title of an Anthony Powell novel, books do furnish a room. And our life.