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In praise of bookshelves

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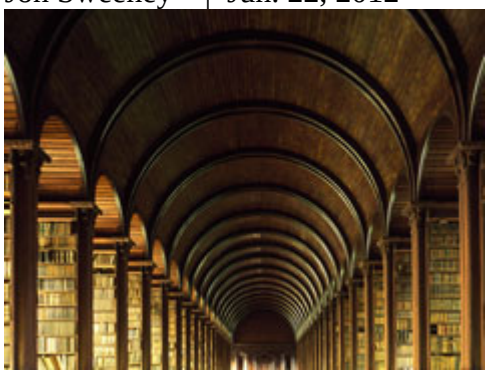

The Long Room in the Trinity College Library in Dublin, Ireland (Newscom/The Irish Collection)

I think the key to my becoming an avid reader began when, as a boy, I was unable to find much that I might want to read in my father's vast library.

Dad was a book publisher, as I am today, and yet I'm not sure that I gleaned any of my reading habits from him. Dad published evangelical Christian books, often written by the best-selling writers in that genre, but it was genre writing to be sure. Day after day I would spend scouring his bookshelves after school and my reaction eventually was: There must be more than this. And indeed, I learned, there was.

I still look to bookshelves for books even though I realize that I am in an increasing minority of those who do. I still organize and reorganize my own books and shelves frequently, keeping the volumes I'm using close at hand while moving others that are not of immediate importance toward deeper recesses.

If you ever invite me over for dinner, I will likely ponder your shelves going to and from the bathroom. I may even attempt to silently understand various facts about you, based on what I see. For instance, one can fairly easily spot a college textbook and to hold onto such things well beyond school days says something. Or, for instance, do you shelve your fiction only with other fiction, or theology only with like-minded volumes? Perhaps you even alphabetize. If so, I'll bet you were disappointed if I arrived a few minutes late for dinner, or forgot the wine.

Some of my friends, of course, don't even own bookshelves anymore. They don't need them. They have recently given them away in favor of virtual shelves. But as I watch friends and colleagues using their electronic reading devices, and delay purchasing one myself for as long as possible, I've begun to notice and admire physical bookshelves more than ever before. There has been much speculation on what will happen to the physical book of paper and binding, but not much, yet, about the architecture of what holds them.

Most bookshelves are unimpressive as physical objects. I remember the ones in college and seminary as gray, metal structures that held wonderful things but were anything but in and of themselves. If I had attended Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland, my experience would have been different. Have you ever seen what they call the Long Room in the Trinity College Library? You'd think you were in heaven. Lock me in there and I wouldn't

worry about what to eat next. The North Reading Room in Doe Library at the University of California, Berkeley, is similarly gorgeous, with shelves that are begging to be picked over. I wonder if there are many undergraduates who still do. There is no metal to be found anywhere.

Occasionally, bookshelves are surrounded by architecture that is distinctively and deliberately religious, making it even easier for mind and spirit to soar. This is the case in the Bapst Art Library at Boston College, where Gothic splendor dwarfs books and shelves. Bapst, named for Boston College's first president, was the school's primary library from 1925 until 1984, when they built a new and larger one named for former House Speaker Tip O'Neill. A student can still study within the Gothic walls of Bapst and many do, although they pay little attention to the bookshelves and spend most of their time staring at their screens. If they did pay closer attention, they might begin to reflect on how the beauty of the bookshelves around them is like the great stone and soaring height of the architecture: Both are intended to honor and match the importance of what is happening inside of them.

Then, there's the famous Rose Main Reading Room of the 42nd Street branch of the New York Public Library. To sit there, which any bloke can do all day long, God bless the NYPL, is to be inspired like a poet. Long oak tables, bronze lamps, and 52-foot ceilings are designed, like a cathedral, for *ruach*. Many a writer -- Norman Mailer, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Elizabeth Bishop, E.L. Doctorow, Allen Ginsberg and Alfred Kazin among them -- has added to our rich cultural heritage from that room.

But, of course, the best bookshelves in the world are ones that are not meant to be primarily ornamental. The bookshelf as work of art does not inspire as does the bookshelf that is, according to Plato's theory of forms, most closely approximated to the ideal, heavenly form, or idea, of Bookshelf. And if there is a form in the heavens of the ideal bookshelf, surely it is the one that is packed to overflowing with books. Outside of private homes, these are most often found in used and rare bookstores, which are also, sadly, a vanishing breed.

There is a scene in Woody Allen's film, "Hannah and Her Sisters," when the characters played by Barbara Hershey and Michael Caine visit a legendary Greenwich Village bookstore, Pageant Book & Print Shop on Fourth Avenue. In that scene, the narrow aisles are rowed to overflowing with oaken shelves and those shelves are stuffed with books. Additional volumes are piled on the floor, and ladders are attached to the shelves so that the daring, perhaps with St. John Climacus in mind, can ascend to the upper, more dangerous regions in order to investigate a book that teases them there. Hershey and Caine's relationship begins to bud while they are in that store, amid those bookshelves, but for book lovers it is the shelves and their contents that draw us most of all.

[Jon M. Sweeney is an occasional contributor to *NCR*, the editor in chief at Paraclete Press, a convert to Catholicism, and the author of many books, including *The Pope Who Quit: A True Medieval Tale of Mystery, Death, and Salvation*.]

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