

The Shelf Life of Books

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After I retired from the English department at University of Delaware, I moved back to Maine with two boxes of books selected from those I had in my 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 our collection. 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, and promised ourselves that we would reduce their number at leisure but with rigor. We took the lack of bookcases as an incentive.

Our job fell neatly into the currently fashionable trend 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.

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

From our days in graduate school, where we met, married, and created bookcases with bricks and boards, books have been a major part of our physical environment as well as central to our intellectual and career pursuits. We've designed rooms around bookcases, and books, wherever we've lived. They are key 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. When we've gone to parties 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 paperbacks and hardbacks 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 off on a very different path. Unboxing and shelving books like *The Selected Letters of Cotton Mather* has inspired him to read some of them again, including, now, a lengthy biography of Mather.

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 objects devoted to colonial 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 had begun. 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 point 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. Most books on architecture and material culture are housed in my study at home because I came back to them, and to my passion for those matters inspired by my graduate work in American Civilization, late in my career at Delaware. When we rediscovered a few books in that category, we set them aside. Sometime a signature on a gift book made us think of a friend or family member, and we designated that 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 and re-reading. We selected out books 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 Southern US literature and history; the box awaits 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 focus 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 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, 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 the 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 lives.