Ex Libris

ANNE FADIMAN

Confessions of a Common Reader

Also by Anne Fadiman
The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down

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Confessions of a Common Reader

ANNE FADIMAN

The essays in this book appeared, in slightly different form, in *Civilization* magazine.

For Clifton Fadiman
and Annalee Jacoby Fadiman,
who built my ancestral castles

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Preface

When the Irish novelist John McGahern was a child, his sisters unlaced and removed one of his shoes while he was reading. He did not stir. They placed a straw hat on his head. No response. Only when they took away the wooden chair on which he was sitting did he, as he puts it, "wake out of the book."

"Wake" is just the right verb, because there is a certain kind of child who awakens from a book as from an abyssal sleep, swimming heavily up through layers of consciousness toward a reality that seems less real than the dream-state that has been left behind. I was such a child. Later, as a teenager under the influence of Hardy, I could not fall in love without classifying the boy as a Damon or a Clym. Later still, I lay with my husband (a Clym) in a bed that was lumpy with books, hoping the delivery of our first child would resemble Kitty's birth scene in *Anna Karenina* but fearing it might be more like Mrs. Thingummy's in *Oliver Twist*.

I began to write *Ex Libris* when it occurred to me how curious it was that books are so often written about as if they were toasters. Is this brand of toaster better than that brand of toaster? At $24.95, is this toaster a best buy? There is nothing about how I may feel about my toaster ten years hence, and nothing about the tender feelings I may yet harbor for my old toaster. This model of readers as consumers—one I have abetted in many a book review myself—neatly omits what I consider the heart of reading: not whether we wish to purchase a new book but how we maintain our connections with our old books, the ones we have lived with for years, the ones whose textures and colors and smells have become as familiar to us as our children's skin.

In *The Common Reader*, Virginia Woolf (who borrowed her title from a phrase in Samuel Johnson's *Life of Gray*) wrote of "all those rooms, too humble to be called libraries, yet full of books, where the pursuit of reading is carried on by private people." The common reader, she said, "differs from the critic and the scholar. He is worse educated, and nature has not gifted him so generously. He reads for his own pleasure rather than to impart knowledge or correct the opinions of others. Above all, he is guided by an instinct to create for himself, out of whatever odds and ends he can come

by, some kind of whole.” This book is the whole that I have attempted to create from the thousands of odds and ends that crowd my sagging bookshelves.

I wrote these eighteen essays over a period of four years. They are presented here in the order in which they were written, with the exception of the last two, which have exchanged places. I have left the facts as they were; for example, William Kunstler was alive when I wrote about him, so he remains alive in these pages. Over the course of those years, my son was born, my daughter learned to read, my husband and I turned forty, my mother turned eighty, my father turned ninety. Our books, however—even the ones printed long before we were born—remained ageless. They recorded the passage of real time, and because they reminded us of all the occasions on which they had been read and reread, they also reflected the passage of the preceding decades.

Books wrote our life story, and as they accumulated on our shelves (and on our windowsills, arid underneath our sofa, and on. top of our refrigerator), they became chapters in it themselves. How could it be otherwise?

A.F.

Marrying Libraries

A few months ago, my husband and I decided to mix our books together. We had known each other for ten years, lived together for six, been married for five. Our mismatched coffee mugs cohabited amicably; we wore each other's T-shirts and, in a pinch, socks; and our record collections had long ago miscegenated without incident, my Josquin Desprez motets cozying up to George's *Worst of Jefferson Airplane*, to the enrichment, we believed, of both. But our libraries had remained separate, mine mostly at the north end of our loft, his at the south. We agreed that it made no sense for my *Billy Budd* to languish forty feet from his *Moby-Dick*, yet neither of us had lifted a finger to bring them together.

We had been married in this loft, in full view of our mutually quarantined Melvilles. Promising to love each other for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health—even promising to forsake all others—had been no problem, but it was a good thing the *Book of Common Prayer* didn't say anything about marrying our libraries and throwing out the duplicates. That would have been a far more solemn vow, one that would probably have caused the wedding to grind to a mortifying halt. We were both writers, and we both invested in our books the kind of emotion most people reserve for their old love letters. Sharing a bed and a future was child's play compared to sharing my copy of *The Complete Poems of W. B. Yeats*, from which I had once read "Under Ben Bulben" aloud while standing at Yeats's grave in the Drumcliff churchyard, or George's copy of *T. S. Eliot's Selected Poems*, given to him in the ninth grade by his best friend, Rob Farnsworth, who inscribed it "Best Wishes from Gerry Cheevers." (Gerry Cheevers, one of Rob's nicknames, was the goalie of the Boston Bruins, and the inscription is probably unique, linking T. S. Eliot and ice hockey for the first time in history.)

Our reluctance to conjugate our Melvilles was also fueled by some essential differences in our characters. George is a lumper. I am a splitter. His books commingled democratically, united under the all-inclusive flag of Literature. Some were vertical, some horizontal, and some actually placed *behind* others. Mine were balkanized by nationality and subject matter. Like most people with a high tolerance for clutter, George maintains a basic trust in three-dimensional objects. If he wants something, he believes it will

present itself, and therefore it usually does. I, on the other hand, believe that books, maps, scissors, and Scotch tape dispensers are all unreliable vagrants, likely to take off for parts unknown unless strictly confined to quarters. My books, therefore, have always been rigidly regimented.

After five years of marriage and a child, George and I finally resolved that we were ready for the more profound intimacy of library consolidation. It was unclear, however, how we were to find a meeting point between his English-garden approach and my French-garden one. At least in the short run, I prevailed, on the theory that he could find his books if they were arranged like mine but I could never find mine if they were arranged like his. We agreed to sort by topic—History, Psychology, Nature, Travel, and so on. Literature would be subdivided by nationality. (If George found this plan excessively finicky, at least he granted that it was a damn sight better than the system some friends of ours had told us about. Some friends of *theirs* had rented their house for several months to an interior decorator. When they returned, they discovered that their entire library had been reorganized by color and size. Shortly thereafter, the decorator met with a fatal automobile accident. I confess that when this story was told, everyone around the dinner table concurred that justice had been served.)

So much for the ground rules. We ran into trouble, however, when I announced my plan to arrange English literature chronologically but American literature alphabetically by author. My defense went like this: Our English collection spanned six centuries, and to shelve it chronologically would allow us to watch the broad sweep of literature unfold before our very eyes. The Victorians *belonged* together; separating them would be like breaking up a family. Besides, Susan Sontag arranged *her* books chronologically. She had told *The New York Times* that it would set her teeth on edge to put Pynchon next to Plato. So there. Our American collection, on the other hand, was mostly twentieth-century, much of it so recent that chronological distinctions would require Talmudic hairsplitting. Ergo, alphabetization. George eventually caved in, but more for the sake of marital harmony than because of a true conversion. A particularly bad moment occurred while he was in the process of transferring my Shakespeare collection from one bookcase to another and I called out, “Be sure to keep the plays in chronological order!”