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Librarians and Books: Value Beyond Content

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As a new library student, I was surprised to find that a number of librarians, in their effort to embrace technology, have minimized the importance of books. For centuries, the profession has been tied to books—until recently, they were the means of our vocation. Librarians have a deep connection and a long history with printed manuscripts. We have cataloged, acquired, organized, taught and, perhaps most importantly, made available written works for centuries. Are we afraid of being identified with our past because books play an unknown part in our future? We need to view books through a different lens: books have value beyond their informational matter and they have had a profound, undeniable impact on our civilization.

Often overlooked as anything other than a source of information, the book is a historical object, it is a collectible, it is a piece of art, it is an important artifact of our profession. It is, in fact, much more than content. The unique properties of the book deserve to be acknowledged and respected.

There is a complex relationship between books and readers across time. Not only are readers impacted by the content of a book in different ways by different generations, the book is impacted by being handled and read. The book and its content face physical, social and contextual changes, both literally and figuratively. Often, the term “book” is meant only as a description of content, not as a physical object (Tanselle, 1992).

In our libraries, the term should encompass both meanings. The relationship between the content (intangible) and the object that transmits it (tangible) has value: the physical book can give us important information regarding the content, the time and place in which it originally existed. These details create a richer context for the whole; they create a periphery that makes the intangible focus more clear. Books, as “manufactured objects” may be read not only for content but also for history (Tanselle, 1992.) The print, binding, paper, and style are all evidences of the time and social setting in which the content was created. Just as ancient pottery can give us an idea of how another civilization lived, books show us a world that can’t otherwise be known—that can be seen as separate from the content.

In an article regarding book collecting, C. Thomas Tanselle (1992) states, “Most literary works ... are purely works of language; but any physical texts of them, though they are not the works themselves, are also of vital importance because they are the principal (and often only) basis from which we can reconstruct the works, regardless of whether we conceive works to be what their authors intended or what their readers perceived.” Books evolve as historical objects and shed the human connections with their content. As time passes, physical attributes rise in importance and



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the unsubstantial information between the covers fades: people do not seek old encyclopedias for current information. They might, however seek these encyclopedias to see how they were bound, what style was employed, or how often such an item was used. All of which is information that the author(s) did not intend but which is inherent in the object.

Another example of the division that sometimes exists between the content and object is viewing the book only as it relates to a specific reader or, its owner. Tichenor (2003) points out that books are sometimes a direct link to the person who owns or owned it. "Though my books certainly take up more space [than an Internet "favorites" list] that space holds a part of me and who I am; it reflects at least part of my personality, and can even be passed on to my children as a keepsake of their father." (Tichenor, 2003). Books can be a potent reminder of their owner because, unlike other keepsakes, the owner of the book has an interactive relationship with it. The interaction that the reader has with the intangible content has a direct bearing on the value of the object. Not only are personal collections made up of these priceless mementos, libraries also provide books that are a link to people who lived in a different time. One way this happens is through inheritance. Book collections are often specifically left to libraries after a patron's death. These collections tell so much about their owner: the various titles, the physical shape (much loved copies have folded pages and broken spines), notes in the text and forgotten bookmarks. There is a piece of the owner in these collections—information that exists inside of the book but outside of the book's content.

It is an honor to be a part of a profession so closely linked to books. Though they do not define us, books are important artifacts of our profession and of our his-

tory as human beings. If we, as librarians, only see the book as a receptacle for information, we are missing a vital part of the information picture and doing our profession a disservice.

Though we are in a world of technological advancement, it is important that we do not forget our history and the importance of certain medias. Libraries have played a key role in collecting and preserving knowledge but "... to recognize in their history the means to interpretation and understanding of the history of the book, and an essential part of the relationship between bibliography and social values, as I believe is inescapable, is to express a credo of our civilization." (McKitterick, 1992). Books have an important place in our past, in our memories, in our imaginations and in our futures. 🌿

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