

BOOKS ABOUT BOOKS: A META-COLLECTION

Jennie Hann
PhD Candidate, English
Krieger School of Arts and Sciences

meta- (adj., *prefix*): 1A) Designating or characterized by a consciously sophisticated, self-referential, and often self-parodying style, whereby something (as a situation, person, etc.) reflects or represents the very characteristics it alludes to or depicts. 2A) Prefixed to the name of a subject or discipline to denote another which deals with ulterior issues in the same field, or which raises questions about the nature of the original discipline and its methods, procedures, and assumptions. —*Oxford English Dictionary Online*

ESSAY:

My father is a difficult man to surprise; more to the point, he is a difficult man for *me* to surprise. Over almost thirty years, he has come to know me—abilities, foibles, eccentricities, and all—quite well. He certainly knows about my bibliomania, since he was, shall we say, more than a little responsible for instilling and indulging it during my formative childhood years. And yet, here he was, my typically imperturbable father, looking at me with arrant incredulity. So unaccustomed was I to seeing this expression on his face that, even though the room was empty but for us, a few suitcases, and several piles of books waiting to be packed in boxes, it took me a moment to discern the reason for his bewilderment. The book stacks, it turns out, were to blame.

“When you said ‘*some* books’ . . .” he let the words linger in the air.

“Oh, well, you know me,” I tried to keep my tone light.

“Yes.” He paused. “But you went on so much about all your time in the British Library that I did not expect . . .” he trailed off again and wandered over to the tallest of the piles.

“Oh, it’s wonderful!” I enthused. “We should go to the BL if we have time before our flight.” Then I added, as if by way of justification, “But you know, it’s not a lending library.”

My father raised his eyebrows and at the same time lifted the top book from the stack. “And, I suppose *Yoga: The Indian Tradition* is essential to your research on Victorian literature?”

“I picked that one up from Arthur Probsthain,” I said, referring to the specialty bookshop above which my flat was located. “I got a discount for being their tenant.”

“Right.” He brandished another volume from the pile. “*John Everett Millais?*”

“I went to that exhibition at the Tate with Sara—I told you, remember?—and that’s the catalog. Besides, Millais was a Victorian painter and a friend of D. G. Rossetti!”

Nonplussed, he held up a recent novel by Ian McEwan. “I *know* you have this at home.”

“Well, yes . . .” I demurred. “But paper is much higher quality on this version, and the cover is better too. On the whole, the U.K. editions tend to be nicer than the U.S. ones.”

“Be that as it may,” my father cleared his throat, “it would cost me a small fortune to ship all of these to Baltimore. It looks like you’ll have to make some tough decisions.”

I did not, as luck would have it, end up needing to make any difficult choices that day. When she heard about the dilemma, my landlady, Lesley, one of the co-owners of the bookstore, intervened on my behalf and offered to ship my box at the commercial rate the Royal Mail gives to booksellers. I am not sure she fully realized just what she was getting into—my dad says her eyes widened measurably when she glimpsed the size of the piles—but she did not renege on her promise. Later that afternoon, she helped us pack the boxes, demonstrating how to layer each stack to minimize the possibility for damage in transit.

“Blimey!” she observed at one point with characteristic earnestness. “My dear, not only do you have a lot of books, you even have a lot of books *about* books!”

At first I thought she meant that I owned a lot of works of literary criticism—monographs in which, for instance, a modern scholar interprets a classic novel—but then she began to list a few exemplary titles and subtitles: “*Bookstore; Every Book Its Reader; Lost in a Town of Books; Books, Baguettes and Bedbugs; So Many Books, So Little Time; Book Lovers’ London . . .*”

I knew, of course, that I had an extensive book collection, and I was aware that within it were several distinct sub-collections: nineteenth-century novels; literary criticism and theory; short story anthologies; nonfiction about higher education; books on the history of psychiatry; et cetera. Until Lesley pointed it out to me, however, I did not realize that I had acquired so many, well, “books *about* books,” as she aptly put it. These books had accrued at random as a result of countless hours spent in desultory browsing; I recall many, if not most, to have been impulse purchases snatched on a whim from the shelf next to the cash register, where, now that I pay close attention to such matters, I know books about books are extremely likely to be displayed.

Back then, however, my books about books were not displayed together, and this, I think, is why I had failed to recognize the collection as such for so long. Some were shelved according to traditional categories—memoirs, history, travel, and so forth; others were grouped in the vast, nebulous section devoted to what I thought of as “Just-for-Fun Books”; not a few were arranged on the bedside table; several more were piled next to the kitchen sink. (Space, as you might have imagined, was something of a premium in central London, and, as I have intimated, books were rather bountiful in my flat.) So, if not for the imminent necessity of sending, *en masse*, the tomes I had acquired in Britain across the Atlantic, I do not know how long it would have taken for me to become aware of the depth and breadth of my meta-bibliomania.

Lesley’s remark stayed in my head for the rest of the afternoon as I carefully packed the remainder of the boxes. Packing encourages introspection, and I was especially pensive that day as I looked back on the year I had spent in London working on a master’s degree in Victorian Studies, and looked forward to my future at Johns Hopkins, where I was heading to pursue a doctorate in English. I reflected on the fundamental love for books and reading that had led me to study literature in the first place, and I ruminated on the second-order interest in these areas—in books about books and reading about reading—that had become crucial to my research.

Specifically, I thought about the MA dissertation I would be submitting in a few weeks, entitled “Compulsive Reading: Dickens’s Serial Novels and the Repetitive Psychology of Fiction Addiction,” in which I examined the obsessional, compulsive behaviors of the author’s famously eccentric characters as a function of the obsessional, compulsive tendencies the serial publishing format encourages in its readers. I remembered the Statement of Purpose I had written when applying to graduate school just months earlier, in which I described my desire to expand upon this work on the psychology of reading. (Now, four years later, I can report that is exactly what I have done; my PhD thesis, “Reading Between the Minds: Victorian Poetry and the Modernist

Novel,” argues that the lyric-narrative hybrids that emerged in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries use the materiality of textual encounter to represent the complexity of intersubjective experience.) And, as I closed the last of the boxes, I reviewed the list of books that prompted Lesley’s comment, mostly reading and bookstore memoirs I had perused just for fun. As I mulled over these things, I realized, for the first time, that meta-bibliomania was how I brought my personal and professional passions together.

It may be that the act of collection rarely begins with an active intention. At one level, of course, the concept of collection—defined, in the broadest sense, as the gradual accumulation of a set of particular objects—would seem to be dependent on purposeful choice; that is, on the discerning selection of certain items and the mindful rejection of others. And yet I wonder how many collections actually start out with a conscious decision by the individual who eventually becomes the collector. For me at least there was no such decision. As I have explained, this collection—or, more accurately, this sub-collection, which forms a small but significant part of my book collection writ large—came into existence without my realizing it. I was responsible for acquiring the volumes listed in the following pages, but I did so largely unaware of their collective status as a cohesive subject—unaware, in other words, that I was slowly but surely developing a substantial collection.

Books, it seems to me, have a particularly unusual status when it comes to the question of collecting. Almost everyone is an owner of books—most people, indeed, own more than just a few—but not all of these people are considered collectors, either by themselves or by others. At what point, I wonder, does a group of books turn into a collection? I think the first time I heard the word “collector” used in reference to myself it was as a quantitative indicator—“Well, you are quite the book collector!” a friend of my parents said when she saw the shelves lining the walls of my childhood bedroom—yet I hardly think book collecting is first and foremost about quantity. If it were, I would (or should) have cataloged one of the many larger sections of my library—something like “The Booker-Prize Shortlist, 2000 to present,” for instance, or “Henry James and His Critics,” both categories in which I could produce close to a hundred volumes.

For me, however, book collecting is not about quantity, nor is it about quality per se. I do own a couple of first editions, but you will not find them described in these pages. Indeed, as far as I know, not a single one of the volumes in the subsequent list is rare or expensive—at least half a dozen were picked up for nothing at The Book Thing of Baltimore—and if paperbacks were excluded from the contest, well, I would not have a collection to enter. Still, as far as I am concerned, these thirty-five volumes comprise the most significant part of my library because they represent the convergence of personal and professional passions that defines who I am and what I do. Though not technically my most valuable books, in other words, these are the ones that I hold most dear. I trust my love for them will be evident in what you are about to read.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- 1. Ash, Russell and Brian Lake. *Bizarre Books: A Compendium of Classic Oddities*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2006.**

As I mentioned, the components of this collection do not, by and large, reside together on the same shelf or even in the same room, and for a long time this prevented me from recognizing the collection as such. At the risk of eliminating my contest submission from serious consideration (in the first entry of the bibliography!), I must admit that this particular work occupies what can only be described as a place of pride in the book basket next to the toilet in my bathroom. Its pages are filled with publication information and cover photographs for hundreds of esoteric—and hilarious—titles, the result of what its two compilers describe as “forty-plus years’ joint experience of scouring bookshops, bookfairs, publishers’ lists, book trade periodicals and internet sites.” My favorite entries include: *Mated from the Morgue: A Novel* (1889), *Poems in Praise of Practically Nothing* (1928), *Memoirs of an Amnesiac* (1965), and, since I am after all a graduate student, *How to Avoid Work* (1913). Judging by how worn the spine of this paperback has become in a relatively short period of time, it would appear that my guests appreciate the book’s humor as well, giving it the undisputed status of most popular item in the collection.

- 2. Bartlett, Allison Hoover. *The Man Who Loved Books Too Much: The True Story of a Thief, a Detective, and a World of Literary Obsession*. New York: Riverhead, 2009.**

In “Unpacking My Library,” his famous essay on the art of book collecting, Walter Benjamin suggests that the habit might well be seen as “a disorder” and mentions, by way of example, “those who in order to acquire [books] became criminals.” In this recent work of non-fiction, journalist Allison Bartlett investigates the life of one such man, John Charles Gilkey, a prolific thief currently serving time for stealing more than \$200,000 worth of rare books and even rarer manuscripts. Bartlett interweaves Gilkey’s story with that of Ken Sanders, the professional book dealer turned amateur detective who orchestrated the sting operation leading to Gilkey’s eventual arrest. Although the two are antagonists, Bartlett suggests that their mutual bibliomania endows them with disconcerting similarities; for both men book collecting becomes a pathological enterprise. This work is something of an outlier both within this sub-collection and my book collection as a whole; although I typically avoid the True Crime genre, I found myself completely fascinated by Bartlett’s nuanced portrait of obsessive minds.

- 3. Bernard, André. *Now All We Need is a Title: Famous Book Titles and How They Got That Way*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1996.**

Another bathroom book, this pocket-sized paperback, which I plucked from the dusty stacks at The Book Thing of Baltimore, offers short, humorous anecdotes about how certain well-known texts got their titles. With the utmost gratitude, I must acknowledge its role in my professional development: it has provided me with a limitless supply of conversational material for the annual English Department cocktail reception, a festive event that might otherwise have been marred by awkward silences and unbridled anxiety. In my four years of experience, I have found no better way to approach esteemed, emeritus faculty members than with questions like “Did you know John Steinbeck’s working title for *Of Mice and Men* (1937) was *Something that Happened?*”

- 4. Bayard, Pierre. *How to Talk About Books You Haven’t Read*. Trans. Jeffrey Mehlman. New York: Bloomsbury, 2007.**

This irreverently titled work by literature professor Pierre Bayard caused quite a stir in academic circles and in the news media when it came out several years ago. The latter were intrigued, but the former were appalled at the idea of such impostor intellectualism—or at least, they pretended to be appalled; my own attendance at department lectures suggests to me that feigned expertise is quite common, even (or especially!) in the vaunted academy. It's rather fitting, then, that I first picked up Bayard's book last year, the night before my comprehensive exams, when confronted with the daunting prospect of potentially having to, ahem, talk about books I had not read. There were, unfortunately, a few of these remaining on my orals list that night, but, following Bayard's sage counsel, I confidently, if somewhat vaguely, pontificated on these at length during the exam the following morning. Please do not tell my advisor; I think he had his suspicions, but I passed!

5. Basbanes, Nicholas A. *Every Book Its Reader: The Power of the Printed Word to Stir the World*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2005.

In this volume, Nicholas Basbanes, a pioneering book historian whose works are directed both at academic and popular audiences, examines how influential men and women of letters—including Isaac Newton, Henry James, and Helen Keller, among many others—were themselves influenced by what they read. Using marginal notes (see bibliographic entry #18), reading journals, and even library records, Basbanes attempts to trace how each individual's chosen reading material shaped his or her thought process. Most interesting to me is his account of the reading habits of contemporary thinkers, especially literary critics like Harold Bloom, Christopher Ricks, and Helen Vendler, whose poetic theories (in works such as *The Anxiety of Influence* [1973], *The Force of Poetry* [1984], and *The Given and the Made* [1995], respectively) have been influential in shaping my own thoughts about literature in general and my PhD thesis in particular.

6. -----, *A Gentle Madness: Bibliophiles, Bibliomanes, and the Eternal Passion for Books*. New York: Henry Holt, 1995.

In this, his first book-length treatment of books and those who love them, book review columnist Nicholas Basbanes chronicles, appropriately, the history of book collecting as a phenomenon. He begins with the construction of the Ancient Library of Alexandria and goes on to describe the development of numerous other personal and institutional collections, in the process attempting to understand the endurance of bibliomania over thousands of years. As he observes, the vast majority of collector's items are short-lived fads (Beanie Babies), and even those that do persist (baseball cards, antique furniture, postage stamps) hardly date back more than a few centuries. Books are unique, he argues, in the link they provide between our world and the ancient one. Earlier I discussed why I think books have an unusual status as collectors' objects, and I like how Basbanes's theory—with its implication that books reveal something integral about the human impulse to collect—complements my own thinking. I will be sure to keep this handsome volume, which is printed on thick paper and adorned with a gold dust jacket, for years to come.

7. Brottman, Mikita. *The Solitary Vice: Against Reading*. Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2008.

Another outlier in a collection dominated by what might be termed “reading memoirs,” works that effusively if nostalgically describe their authors' reading habits past and present (see for example entries #9, #10, #12, #15, #23, #27, #30, and #33), Mikita Brottman's polemical work instead suggests that reading is isolating at best and solipsistic at worst. Brottman—who, I was interested to learn, holds an Oxford doctorate in, of all things, English Literature—insists that, “in terms of emotional development, books didn't help [her] at all,” since she “read not to join in,

but to get out of the culture.” In the tradition of Victorian opponents to the emergent genre of the novel (the topic of my MA dissertation), Brottman likens reading to masturbating and maintains that it is an unhealthy indulgence in escapist fantasy, a perverse activity that forces those who engage in it to confront the disturbing and pathological elements of human nature. This last-ditch attempt to rescue the social utility of reading is an intriguing claim, and, though I disagree with much of Brottman’s work, I do feel that I benefitted from the experience of reading it. But I doubt she would see it that way . . .

8. Collins, Paul. *Sixpence House: Lost in a Town of Books*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2003.

Reading Paul Collins’s account of his transatlantic move to the Welsh village of Hay-on-Wye enriched me in a literary sense even as it impoverished me in a literal one. Not that the book itself was so expensive—as a matter of fact I first read it on loan from the Harvard Library—but the information it contains facilitated some rather costly expenditures during the year I spent in the U.K. Despite boasting fewer than two thousand residents, Hay-on-Wye, as Collins explains, is the antiquarian book capital of the globe, and it was for this reason that he decided to relocate there and take a position as clerk in the most prestigious of the town’s forty used/rare bookstores. As if this alone were not incentive enough for me to hie myself to Hay forthwith, for ten days each year the village hosts a massive Literature and Arts festival that has been described as “the Woodstock of the mind.” Needless to say, a substantial proportion of the book boxes that had to be shipped back to America when I came to grad school were filled with tomes from a glorious week spent in Hay-on-Wye. Fittingly, I bought my own copy of Collins’s memoir there.

9. Corrigan, Maureen. *Leave Me Alone, I’m Reading: Finding and Losing Myself in Books*. New York: Vintage, 2006.

If memory serves, this work by Maureen Corrigan provided my introduction to the genre of the reading memoir, which, as evidenced by this collection, has been a favorite of mine ever since. Here Corrigan, the book reviewer for NPR’s *Fresh Air*, interprets the significant events in her life through the lens of her favorite books. When I picked up this book I was on the verge of completing my undergraduate degree, contemplating an endless stretch of time in which I would not have to read anything in particular. In reading Corrigan’s book, I gleaned numerous reading suggestions to fill this time—most notably Dashiell Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon* (1930) and Barbara Pym’s *Quartet in Autumn* (1977), which I now count among my favorites—and in the process I realized how much I enjoy having a structured reading plan. I remember being quite enthralled by the chapters in which Corrigan describes her years in an English PhD program; it was no accident that, soon after I finished reading her book, I decided to follow the same path.

10. Dirda, Michael. *An Open Book: Chapters from a Reader’s Life*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2003.

Having spent the first thirteen years of my life in the rural Dakotas, I could not help but identify with Michael Dirda’s reading memoir, which bears the alternate subtitle “Coming of Age in the Heartland.” Dirda, a Pulitzer-Prize-winning columnist for the *Washington Post Book World*, recounts his childhood in blue-collar Ohio and explains how his encounters with books during this early period shaped the course of the rest of his life. I have the same feeling every time I look back on the days—long before the advent of the internet and the e-reader made it easy to obtain books anywhere, anytime—when I would breathlessly await the weekly arrival (weather permitting) of The Bookmobile, a traveling library my family depended upon for our reading

material. No matter how many books I checked out, it was never enough; I invariably would have finished them all, and sometimes read them all again, before The Bookmobile made its return visit. I confess to having consumed Dirda's memoir with similar avidity over the course of just one summer afternoon, and I know I will read it again (and, most likely, again).

11. Donoghue, Denis. *The Practice of Reading*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000.

I picked up this book for a mere \$1.00 at the Harvard Book Store Warehouse Sale in the summer after my first year of graduate school. Finding a bargain-priced academic monograph is always a special treat, but it was especially serendipitous in this case since I was enrolled at the time in a self-designed independent study entitled "Reading Victorian Reading: Book History, Reader-Response Theory, and the Nineteenth-Century Novel." Denis Donoghue's persuasive account of the continuing relevance of nineteenth-century modes of reading—in particular he champions the aesthetic criticism of Matthew Arnold, Walter Pater, and Oscar Wilde—proved highly useful to my thinking about issues related to the historical specificity of the reading experience. This was the subject of a paper I wrote on George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1869) for my independent project.

12. Fadiman, Anne. *Ex Libris: Confessions of a Common Reader*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998.

Published in 1998, Anne Fadiman's book is one of the inaugural examples of the reading memoir genre, although I did not come upon it until more than a decade after its initial release, by which point I had read many of the thematically similar works it spawned. But this did not diminish my enjoyment of it in the least; on the contrary, I think, my familiarity with the genre made me appreciate Fadiman's originality all the more. Her chapter "Marrying Libraries," in which she describes how, after five years of marriage, she and her husband finally agreed to consolidate their book collections, ranks as one of my all-time favorite pieces of non-fiction prose, even as it fills me with mild anxiety at the thought of having to merge my own library with someone else's.

13. Flint, Kate. *The Woman Reader, 1837-1914*. Oxford: Clarendon/Oxford University Press, 1995.

My MA dissertation advisor introduced me to Kate Flint's academic study *The Woman Reader*—and, later, to Kate Flint herself—when I expressed my desire to write a thesis on Victorian fears about the dangerous, habit-forming potential of the novel. Flint's monograph, a seminal text in the nascent subfield of book history (see entry #3 on the accompanying wishlist) persuasively demonstrates that nineteenth-century apprehensions about the novel as a genre were inextricable from contemporary debates about the proper role of women in a changing society. In my MA dissertation, I tried to expand on Flint's work by considering how Victorian novelists, most notably Charles Dickens, used the format of serial publication to capitalize on what were then regarded as fiction's addictive properties. Flint read my chapter on *Great Expectations* (1861).

14. Hanff, Helen. *84, Charing Cross Road*. New York: Avon, 1970.

Surprisingly, I had never heard of Helen Hanff's account of her long-term correspondence with London bookseller Frank Doel before I decided to move to England. When I told a friend back in the U.S. that I was letting a flat above an antiquarian bookshop, she promptly sent me Hanff's work and the film based upon it. I would have loved this real-life story of epistolary friendship between an American bibliophile and a British bookseller no matter what, but I appreciated it all the more because I had my very own bookseller friends—the Sheringham-Ma family, proprietors

of Arthur Probsthain Books—just four flights down. Every time I reread Hanff’s work I find myself yearning to write an account of my own experiences at 41A, Great Russell Street . . .

15. Hornby, Nick. *The Polysyllabic Spree*. San Francisco: Believer, 2004.

Subtitled “A Hilarious and True Account of One Man’s Struggle with the Monthly Tide of the Books He’s Bought and the Books He’s Been Meaning to Read,” this is a diary of one year in the acclaimed novelist’s reading life. Each month is given a chapter, at the outset of which Hornby lists the books he has purchased alongside the books he has read; only rarely do these overlap. He then goes on to describe his trials and tribulations during that period, to draw connections between his reading and his life, and to reflect on what his book purchases suggest about his mental state. I imagine it is clear by now how much I adore the retro/introspective style of the reading memoir and Hornby’s is no exception. After finishing it, I decided to begin keeping a list of books purchased and books read in my diary; so far the former outnumber the latter.

16. Iser, Wolfgang. *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980.

Wolfgang Iser’s groundbreaking theory of aesthetic response constituted a major intervention in literary studies when it first appeared and its hermeneutic ramifications continue to be felt today. Rejecting the critical paradigm of “symptomatic reading” then dominant in the academy, Iser argued that, rather than attempting to uncover the “hidden meaning” of a given text, the goal of literary analysis should be to understand how texts generate effects by necessitating the reader’s active participation in the process of representation. In shifting attention from the author to the reader, Iser brought literature’s indeterminate aspects (what he called the “gaps”) to the forefront of critical inquiry in a way that emphasized the subjective nature of the reading experience. His work provides one of the theoretical foundations for my PhD research on late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century writers’ interest in using reading to depict the problem of other minds. Furthermore, without Iser’s insistence on the significance of an individual’s personal reaction to a literary text, it is doubtful the reading memoirs on this list ever would have been published.

17. Jackson, H. J. *Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001.

Before I came to graduate school I was staunchly opposed to what I perceived as defacing my books by highlighting, underlining, and, above all, scrawling comments in the margins. It will come as no surprise that the demands of my reading-intensive program quickly convinced me to change my ways. H. J. Jackson’s magisterial account of the evolution of marginalia, which I read for a course on “Reading and Writing in the Romantic Era” during my first year at Hopkins, played no small role in my conversion. Based on her analysis of thousands of books, Jackson identifies three periods in the history of marginalia, each with its own distinct function. Until 1700, she says, annotation was used primarily as a mnemonic device; from 1700 to 1820 it served as an evaluative tool; and from 1820 until the present it has been a way for readers to express the personal feelings aroused by a given text. I now take prodigious notes in the margins of all my books, not only the ones I read for course or dissertation work; a cursory examination of these annotations reveals that my marginal scribbles combine all three functions.

18. Jacobs, Alan. *The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Printed matter is on the decline and with it, according to most headlines, is attentive reading. Due to the prevalence of electronic gadgetry, these articles hold, we now inhabit an environment that is not conducive to the prolonged attention demanded by traditional reading practices. In contrast to this apocalyptic view, Alan Jacobs's work, which was featured widely in the press on its appearance at the end of last year, posits that reading is as widespread as ever but that people are reading with less confidence in their abilities, in large part because the media has encouraged them to believe in their diminished capacity to pay attention. As an antidote, he recommends that one actively strive to enjoy reading by perusing the texts one finds most pleasurable. Of course, I have no objection to this idea, and, since I most enjoyed Jacobs's discussion of the peculiar pleasures of rereading, I am planning to do more reading about rereading at some point in the near future (see especially #8 on the attached wishlist).

19. Kaplan, Bob and Harold Rabinowitz, eds. *Speaking of Books: The Best Things Ever Said About Books and Book Collecting*. New York: Crown, 2001.

A collection (no pun intended) of quotations and aphorisms, this is another volume that deserves credit for providing me with witty remarks to use as conversational icebreakers in awkward professional contexts such as the erroneously-named academic conference "banquet." Since many of the examples are culled from obscure literary and historical texts, this book has also been useful to my dissertation research. It was not, however, as useful as I had hoped in writing the essay that accompanies this bibliography; despite the promise in the title, it has little to offer on the subject of book collecting, and so I had to formulate my own abstractions.

20. Korda, Michael. *Making the List: A Cultural History of the American Bestseller, 1900-1999*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 2001.

Using the bestseller lists from *Publisher's Weekly* as evidence and devoting a chapter to each decade of the last century, Michael Korda argues here that what Americans are reading serves as a sort of socio-cultural thermometer. For instance, he attributes the sharp rise in popularity of happily-ever-after romance novels and feel-good self-help books after the Vietnam War to the fact that readers were "in retreat from bruising ethical, moral, and political conflicts" and "in a mood to get over the war and enjoy life." This makes intuitive sense to me, but what I liked best about Korda's work was not his interpretations of the lists but rather the lists themselves. An appendix at the end of each chapter is devoted to cataloguing the overall bestselling books of each year from 1900 to 1999, and in perusing these I found a number of works to add to my own ever-increasing "To-Read" list. Book collecting, it would appear, is destined to continue . . .

21. Krantz, Les and Tim Knight. *The Book of Books: An Eclectic Collection of Reading Recommendations, Quirky Lists, and Fun Facts About Books*. Geneva, WI: Wildwood, 2007.

This is a fantastic catalog of book recommendations classified under headings that range from the conventional ("Detective Stories") to the unusual ("Psychopaths in Literature"). I find the thematic arrangement to be extremely helpful not only in brainstorming ideas for new course ideas but also for locating new texts with which to refresh the syllabi of older ones. Naturally I found this book while foraging at The Book Thing, something I'm afraid I do all too regularly.

22. Mercer, Jeremy. *Books, Baguettes and Bedbugs: The Left Bank World of Shakespeare & Co*. London: Phoenix/Orion, 2005.

There is little doubt that Paris would be my favorite place on earth if either a.) my French were better (while I did receive “fluency” on my department’s foreign language exam, I have the sense my examiner must have been feeling generous) or b.) the City of Lights were home to a greater number of English bookstores. Fortunately it does have Shakespeare & Co. Made famous as the gathering place of Left Bank literati such as Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, and Ernest Hemingway in the early twentieth century, the labyrinthine shop, packed to capacity with volumes new, used, and rare, continues to do a thriving business from its enviable location on the banks of the Seine. I made my first visit there in 2006, where I picked up this book, in which former reporter Jeremy Mercer describes the year he spent living rent-free above the shop in exchange for working there. His romanticized portrait of modern literary bohemia has an irresistible charm; so irresistible, in fact, that when I learned the book had been published in the U.S. under another title (*Time Was Soft There: A Paris Sojourn at Shakespeare & Co.* [New York: Picador, 2006]), I found myself compelled to purchase another copy. Such is the prerogative of the collector . . .

23. Nelson, Sara. *So Many Books, So Little Time: A Year of Passionate Reading.* New York: Berkley Books, 2003.

Sara Nelson’s reading memoir, a journal of her attempt to make it through fifty-two books in the course of a year, is not my favorite example of the genre; I came away from it without exciting book recommendations or profound life insights. Now that it is a part of what I have come to regard as this sub-collection, however, I find that I cannot bring myself to part with it. If I were being honest, I would admit that I like how it looks lined up on the shelf alongside my other reading memoirs, and I would acknowledge that this is a symptom of the collector’s perversity.

24. Osen, Diane, ed. *The Book That Changed My Life: Interviews with National Book Award Winners and Finalists.* New York: Modern Library, 2002.

Here Diane Osen transcribes her interviews with fifteen authors about the reading experiences they perceive as having been most influential to their creative development. It was thrilling to learn that some of my favorite contemporary writers were profoundly impacted by some of my favorite nineteenth-century ones. For instance, Alice McDermott (professor in the Writing Seminars at JHU) describes her love for Emily Brontë; Linda Pastan (former Poet Laureate of Maryland) recalls her obsession with the poems of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Alfred, Lord Tennyson; and Diane Johnson muses at length on her debt to Henry James.

25. Pearl, Nancy. *BOOK LUST: Recommended Reading for Every Mood, Moment, and Reason.* Seattle: Sasquatch Books, 2003.

BOOK LUST is another wonderful catalog of recommended titles (see also #21), organized by theme into 175 separate categories. The most esoteric of these include: “Czech It Out,” a list of novels about the Czech Republic; “Grit Lit,” which the editor defines as a sub-genre of Southern fiction with an emphasis on rural poverty; “Kitchen-Sink Poetry,” verse that defies classification under available terms like lyric, epic, et cetera; and, to my delight, “Books About Books,” which is the source of the title of this collection as well as a few of the items on the attached wishlist.

26. Petroski, Henry. *The Book on the Bookshelf.* New York: Knopf, 1999.

Another find of mine at The Book Thing of Baltimore, Henry Petroski’s work examines books as material objects, paying special attention to the evolution of the devices used to store them: from the pigeonholes and codices that housed ancient scrolls, to the chained armaria in vogue during

the Middle Ages, to the comparative minimalism of today's utilitarian bookcase. This is one of the only volumes I own that treats the materiality of the book at great length, and, although it will necessitate my investment in some more bookshelves, in the future I would like to develop the collection in this direction by acquiring similar works on bookbinding and papermaking, two subjects I will study in depth this summer at the University of Virginia's Rare Book School.

27. Prose, Francine. *Reading Like a Writer: A Guide for People Who Love Books and for Those Who Want to Write Them*. New York: HarperCollins, 2006.

Part reading memoir and part writing manual, Francine Prose's work draws upon the work of classic novelists—from Franz Kafka and Fyodor Dostoyevsky to James Joyce and Virginia Woolf—to illustrate fundamental creative lessons about developing realistic characters, creating believable dialogue, and so on. Perhaps because of this bifurcated approach, upon closing Prose's book I felt myself pulled in two directions at once: I wanted both to dash out and buy all of the volumes she lists in the appendix (which bears the imperative, irresistible heading "Books To Be Read Immediately") and to rush over to my typewriter and commence writing a novel of my own. This is another inspiring book that I will be sure to keep forever and reread often.

28. Reader, Lesley. *Book Lovers' London*. London: Metro Publications, 2006.

This guidebook was a gift from a friend who works as a used book buyer after I declared my plan to move to London and pursue a Master's in Victorian Studies in 2007. Though I did not know it then, I would end up residing above the bookshop pictured on the first page! What I did know, even at the time, however, was that this book would be an indispensable companion to my bibliomaniacal sojourns throughout the city. Lesley Reader—whose name I am convinced *must* be a pseudonym—provides an exhaustive, 350-page catalog of the bookstores in greater London. I am afraid that I did not get to all of them, but I can say that I made a valiant effort to do so!

29. Rostenberg, Leona and Madeleine Stern. *Old Books, Rare Friends: Two Literary Sleuths and Their Shared Passion*. New York: Main Street Books/Doubleday, 1997.

The authors of this jointly-written memoir were best friends and business partners for fifty years, and here they recount their escapades scouring the globe for rare volumes, first to use in their academic research and later to sell to the eccentric clientele of their antiquarian dealership in Manhattan. It's a hard decision, but of all the books in this collection, I think this one is my favorite. I found it fascinating and inspiring to read about these two women's experiences as graduate students at Columbia in the 1930s, a time when academia was virtually dominated by men. Rostenberg was in History PhD program while Stern earned an MA in English; they decided to enter the book business together after Rostenberg's completed dissertation—an archival investigation of how early printer-publishers influenced reform and scholarship—was rejected on the grounds that its "subject had no validity." It was not Rostenberg's research but her advisor's decree that turned out to be invalid, however; she was awarded her degree thirty years later and today is heralded as a trailblazer in the discipline of book history.

30. Schwartz, Lynn Sharon. *Ruined by Reading: A Life in Books*. Boston: Beacon, 1996.

While the title of this reading memoir would appear to suggest that it shares some affinities with Mikita Brottman's anti-reading polemic described earlier (see entry #7), Lynn Schwartz's work, while it asks the same questions about the benefits and drawbacks of reading as a mechanism of social utility, reaches a vastly different conclusion. Schwartz ends her luminous essay with the

proclamation that the solitary hours spent turning over the leaves of a book are essential to the self-realization that is necessary for meaningful relationships. She writes: “Reading teaches receptivity. Reading gives a context for experience, a myriad of contexts. . . . So much of a child’s life is lived for others. We learn what they want us to learn, and show our learning for their gratification. All the reading I did as a child, behind closed doors, sitting on my bed while the darkness fell around me, was an act of reclamation. This was the way to make my life my own.” While I am no longer a child, I am a student, learning what others tell me to learn and demonstrating my learning upon command; perhaps for this reason, Schwartz’s words resonate with me. At times I question the decision to turn my passion into my profession, and I think that this is why I have made building my library such a vital part of my life. Collecting is an act of reclamation for me; my books—especially these books about books—remind me of what it is that I love and reassure me that it will never cease to be mine.

31. Tillman, Lynne. *Bookstore: The Life and Times of Jeannette Watson and Books & Co.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1999.

This book, which I received as a gift from my father when I was in high school, is the first item I acquired in this collection. At the time, I had no idea that I would cultivate such a collection, but I do remember being inordinately excited by the prospect of reading a book about a bookstore, which struck me as the best possible combination. (I may have tried to convince my dad, who was in the process of changing careers at the time, that what he really ought to do was enter the bookselling business; to his immense credit, I think he actually considered the proposal!) Lynne Tillman’s history of one of New York City’s premier independent bookstores disappointed me only in its final chapter, which described how Books & Co. was forced to close its doors in 1997, the victim of competing chain stores, rising real estate prices, and increasing internet sales.

32. Toth, Susan Allen and John Coughlan, eds. *Reading Rooms: America’s Foremost Writers Celebrate Our Public Libraries with Stories, Memoirs, Essays, and Poems.* New York: Doubleday, 1991.

Another treasure I stumbled upon at The Book Thing of Baltimore, this delightful anthology of excerpts pays reverent homage to public libraries. There are sections devoted to “Small-Town Libraries” and “City Libraries,” as well as “Love in the Library” and “Mystery and Murder in the Library,” and, of course, “The Librarian,” among others. Notably, it was in the section entitled “Reading Room Reveries” that I first encountered Howard Nemerov’s ode “To a Scholar in the Stacks” (1977), which compares the university library to the Minotaur’s cave. I think of this poem every time my research takes me into the darkest corners of the D-Level stacks at MSE.

33. Quindlen, Anna. *How Reading Changed My Life.* New York: Ballantine, 1998.

Since I am not a huge fan of Anna Quindlen’s novels, I was quite reticent to pick up her reading memoir, another early example of the genre that became popular in the late 1990s and continues to flourish. Indeed, had I not happened upon a free copy at (of course) The Book Thing last year, I doubt it would be making an appearance in this bibliography. I had seen the work there before, actually, and had never felt compelled to grab it, but on that cold, blustery afternoon the pickings were slimmer than usual, and so I gave in and cracked open its pristine cover. I am ever so glad that I did, because Quindlen’s literary tastes are strikingly like my own and reading this lyrical meditation on her love for the written word made me feel like I was catching up with a dear old

friend. I felt this way from the very first page, since Quindlen's work opens with an excerpt from my favorite narrative poem, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856).

34. Wolf, Maryanne. *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain*. New York: HarperCollins, 2007.

This book was listed on the syllabus for a personal enrichment of lecture course I purchased on "The Art of Reading." (Evidently I cannot get enough of that subject.) Maryanne Wolf, an avid reader and cognitive neuroscientist, attempts to explain, from a scientific perspective, how the human mind transforms the written symbols on a page of text first into meaningful groups of words and sentences, and then into the complex ideas and multi-faceted plots characteristic of great works of literature. At present this book is another outlier in the collection, as it is one of the only works I possess to explore reading as a mental process. I hope to expand the collection in this direction in light of the cognitive turn that literary studies has taken in recent years.

35. Yardley, Jonathan. *Second Reading: Notable and Neglected Books Revisited*. New York: Europa Editions, 2011.

When I come across a writer whose books I truly love, I make it a point read everything he or she has published. For many hours, this brings me an immense feeling of satisfaction; however, when the time comes to close the last volume, I inevitably experience a poignant sense of loss. This is especially true when I reach the last work of an author who is no longer living and/or writing, since I know I will never again have the experience of reading, say, a Thomas Hardy novel for the first time. It pains me, for instance, to know that there will never be another initial discovery of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905) or A. S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990). The feeling is irrational—I know the number of great books is so vast that I will never have enough time to read them all—but nevertheless I despair to think that someday there might be no more transcendent reading experiences left for me. It is for this reason, I imagine, that the notion of forgotten/neglected works of literature holds such romantic appeal for me. Jonathan Yardley gives an overview of sixty such works; of these to date I have read only fifteen. Keeping his volume on my shelf comforts me, for I like the idea that there are still, at the bare minimum, at least forty-five great texts that I have yet to discover.

WISHLIST:

- 1. Basbanes, Nicholas A. *A World of Letters: Yale University Press, 1908-2008*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008.**

In this work Nicholas Basbanes (see entries #5 and #6 on the bibliography) turns his attention to the world of scholarly publishing by offering a history of one of the nation's oldest academic presses. Since becoming associate editor of my department's scholarly journal, *English Literary History (ELH)*, last year, I have had the opportunity to work with Johns Hopkins University Press, and have become fascinated by the unique facets of academic publishing. I would love to read Basbanes's inside look at the origins and evolution of Yale's renowned publishing division.

- 2. Burton, Betsy. *The King's English: Adventures of an Independent Bookseller*. Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, 2005.**

I confess my desire to read Betsy Burton's chronicle of her thirty years at the helm of The King's English Bookshop in Salt Lake City stems from my dream of someday operating an independent bookstore of my own. Burton includes a lengthy appendix of idiosyncratic recommendations, including a list entitled "25 Books on Reading Books." Obviously, I need to own this one.

- 3. Barnard, John, D. F. McKenzie, David McKitterick, and I. R. Willison, gen. eds. *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*. 7 vol. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999-2012 (projected).**

Is it cheating to count a seven-volume work as one item on the wishlist? I hope not, for the hefty tomes in this academic series, each bearing a \$200 price tag, seem to me to epitomize the very principle of a wishlist! These works provide the most comprehensive and definitive account of the history of book in Britain to date, from Anglo-Saxon codicology to Renaissance typology, from Victorian serialization to twenty-first-century digitization, and so on. I suppose if I had to select just one, I would choose *Volume VI: 1830-1914*, which covers the period of my PhD dissertation and charts how new advancements in printing and binding technologies gave rise to mass literacy and generated unprecedented success for writers, publishers, and booksellers alike.

- 4. Goldstone, Lawrence and Nancy Goldstone. *Slightly Chipped: Footnotes in Booklore*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1999.**

This is a companion volume to the Goldstones' first book, *Used and Rare: Travels in the Book World* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1998), which I borrowed from my London landlords as an introduction to antiquarian collecting. (I would like to possess my own copy of that book as well, but, alas, the wishlist is limited to ten items!) In this sequel the married pair describes their adventures trying to obtain rare editions of the correspondence of Virginia Woolf and the other members of the Bloomsbury Group; for obvious reasons, this subject deeply interests me.

- 5. Manguel, Alberto. *A Reader on Reading*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011.**

Alberto Manguel—who has been called the "Casanova of reading"—writes extensively on the subject of books, and this recent volume brings together thirty-nine of his most acclaimed essays.

- 6. Popek, Michael. *Forgotten Bookmarks: A Bookseller's Collection of Odd Things Lost Between the Pages*. New York: Perigree, 2011.**

It has been said that collecting begets collecting; certainly this has been true for me. As a result of countless weekend pilgrimages to The Book Thing of Baltimore, I have accumulated not only a vast quantity of books but also a wide variety of what might be loosely defined as bookmarks: blank postcards, foreign currency, ticket stubs, yearbook photographs, index cards with cryptic inscriptions, and, yes, actual bookmarks emblazoned with the names of now-defunct bookshops across the country. I keep these in a box on my desk and use them to flag important pages in an ever-increasing mound of library books; no matter if I forget to remove one, I figure, for it will just continue on its journey. Here Michael Popek (of www.forgottenbookmarks.com) describes the unusual items he has found amidst the pages of the used volumes in his family's store. Since his website is my top dissertation-procrastination destination, I cannot wait to read his book.

7. Price, Leah. *Unpacking My Library: Writers and Their Books*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011.

In this recently-published work, Harvard English professor Leah Price, whose less important accomplishments include introducing my undergraduate self to the emergent subfield of book history (see wishlist item #3), profiles the libraries of thirteen acclaimed novelists. According to the dust jacket, Price's interviews with authors from Philip Pullman to Gary Steynart "probe the relation of writing to reading, collecting, and arranging books." Having now, in the process of preparing this book collecting contest submission, pondered these questions at length myself, I am eager to learn what others have to say about it. It bears noting that Price's work takes its title from Walter Benjamin's famous essay on book collecting, a personal favorite of mine.

8. Spacks, Patricia Meyer. *On Rereading*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 2011.

As evidenced by this collection, in the past few decades much has been written about books and reading for scholarly as well as popular audiences. There has been remarkably little attention, however, to the distinctive experience of rereading, an oversight Patricia Meyer Spacks remedies with this treatise. Why, she asks, do we return, again and again, to certain books we know well? According to the *New Yorker* blog, in her attempt to answer this perplexing question, she blends personal memoir with literary criticism and psychological research. What more could one want?

9. Shea, Suzanne Strempek. *Shelf Life: Romance, Mystery, Drama, and Other Page-Turning Adventures from a Year in a Bookstore*. Boston: Beacon, 2004.

One step away from the reading memoir is the bookstore memoir (see for example bibliography entries #8, #14, #22, #29, and #31), and this work by Suzanne Strempek Shea constitutes another example in that niche genre. Most of the book's reviews complain that it does not live up to its subtitle, but I want to read (and own) it regardless. Again, I invoke the collector's prerogative.

10. Stewart, Garrett. *The Look of Reading: Book, Painting, Text*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

In this gorgeous coffee-table volume, which I love to ogle during library breaks, Garrett Stewart, an influential critic and emeritus professor of English, examines five centuries of painted images of individuals reading and explores how artists from Rembrandt to Caravaggio translate the experience of textual encounter into a visual medium. The wall above my desk in the *ELH* office is decorated with reprints of certain paintings featured in Stewart's book. I would like to display the book itself on the coffee table in my office when I become an English professor.