



## Obsession with Books

Dian Parker

I own so many books that my husband has to keep building more bookshelves. He's outside right now in the cold, sawing and hammering. In the small study where I'm writing this, I have five bookshelves and need at least two more. No, probably three.

My problem is that I have to have the physical book. Not a library book or a virtual book. Reading online causes me to skim and skip ruthlessly. It's a severe deficit for writers – readers reading our work online. But it's difficult not to scan online. There's just so much information every day piling up the inbox, outbox, out of town box, trash box, brain box. A

deluge of information to sift through so why would I chose to read a chapter of Proust or Paul Bowles or Elena Ferrante online when I can hold the book in my hands?

I take care of a three-year old and I'm constantly telling him not to throw his books around. He also rips the covers and bends the pages, leaving the book nearly impossible to read. "They're precious," I keep telling him. "Someone took a long time to write the words and paint the pictures. See how somebody bound them up in this nice cover? Not only that," I insist, "books are meant to last forever. For your whole life!" How can I expect him to understand any of this when he can't even remember what he had for breakfast half an hour before he comes over to my house?

Books are for the ages. A well written book with a compelling story, like "Anna Karenina," or Barbara Kingsolver's "The Poisonwood Bible" have traveled with me for decades through every move – from New York to Chicago to London to Ireland to San Francisco to Seattle, and to Vermont where I live now.

Books are time travelers. I only have to pick up one of my books and I remember when I first read it. Jean Giono's "Joy of Man's Desiring" I read on my friend's deck in Anacortes, Washington overlooking the San Juan Islands (where I would years later meet my husband. All those far off gazes across the sea...)

My friend had read Giono's book in French and said it had always been one of her favorites. I went to the tiny library in her town and lo and behold, they had an old hardcover copy in English. I read it's 500 pages in three days. Because I needed to own that book, I looked for a used copy for years but none of the booksellers had ever heard of the book. Some had never heard of the author. Finally I found a copy in Powell's mile-long used bookstore in Portland, Oregon. The book had a photograph of the author on the cover – a handsome man

sipping wine in a small glass at a café table with a pipe held between smiling lips. I was hooked.

I so fell in love with his books and that face, that every time I go to bookstores the first thing I look for are Giono's books. There aren't many of his fifty books translated into English but I have most of them. A boyfriend (before I met my husband) bought me the first edition of one of his hardback books, "Hill of Destiny." It remains to this day, thirty years later, one of my most prized possessions. Sometimes I carry it around in my purse. Published in 1929 in Paris, the cover is a woodblock print. Painted in brown and red, the cover shows a solitary man shooting a boar, with red fire flaring out the muzzle of his long rifle. In the background, a burning red hill is in flames, with little figures below running around with their arms in the air, mouths wide, screaming. I also found a second printing of Jean Giono's "Song of the World" published in 1937 (first printing in 1934). The cover is a yellow, blue, and black painting of a man and woman, with two children, on a raft traveling down a wide sweeping river surrounded by lush trees. The forest wraps around the spine of the book with the image in reverse on the back cover.

These kinds of books are works of art. I am a painter as well as a writer and appreciate the effort, creativity, and care that went into making these old books. When I was a kid, my parents had two hardbound copies with woodblock prints of the Brontë's "Jane Eyre" and "Wuthering Heights." I read both books under the covers by flashlight when I was supposed to be asleep. Those books transported me to the windswept moors and dark nights of England, where love meant death because it was so powerful. I still think of their heavy green covers with, I seem to remember from my teenage frenzy, a man and woman locked in fierce embrace, wind tearing through her long green dress and long black hair. But after all these many years, maybe I'm mistaking that image for the black and white film with Laurence Olivier and Vivian Lee

which I also adored. In any case, I would love those two books now, carrying them around with me like an expensive handbag that fashion magazines like to feature.

I love books more than I love people, almost. I adore my husband. And my brother three. Both my parents but they're dead now. I have some close friends but we're separated by distance so it's not the same as when we worked and traveled together. Since the pandemic, my relationship with books has grown even more intense. I am devoted to them and rarely lend them out. People always take too long reading books I've lent them. I miss those books on my shelves, all tucked in safely. I've stopped lending books to my brother who lives near me because he and his wife read the books in the bathtub and return them wrinkled. When I say anything about it, they say, "They're only books." Only books! I spend days fretting over sentences and paragraphs, should a comma be inserted here, a section break there. To italicize or not is a major issue, and the dreaded exclamation point I try never to use (even though I've used it three times in this story). So to hold a well written book in my hands, like Dicken's "David Copperfield" or Nabokov's "Speak Memory" is to hold rare jewels. And to have those books in rare hard cover editions is like seeing a hairy mammoth in my backyard.

I write color essays for an art magazine every two months and one of my bookcases are filled with books on color. I recently purchased "NATURE'S PALETER; A COLOR REFERENCE SYSTEM FROM THE NATURAL WORLD." The book is large, hardbound, with the title in gold lettering. On the cover are twelve squares of color with an accompanying square with the same color of bird, flower, or mineral. The squares are inlaid. The cover is a rare 3D art object.

Sometimes I purchase the books I've loved according to their cover. I searched high and low for Murakami's "Wild Bird Chronicle" for the original cover. I found one on eBay but when it came, it was not the cover they had shown so I sent it

back. I had lent my book out and it was never returned even though I asked for it any number of times. Oh, the borrower said, I must have lost it. Like it was no big deal, the book I've reread and fondled and slept next. Oh, I don't know, it must be somewhere around here, they'd say. Like you'd leave your baby lying around somewhere but never mind, it will turn up eventually.

I've hounded people to get my books back that I've lent so I stopped lending them out, even though right now I've got some of my beloveds at a good friend's house and she's had them an awfully long time. Five books! I asked her if she'd read them yet and she said she'd read them all and was thrilled with all of them, but she was going away for ten days and she'd return them then. Why? Do you need them back? I said no, when you return them is fine with me. But it really wasn't fine with me. Not at all fine. It won't be fine until they are tucked back in my room in their place on my shelf.

At the beginning of COVID, I decided to organize my books. I'd never done that before, mostly because I've moved so many times. I've been in my current house for fourteen years now, longer than any other place in my life. Even longer than when I was a kid. I knew of someone that organized their books according to the the color of the spines, but that seemed unliterary (though aesthetically appealing). I found a loose way to organize that worked for the first few months but then I ran out of room and had to squeeze in books where I could. Even though my husband is building me another book shelf as we speak, our house is small, plus the living and dining area all have slanted walls from originally being an A frame, so really there's nowhere to put another bookshelf. Maybe in the study where I write this, keep all our clothes, and lay down a mattress on the floor for guests, but there's really no more room. I have no idea where we'll put the new bookcase but I'm determined to have it. The heck with eBooks.

On the bookshelves, I've placed all the women writers together, and the classics together. Books on writing are on one shelf, with dictionaries and thesauruses nearby. My journals take up an entire shelf. My art books, books by artists, and the color books are all together in one bookshelf. My very, very special books that I reread have their very own bookshelf that used to be my grandmother's bookcase. It is tall in a dark burnished wood, with an arched top. Another bookcase has poetry books on one shelf, essays on another, quantum physics books on one, and books I haven't yet read take up only one shelf. I'm proud that most of the books in the room I've read. The ones I haven't, I'll probably never get to if I haven't already. I prefer to reread my loves. They love me back so much.

And it's not only in the study that I have books. I also have books in the kitchen: cookbooks, natural healing manuals, canning books, hiking trails, quiet water books for canoeing and kayaking, Audubon books on spiders, insects, butterflies, birds, wild plants, trees, wild flowers. Travel books on Morocco, Las Vegas, Costa Rica, Canary Islands, Amsterdam – all the places we went to before the pandemic. We even have shelves of books in our only bedroom's closet because there's no more walls for a bookshelf. I might try fitting the up-and-coming new bookshelf in our small bathroom but I already know it won't fit. Maybe I'll knock out a wall or two.

I practice yoga in the study with my books five days a week. I love doing the triangle or the bridge posture while staring at my books. I contemplate how I'd like to read this or that one again. I clearly remember when I first read Hermann Hesse's "Siddhartha" on the train to Brighton to see one boyfriend. Or my very first boyfriend in high school reading Henry Miller's "Tropic of Cancer" on the bus. Or a boyfriend in London who I first saw sitting on a bench reading Thomas Mann's "The Magic Mountain;" his long legs crossed, light green corduroy pants, no socks, fine kid-leather loafers, the book open on his

lap, immersed in reading. I didn't even look up at his face. I just looked at that book, one of my favorites, and his elegant crossed sockless legs and I was hooked. In love and ready for the moors.

Because of COVID, I'm traveling more and more in books. I'm earnestly trying to avoid scanned reading which, I feel, leads to scanned thinking. Books require long thought. If they are well written and explore large ideas, books require deep thought, and often rereading. It's the least I can do for an author that has spent years writing the book.

I'm trying hard not to buy any more books. I go to our local library and check out books but if I love it, I want to own it. Is this a compulsion? I don't know and to be honest, I don't really care. Inside those books are *my* insides. Books travel deep, reach in deep. They are nourishment. They speak my name.

## Dian Parker

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Dian's essays and short stories have been published in The Rupture, Critical Read, Epiphany, Westerly, Channel, Tiny Molecules, Capsule, Adelaide, Deep Wild, among others, and nominated for several Pushcart Prizes. She writes about art and artists, including color essays, for Art New England.

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