



# THE WALL

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“I’ll do it, Love,” my newly retired husband, Weldon, said when I mentioned our book collection needed cleaning. It took him two years to finish the job. I knew the books were getting dirty again, but I held my tongue; I didn’t want to dust them.

When we moved into our Seattle condo in 1996, we added bookshelves. Our new home had a perfect place—a tall wall in our living room, fourteen feet high. We ordered 2,548 linear feet of custom-built bookshelves made of sturdy oak covered in black laminate with a metal rail near the top for a sliding library ladder. We filled every inch with books, and it looks terrific. The wall glows with colorful covers, and the room feels warmer. I love watching people enter this room for the first time. It’s a surprise, all those books.

Initially, I hired our building’s janitor,

Jim, to dust the books every six months. He did a fine job at first, but after a few years he began slacking off, doing sloppy work. After Jim jumbled our books’ order—mixed fiction with nonfiction and ignored our alphabetic system—I decided not to hire him again.

But my books got quite dusty. Every time I pulled one out, I had to blow across the top to get rid of the accumulation. I felt overwhelmed just thinking of the task, and when I mentioned my dilemma to Weldon, he offered to take it on. Relieved, I checked Cheryl Mendelson’s 906-page book, *Home Comforts: The Art and Science of Keeping House*. She recommends vacuuming, so we bought a small Oreck with a shoulder strap Weldon could sling over his back while climbing the library ladder.

Now that he’s retired, Weldon spends a lot of time on the Internet, and he discovered

Collectorz, an online book inventory system. We can access the collection on our computers and even pull up the list on our cell phones while book shopping. This is a useful feature since we have returned more than one book after discovering it was already on our shelves. Weldon prizes efficiency and was elated when he realized he could computerize our inventory and dust books in one effort.

Weldon enters the ISBN with a small scanner. Once the program finds the number, an image of the cover and all pertinent information appear on his computer screen. After he'd entered about a thousand books into the system, a third of our collection, he excitedly forwarded the list to our children. No response.



My love of books blossomed early through trips with my mother to the public library in Minerva, Ohio. The facility was housed in a small space on the second floor of city hall and seemed vast to my five-year-old eyes. Mommy had a serious look on her face as we climbed the stairs, and before we opened the library door, she would lean down and say, "Remember, if you need to tell me something, whisper. No running, and handle the books carefully."

I grew to know my village library well. The space had its own comforting aroma. The oak bookcases released scents of timber and beeswax; calfskin-bound books suggested tobacco; hardbacks with their protective covers firmly affixed evoked the interior of Grandma's wardrobe. I delight in the smell of books.

When I toured George Washington's Mount Vernon, my favorite room was the

library. It held a modest collection, but as I walked into the room with glass-fronted bookcases, a familiar fragrance drifted into my nostrils—the essence of aged books. I could see Washington walking into his library, taking pleasure in the books' presence. Did he love their smell too? My nose has tuned out my own books' redolence. I wonder, do my books give off the same soothing scent to my visitors as Mount Vernon's gave to me?

My parents couldn't afford to buy me books, but I did possess four precious ones—Mother West Wind stories, *Heidi*, and two Nancy Drew mysteries—and I read them over and over. But in one of my periodic explorations of our attic, filled with odds and ends from the Elliott family who'd built and lived in the farmhouse for decades before we moved in, I found two boxes of books under the eaves. Hardback books with colorful modern covers, different from the old books I'd already uncovered in the attic with tissue-thin paper and pages sometimes bound out of order. These had belonged to two spinster schoolteachers who'd lived with the Elliots.

Uncovering these modern books was like finding a treasure chest of sparkling rubies. I pulled them out of the brown cardboard box—*The Good Earth*, *My Sister Eileen*, *The Yearling*, *Rebecca*, *So Red the Rose*, *Saratoga Trunk*, *Mama's Bank Account*, *Mrs. Miniver*—popular novels of the thirties. I couldn't believe my find. And I was old enough to read many of them. I ran down to the kitchen. "Mommy! I found two boxes of books in the attic. Where did they come from?" She looked up from rolling out her pie dough and said, "They're mine. Before I married, I belonged to Book-of-the-Month Club." I'd never seen her sit down with a book, and I suddenly realized

that as a farm wife and mother of four, she was too busy to read. This insight surprised and saddened me. How could she give up a wonderful pastime like reading? I vowed I would always take time for books.

I first set foot in a bookstore as a freshman at The Ohio State University. I could hardly believe the riches at the Student Book Exchange on High Street in Columbus. They stocked much more than textbooks. I had a little extra spending money from my part-time job as a telephone operator, and I started growing my personal library by buying the classics—*Anna Karenina*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Madame Bovary*, *The Age of Innocence*, *Wuthering Heights*, *The Prince*, *Emma*, *Jane Eyre*, *The Great Gatsby*. I bought a book every week. Possession was important to me. My roommates didn't understand why I was reading books not assigned for class, but I was in heaven.

I continued to buy books while in college and throughout my first marriage, even though my husband complained that I read too much and it gave me ideas. This was the sixties—the women's lib movement was underway, and some men were uneasy with changes afoot. We divorced.

A year later, I met Weldon. We shared a love of books and began to collect them as a couple. Not rare, old books, but fat, absorbing novels, political histories, probing biographies, well-written mysteries, colorful cookbooks. When we combined households forty-two years ago, we discovered we owned many identical books. I took that as a good omen for our marriage, although, as we gave away the duplicates, I had a niggling thought: *What if this doesn't work out? Will I get my books back?*

When we traveled, we always sought out bookstores. Powell's in Portland; Chaucer's

in Santa Barbara; and Elliott Bay Bookstore in Seattle. We moved to Seattle in 1996, not because of Elliott Bay Bookstore, although that was a plus, and bought a condo downtown near the Pike Place Market. We were thrilled to find McCoy Books two blocks from our home. Imagine—a country girl who revered books and, as an adult, had to drive twenty miles from her suburban Columbus, Ohio, home to buy a book now lived around the corner from a bookstore.

We visited McCoy several times a week to browse, buy books, have an espresso, and talk politics with the owner, Michael Coy. When my book, *Financial Basics: A Money-Management Guide for Students*, was published, he created a big window display for it. I was so proud.

The office building that housed McCoy Books was sold as the Seattle real estate market skyrocketed, and when Michael's lease came up for renewal, the rent increase was so significant that he couldn't sustain the business. He closed his doors near the end of 2008. We mourned the loss. Walking by that empty storefront was like passing a mausoleum holding the bones of dear ones. We not only lost our beloved McCoy; six other neighborhood bookstores closed too. We rode the bus to Elliott Bay and University of Washington bookstores, but it wasn't the same.

The upshot of this loss in our lives? We bought Kindles. We'd resisted for years, even though our friends raved about theirs. We loved the physicality of books, the cover art, the heft, the pages to turn; we couldn't imagine anything better. But in 2014, we succumbed and joined the ranks of 32 percent of Americans who own an e-reader.

I can hardly believe how much I adore my Kindle. I read in bed in the middle of the

night without disturbing Weldon. I borrow e-books from the Seattle Public Library and download them from home. If a compelling book review appears, I instantly acquire the volume online.

When I read John Banville or Hilary Mantel or Lauren Groff, writers with extensive lexicons, I highlight unfamiliar words with my finger and learn their definitions. Thick, heavy books are easily managed. I wouldn't have read Robert Caro's 736-page *The Passage of Power* or Donna Tartt's 755-page *The Goldfinch* while in bed. Their heft would have tired my arms, and since I do a lot of my reading there, it would have taken forever to finish them. When I travel, I don't have to pack multiple books to assuage my fear of running out of something to read. My reader is always nearby, loaded with books. In a pinch, I can even read from my electronic library with my iPhone.

There are drawbacks. Charts, family trees, and photographs are difficult to make out. Footnotes are elusive. I have to tap the screen to read them, and I often miss the notation. I can't easily leaf back to check a character's background or reread a scene. Somehow, in a book I knew the relative location and could quickly find what I was looking for.

I gave up one of my greatest pleasures—browsing in bookstores—because I felt guilty using their displays and staff recommendations, knowing I would buy it from Amazon for my Kindle. I realize many bookstores sell e-books through Kobo, but they only load on my iPhone, and I don't enjoy reading on the smaller screen.

I can't loan or borrow e-books the way I shared hardbacks. I wish the cover appeared automatically when I turn on the reader. I

miss the cover artwork. I worry about the effect on the publishing industry and the small part I'm playing in this ongoing saga. Will Amazon become a monopoly? How might that influence quality and pricing and writers and readers? What is Jeff Bezos's master plan?

I still have my living room wall of books. I will always have them. They please me and reassure the child in me who owned few and used the lending library and county bookmobile. But I must confess that Weldon and I are beginning to duplicate our paper books on our Kindles. We're at an age when we're rereading favorites and we're reluctant to open the physical book; we want the ease of an e-reader. We've spent decades acquiring books, and I'd be bereft if I lost them, and yet, I don't want to read them. It's as though I have a foot in each world, and I'm not going to budge.

Sometimes, I think of our children emptying our home after we've died. I can hear them asking what that unusual smell is. I can see them groaning at the sight of our collection. I can imagine them wondering why we had so many, whether we actually read them all, why we spent so much money on them, questioning whether there's a market for books or whether they'll have to dump them. So in the spirit of preparing them for our demise, I decided to discuss our books with them before we're gone. Here's the gist of their remarks: *You said you're doing all your reading on your Kindles. Why not just sell the books? Or give them to the public library?*

"But the wall," I say. "What would I do with the wall?"

