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ALBERTO MANGUEL | Domestic Lives MAY. 15, 2008

A 30,000-Volume Window on the World

FOR the last seven years, I've lived in an old stone presbytery in France, south of the Loire Valley, in a village of fewer than 10 houses. I chose the place because next to the 15th-century house itself was a barn, partly torn down centuries ago, large enough to accommodate my library of some 30,000 books, assembled over six itinerant decades. I knew that once the books found their place, I would find mine.

My library is not a single beast but a composite of many others, a fantastic animal made up of the several libraries built and then abandoned, over and over again, throughout my life. I can't remember a time in which I didn't have a library of some sort. The present one is a sort of multilayered autobiography, each book holding the moment in which I opened it for the first time. The scribbles on the margins, the occasional date on the flyleaf, the faded bus ticket marking a page for a reason today mysterious, all try to remind me of who I was then. For the most part, they fail. My memory is less interested in me than in my books, and I find it easier to remember the story read once than the young man who then read it.

One of my earliest memories — I must have been 2 or 3 at the time — is of a shelf full of books on the wall above my cot, from which my nurse would choose a bedtime story. This was my first library; when I learned to read by myself a year or so later, the shelf, transferred to safe ground level, became my private domain. I remember arranging and rearranging my books according to secret rules that I invented for myself: all the Golden Books series had to be grouped together, the fat collections of fairy tales were not allowed to touch the minuscule Beatrix Potters, stuffed animals were not permitted to sit on the same shelf as the books. I told myself that if these rules were upset, terrible things would happen. Superstition and the art of libraries are tightly entwined.



Valerio Mezzanotti for The New York Times

The writer calls his library “a fantastic animal made up of the several libraries built and then abandoned, over and over again, throughout my life.”

That first library was in a house in Tel Aviv, where my father was the Argentine ambassador; my next one grew in Buenos Aires, during the decade of my adolescence. Before returning to Argentina, my father had asked his secretary to buy enough books to fill the shelves of his library in our new house; obligingly, she ordered cartloads of volumes from a secondhand dealer, but found that when she tried to place them on the shelves, many wouldn't fit. Undaunted, she had them trimmed to size and then bound in deep-green leather, a color that, combined with the dark oak, lent the place the atmosphere of a soft forest. I pilfered books from that library to stock my own, which by then covered three of the walls in my bedroom. Reading these circumcised books required the extra effort of supplanting the missing bit of every page, an exercise that no doubt trained me well for reading the cut-up novels of William Burroughs years later.

The library of my adolescence — a time when the simultaneous discoveries of sex and the injustice of the world called for words to name the frightening stirrings in my body and in my head — contained almost every book that still matters to me today; of the thousands that have been added since, few are essential. Generous teachers, passionate

booksellers, friends for whom giving a book was a supreme act of intimacy and trust, helped me build it. Their ghosts kindly haunt my shelves and the books they gave still carry their voices, so that now, when I open [Isak Dinesen's](#) “Seven Gothic Tales” or Blas de Otero's early poems, I have the impression not of reading the book myself but of being read to. This is one of the reasons I never feel alone in my library.

I left my books behind when I set off for Europe in 1969, some time before the military dictatorship. I was 21 years old and wanted to see the world I had read about, the London of Dickens, the Paris of Marcel Aymé. My books, I thought, would faithfully wait in my parents' house for me to come back one day. I could not have imagined that, had I stayed, like so many of my friends, I would have had to destroy my library for fear of the police, since in those terrible days one could be accused of subversion merely for being seen with a book that looked suspicious (someone I knew was arrested as a communist for carrying with him “The Red and the Black.”) Argentine plumbers found an unprecedented call for their services, since many readers tried to burn their books in their toilet bowls, causing the porcelain to crack.

In every place I settled, a library began to grow almost on its own. In Paris and in London, in the humid heat of Tahiti where I worked as a publisher for five long years (my Melville still shows traces of Polynesian mold), in Toronto and in Calgary, I collected books and then, when the time came to leave, packed them up in boxes to wait patiently inside tomblike storage spaces in the uncertain hope of resurrection. Every time I would ask myself how it had happened, this exuberant accumulation of paper and ink that once again would cover my walls like ivy.

A growing library threatens to force the owner into his garden.

The library as it now stands, between long walls whose stones carry in some places the signature of their 15th-century masons, houses the remnants of all those previous libraries, including, from my earliest one, the fairy tales of the Grimm brothers in two volumes, printed in somber Gothic script, and a scribbled-over copy of “The Tailor of Gloucester.” There are few books that a serious bibliophile would find worthy: an illuminated Bible from a 13-century German scriptorium (a gift from the novelist Yehuda Elberg), half a dozen contemporary artist’s books, a few first

editions and signed copies. But I have neither the funds nor the knowledge to become a professional collector, and in my library, shiny young Penguins sit happily alongside severe-looking leather-bound patriarchs.

Since my library, unlike a public one, requires no common codes that other readers must understand and share, I’ve organized it simply according to my own requirements and prejudices. A certain zany logic governs its geography. Its major divisions are determined by the language in which the books are written: without distinction of genre, all books written originally in Spanish or French, English or Arabic, come together on the same shelves. (I allow myself, however, many exceptions: Certain subjects — books on the history of the book, biblical studies, versions of the legend of Faust, Renaissance literature and philosophy, gay studies, medieval bestiaries — have separate sections.)

Certain authors are privileged: I have thousands of detective novels but few spy stories, more Plato than Aristotle, all Zola and hardly any Maupassant, almost all of John Hawkes and [Cynthia Ozick](#). I have dozens of very bad books that I don’t throw away in case I ever need an example of a book I think is bad. The only book I ever banished from my library was [Bret Easton Ellis](#)’s “American Psycho,” which I felt infected the shelves with its prurient descriptions of delibe-

rately inflicted pain. I put it in the garbage; I didn’t give it to anyone because I wouldn’t give away a book I wasn’t fond of. Nor do I lend books. If I want someone to read a book, I’ll buy a copy and offer it as a gift. I believe that to lend a book is an incitement to theft.

These days, after my 60th birthday, I tend to seek the comfort of the books I’ve already read rather than set out to discover new ones. In my library, I revisit old acquaintances who will not distract me with superficial surprises. I no longer need to wonder who’s making those dreadful phone calls in [Muriel Spark](#)’s “Memento Mori,” or who’s killing all those monks in Umberto Eco’s “The Name of the Rose.” We know one another, these books and I, and we can take our time with the unfolding story.

Like every library, mine will eventually exceed the space allotted to it. Barely seven years after setting it up, it has already spread into the main body of the house, which I had hoped to keep free of bookshelves. Travelogues, books on music and film, anthologies of various kinds now cover the walls of several rooms. My detective novels fill one of the guest bedrooms, known now by friends and family as the Murder Room. There is a story by Julio Cortázar, “House Taken Over,” in which a brother and sister are forced to move from room to room as something unnamed occupies, inch by inch, their entire house, eventually forcing them out into the street.

I foresee a day in which my books, like that anonymous invader, will complete their gradual conquest. I will then be banished to the garden, but knowing the way of books, I fear that even that seemingly safe place may not be entirely beyond my library’s hungry ambition.

Alberto Manguel is the author of “The Library at Night,” a book that explores the meaning of libraries through history. ■



Valerio Mezzanotti for The New York Times

His enormous collection of books has already overrun its home in a 15th-century stone structure, above, a former barn.
