

THE BOOKCASE
By Mary Collins

The antique Globe-Wenicke stackable oak bookcase with glass panels and brass knobs sits in the corner of my living room where the rest of the décor of ill-matched furniture always makes me feel as though I'm moving through someone else's yard sale. I can't remember when I stopped using the case to hold my favorite books and instead used it to hold titles that have the most personal meaning for me. I do know that my mother gave it to me after I finished graduate school, a profound gesture that far outweighed anything else she could have offered me, even her wedding ring.

My father, a judge in Connecticut, died when I was 14 and this case once stood in his judicial chambers filled with tan bound legal tomes. My collection of books has a more motley hue: black, shocking red, glossy white, orange.

I know a lot of novelists.

There are plenty of Pulitzer Prize winning titles in my collection of signed first editions, but that exalted stamp of approval is not what earns them their place behind the glass. Somehow the story behind the book must resonant with me to the point where I feel joy, sadness or longing simply because I touched the dust jacket.

In my autographed edition of David McCullough's *1776* I have a picture of my mother leaning her petite body into the renown historian's bearish torso. She's landing a smooch on his cheek as his wife, Rosalee, stands to the far right of the frame letting loose with a full throttled laugh. The entire photograph radiates teenage passion, even though they are all over seventy.

Pressed between the book's back cover and jacket flap, I also keep copies of letters my mother has sent to McCullough and a postcard that Rosalee sent her.

My mother does not know the McCulloughs personally; she's just an impassioned fan of his books and has gone to so many of his signings and talks that he now recognizes her face and knows her name. At one point during the chirpy exchanges people have with authors at book signings, my mother thanked him for all of the joy his books had given her in her quiet hours.

He told her it was one of the nicest things anyone had ever said to him.

The McCullough story always makes me think of a book that's not in the case, because I gave it to my mother as a gift. While she's taken with McCullough, she gets absolutely apoplectic about Abraham Lincoln. Obviously, no chances for kisses there, but I knew a signed edition of Doris Kearns Goodwin's *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* would rank right up there with the McCullough postcard. When I heard Goodwin planned a signing in Washington, I lined up with hundreds of fans to get her autograph.

As I approached the table, I told her that my parents' 55th wedding anniversary was coming up and could she please dedicate the book to my mom. She paused. The handler from the bookstore flinched.

"Fifty-five years. That's wonderful," she said, with her muscular Brooklyn accent. Her face was more elastic and expressive in person than on television, which always seems to blur the edges of things. I told her they used to love talking about history together and especially admired Lincoln. The handler started to say something about moving the line along, but she raised her hand slightly and he quieted.

I chatted with Goodwin for another minute or so and then she signed the book: “To Jim and Connie: Still sharing their love for history after all these years.”

I couldn't bring myself to tell her that my father had been dead for more than three decades. When I gave the book to my mother, she laughed and wept at once. She would share the book with him, she said, just as she continues to share things with him everyday.

Lincoln himself probably had fewer books at his disposal while growing up in rural Illinois than the 80-plus titles I have in my case, and yet he became a writer for the ages. His stepmother, Nancy, and several boyhood friends often remarked on how Lincoln fully possessed whatever he read—Shakespeare, the Bible, Robert Burns' poetry—committing it to memory and, literally, to heart. His only surviving son, Robert, knew “of no book in which my father wrote his name as owner, as is commonly done.”

As a self-educated man, Lincoln so appreciated people that had loaned him books over the years that he could often remember who had lent him what decades after the fact. Perhaps he never tried to claim ownership of his own books by signing them, because he feared that would make him less apt to share them with others. I do know that, like Lincoln, once I've read something I admire, or in rare instances even revere, the text visits me both intellectually and emotionally throughout my life.

When Robert cleared out his parents' things after his mother, Mary Lincoln, died, he found “twenty odd books.” Of course there's no measuring the number of books Lincoln had stored within him when he was assassinated at age 56.

I'm certain I own more things than Lincoln ever did, but I list only one specific object in my will: the bookcase. I make it clear that my sister should care for the books and the case until my daughter, Julia, reaches the age of thirty, by which time I expect she

will be settled enough to have a place for it. But no matter how hard I try I can never really convey to her all the stories on its shelves.

For starters, many of my former lovers wrote books. Not all of the titles made it into the case. I'll leave it at that. But those that have usually include modest dedications over the signatures: "Warm wishes," "Fond memories," "Thanks for everything." At the time I usually admired their nimble minds and published prose, but after years of working in the mainstream press the academic style now seems outlandish, even quaint. The book jackets themselves often evoke memories of erotic trysts, broken promises, poor timing, religious differences, parental meddling, guitar music in a stairwell, hand-wringing good-byes in a garden, and green eyes. The men all seem to have had green or hazel-green eyes.

Somehow "Warm wishes" doesn't quite capture it.

I actually met my ex-husband (not an author himself) at a book signing for John Maxwell Hamilton's *Hold the Press: The Inside Story on Newspapers*. My copy of the book still has the original invitation to the signing slipped inside. The store on I Street in Washington, D.C. is gone now, along with the marriage.

A copy of my own book, *The Essential Daughter: Changing Expectations for Girls at Home*, which I signed for my husband, sits next to *Hold the Press*. It's not just any copy; it was part of *the* irreplaceable first batch of five author's copies that the publisher sent me, part of the moment when I held in my hands for the first time a book that was my idea from start to finish, a book I sold to a publisher and wrote entirely on my own terms. My husband skimmed a few chapters then left it on his nightstand in a stack for months. One day while cleaning the bedroom, I decided to take it back, knowing what it meant to me and what it didn't mean to him.

Fortunately I've offset that sadness by placing that copy next to the edition I signed for my daughter, which I plan to keep until she owns her own home. I wrote, "You can never know how much you mean to me, Much Love, Mom." I officially dedicated the book to her with two simple words set in type just before the title page: To Julia.

While the most emotionally charged titles sit on the top row of the case, the second row mostly radiates joy and accomplishment, because it holds titles that my students at Johns Hopkins University's graduate writing program in Washington have published. I have a reputation as a difficult but fair professor, so I find it amusing that so many students, who have gone on to publish books ranging from *The Fearless Shopper* to *The American Plague*, *The Untold Story of Yellow Fever, the Epidemic that Shaped Our History*, mentioned me in their acknowledgments with affection, but always added that I had pushed them "hard" or given them such a "hard time." One officially conceded that all of my editorial pressure did indeed make her a better writer, but left her "with this nervous twitch."

I place Kenneth Ackerman's *Boss Tweed: The Rise and Fall of the Corrupt Pol Who Conceived the Soul of Modern New York* in among the students' work, even though he's a veteran, award-winning journalist, because he participated in an excellent adventure with one of my classes. I was teaching a course on writing the review and asked Ken if we could read the galleys of his forthcoming book about the 19th Century political kingpin of New York City. He agreed and the students wrote their reviews, most of them caustic and critical of the length of the book (437 pages) and the footnotes. *Boss Tweed* eventually received awards and a glowing evaluation from *The New York Times Book Review*, but the students only found that out afterwards.

Without telling them, I showed Ken their reviews and then had him come to the class as a surprise guest.

Oh, the look of horror on the students' faces when the person they had lambasted as long-winded and dull sat there in the flesh. Ken gave a rigorous defense of his book, especially the importance of detailed footnotes in a serious biography, and the students lobbed positive verbal comments his way and then he left.

The word "hard" is mild compared to what the students of this class had to say to me after Ken left the room. But, I countered, it was a good lesson to learn as a reviewer: Most book authors truly care about their writing and feel they have put forth their best effort. Even a modest book requires tremendous self-discipline and labor to complete. It's easy to criticize and shoot off personal attacks, but always remember that the author may eventually read what you've written.

The New York Times has never reviewed one of my books—a badge of respectability (even if the review is negative) that I hope to secure someday—but that does nothing to detract from the sense of artistic satisfaction and personal well-being that I feel whenever I spy the spines of my titles tucked in the far left corner of the upper shelf of my case. I've taken a lot of calculated risks to remain a writer and teacher of writing rather than a higher-paid (and more stable) editor, and those books are swatches of joy and self-fulfillment.

While writing my first book, a project-for-hire that involved sketching a portrait of the first 25 years at National Public Radio, I told my publisher I had the flu. This went on for months until I finally had to break the news that I was, in fact, pregnant out-of-wedlock. I feared they'd cancel my book contract, because they'd think I couldn't meet

my tight deadline, but they just laughed. When my daughter was born, the staff called her “flu.”

Ten years later I wrote *The Essential Daughter* and *Airborne*, a photobiography of the Wright brothers. National Geographic hired me to pen the airplane book, which was part of a huge crop of products that came out in 2003 to celebrate the centennial of flight. I often wrote about famous people for the Society, but generally found most of them terribly disappointing once I learned the details of their personal lives or their shaky claims on being first at something. The Wrights had the rare quality of becoming more luminous the more I studied them.

I was delighted to learn that Otto Wenicke, who filed the original 1892 patent for the stackable bookcase, lived during the same era as the Wright brothers. He would have surely read about their exploits in the newspapers and, as an engineer, must have admired their spectacular flying machine. I came across the date for the patent while searching for some replacement metal tracks for my case. The glass panels roll roughly up over the top of the books and I was hoping to smooth things out. On the website I found a special corner that lists the number of oak cases for resale. The total: zero. People who own an antique Global-Wenicke case aren't interested in selling, just fixing.

The fact I've mentioned that I've published several books myself and that my mom socialized with David McCullough could leave me open to charges of name-dropping and self-promotion, but I have plenty of authors in my own network of family and friends to keep my ego grounded. The titles of my own brother, a French history professor at Georgetown University, take up a quarter of one of the shelves in the case. A quirky book on penguins by James Gorman sits next to my brother's collected works. The two men often played together as boys growing up in Hartford, Connecticut. Their

mothers remain close friends. Gorman himself has had a creative and hugely successful career as a writer, humorist and editor. He currently works as a top editor at *The New York Times* (hey, review my books).

Just down the row from the brother-buddy tandem, there's a charming novel by a neighbor I grew up with and another red-bound title by a cousin. That cousin's sister has written several books on political theory herself. And so it goes down the family and friend line.

"Fellow travelers on rough seas, we cousins have to stick together," wrote one relative. All of these successes simultaneously inspire and humble me. It's much easier to justify spending my time writing an essay on a bookcase when I come from a family and neighborhood that helps fill that case. But it's also a reality check each time I publish a new book and feel self-important and successful; I'm just one of a crowd of writers where I come from.

The bookcase provides a topographical map of my American world, where everyone reads at least one book a month and some publish something every year. But according to Dana Gioia, chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities and celebrated poet and essayist, less than half of the adults in the United States read one book a year. He told me, and a group of several hundred fellow writers, this sobering news at a conference in Baltimore, Maryland, in 2004, where he was the keynote speaker. Statistics like that make me want to visit my bookcase, take out the volumes, read the inscriptions, and scan a few pages. The stories both in and behind each book reassure me, like recognizable faces in a city landscape of noise and rush, that I am not alone in the literary life I've created for myself.

I served as a panelist at the same conference and found myself sitting with Gioia and the woman who organized the event in a lobby after my session. We chatted about the war in Iraq, where her son served as a marine, and I had Gioia sign a copy of his book, *Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture*, which I'd bought because his talk had really unnerved me.

Two days later, on the cover of *The Washington Post*, I read that her son had been shot dead in Iraq.

She was a single mother and he was her only child.

I put Gioia's *Disappearing* in my case, the start of a special subsection tied to 9/11 and the aftermath. The most meaningful book in this section is unsigned and I never met the author. But I met his mother, Marguerite Kelly, a columnist for *The Washington Post* and a member of an authors' group I once frequented. I knew her when she learned that her son, Michael Kelly, had been named editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*. I knew her when I read his account of the first Gulf War, *Martyr's Day*, the best war-related book I've ever read. And I knew her when her son decided to return to Iraq to cover the war of George Bush Jr. Michael Kelly died there, drowned in a canal pressed down by the weight of an overturned military vehicle. Most people in his profession considered him a once-in-a-generation-type reporter.

I want to ask Marguerite to sign *Martyr's Day* for me, but it's probably always going to be too emotional and awkward to actually try.

Whenever I see how one story behind one book dovetails into yet another story behind another book, I think of E.O. Wilson's claim that a scientist could spend his or her life studying one cubic feet of soil and never really uncover the full picture. I could write

a book on all that's contained emotionally and intellectually on just one row of my very own Globe-Wenicke shelf.

So I will close with just two more tales. The most important book in the case is the smallest. Just three inches by three inches, *Beatrice Potter's Birthday Book* has a hard, glossy cover with a portrait of Peter Rabbit in watercolor on the front. On the inside there are lines under each day of the year, where people are supposed to sign their name under their birth date.

My parents bought it for me in Europe when I was seven. My grandmother signed it before old age robbed her of her fine penmanship. Over the years, I've had roommates, lovers, family members and great friends sign it on their birthdays.

Under September 6, my father wrote, "Your Daddy, who loves you very much." Most people only sign their names, because there isn't much room. His entry is by far the most emotional.

Sometime around my 25th birthday I stopped remembering to ask people to sign the *Birthday Book* when I left places, like graduate school, so the catalogue of important people just tapers off. No one where I've lived for the last 20 years has signed it.

I didn't outgrow the ritual. I let it go on purpose, because I lost so many of the people who had signed the book—either to death or simple departure to new places or partners—that it had become transformed into some sort of record of regret and grief. For more than a decade I never even touched it, though I always kept it in the case.

For some reason in my mid-thirties, I pulled out the *Birthday Book* and revisited my father's entry. I had buried memories of him for two decades and had trouble recalling his face and had no recollection of his voice. I had to depend on the stories of others to recreate memories for me of going out for ice cream on a summer night or

sailing Long Island Sound in our modest boat. For the first time I noticed that my handwriting shared a lot of the same traits with his loopy, rushed style. Suddenly a bold image, crisp around the edges and fully realized, of my dad writing on yellow legal pads at his large oak desk came into my mind's eye. Next I visualized the desk itself then moved into the living room, where he often sat in his favorite chair with his right leg swung over the arm and perched on the side table, a trick I also do to relieve lower back pain.

Twenty years after losing my beloved father, I could finally see him again.

The power of grief. The power of books.

Alice McDermott inadvertently captured what my father's bookcase means to me when she inscribed her National Book Award-winning novel *Charming Billy* for me at a conference we were both working for Johns Hopkins. She wrote, "Many thanks for all you do for writers in our neighborhood."

That's what the bookcase has become for me—a neighborhood of fellow writers, students, family members and friends, an album of dedications, mementos, memories and ideas. When I stand in front of it, no matter what else is happening in my life or in the world, I know I am home.

Source for Robert Lincoln quotations:

Angle, Paul, Editor, *A Portrait of Abraham Lincoln in Letters by His Oldest Son*, Chicago Historical Society, 1968, p. 47-48

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