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## Why Books Are Comforting in the Era of Coronavirus

*Michelle Slatalla*

9-12 minutes

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**SOME OF MY** best friends are libraries, but I wouldn't want to live in one.

I thought of this last week when my daughter Ella visited and gracefully tried to off-load a fat, hardcover novel she'd read on a plane.

"Such a great story," she said, eyeing me like the devil herself.

"I can't," I said feebly.

"A psychological thriller," she said.

"Stop," I whispered. "His word against hers," said Ella. "Put it on my night table," I said, hating myself.

Of all my worldly possessions—my furniture, my piano, my oil paintings of dogs—I love my books the most. But it is a tortured kind of a love. Because I have run out of room for them.

The scope of the book problem became very clear to me this week as I, along with much of America, sequestered myself at home to try to stop the coronavirus. Suddenly I had all the time in the world to survey my domain. And what I saw was that the books had taken over the place.

"I don't want to say my books look menacing, exactly, but I am definitely feeling confined," I told psychologist Darby Saxbe, who I admit I phoned partly for the sheer pleasure of talking to another human being.

"Clutter is especially bad for the psyche when our typical world is disrupted," said Dr. Saxbe, director of the Center for the Changing Family at the University of Southern California. "When it comes to books, my personal tip is to organize them by color. On the top shelf, the left-hand book is red and then the books go through the rainbow. It looks really eye-catching—and soothing."

What we want from our physical surroundings at a time like this is to have everything go back into its assigned place, she said, adding that order can be difficult to achieve if adults are forced to work at home and schools are closed.

"Our personal stuff is getting mixed in with our office space, and the boundaries become blurred. It can exacerbate stress with people sharing small quarters together," Dr. Saxbe said. "My kids right now are trashing the kitchen," she added.

Shelves of #rainbowbooks soothe many people, as evidenced by more than 45,000 photos on Instagram, and I would consider trying the Roy G. Biv method if all my books fit on my shelves. But they are jammed with extra paperbacks lying on their sides on top of hardcovers. Gardening books are stacked under my bed. Cookbooks are muscling out the dishware on kitchen shelves. Not to mention all the books Ella has read on a plane.

The most perplexing part of this décor dilemma is that my books serve little or no functional purpose in my life. Like most people I know, I read almost everything on my phone.

So **why do we even keep books in our homes when digital books are so much easier to store? Is it because real books make us look smarter?**

To answer the question, I turned to Naomi S. Baron, a linguist and professor emerita at American University and author of "Words Onscreen: The Fate of Reading in a Digital World."

When I reached her by phone, it turned out she too was surrounded by books—and liking it.

"I'm sitting here staring at my old friends on the shelves," said Prof. Baron, whose research shows there are lots of reasons people still feel attached to the printed-and-bound word. "Books are part of your personal history. They're mementos from trips you took. They're part of who you were." I am looking at my Gothic dictionary, from a class I took when I was in graduate school. Do I ever use this dictionary? No. But just looking at the spine reminds me of the time when I was a student and learning exotic things," she said.

"But do we only feel like that because we grew up with books?" I asked. "I'm afraid that if I add more shelves to the house, in a generation or two they will be seen as an anachronistic design flaw by people who have never seen a physical book."

"I don't think so," Prof. Baron said. "You might think that younger kids who are on devices all the time couldn't care less about print, but they do. When it comes to books, I would not call the patient expired."

Last year, Prof. Baron partnered with European researchers, including cognitive reading specialist Anne Mangen at the University of Stavanger in Norway, to ask teens and preteens what they thought about physical books. (The survey of 212 middle- and high-school students at the International School of Stavanger was suggested by the school's head librarian, Kim Tyo-Dickerson.)

Many of the students said they preferred physical books over their digital counterparts for their tactile qualities. "We asked them what do you like most about print, and their answers were 'I can feel the paper in my hands,' 'I like turning pages,' 'It feels right to hold a book,'" she said.

"That's pretty much how I feel too," I said.

"And you should feel good about that," Prof. Baron said, before hanging up.

In fact, I think of my favorite books as comfort objects. I pulled some off the shelf this week just to feel their weight in my hands, a feeling that Prof. Mangen said is not uncommon. "Touch and the physical interaction with things in our surroundings is a vital part of being human," she told me in email earlier this week.

I may run out of things to watch on Netflix in the next few weeks, but my books will always keep me company. Maybe it's time to reread Jane Austen's "Emma," which I haven't opened since I toted it along to the hospital when I was in labor. Or my dusty-blue, hardcover copy of Ardyth Kennelly's "The Peaceable Kingdom" (about a lovable family of polygamists), which I have carried with me from home to home since I discovered it on my grandmother's bedside table when I was 9.

As we struggle to understand the scope of the coronavirus, reading fiction can help us identify with others, research shows. "The more fiction you read, the more you think of yourself in their lives," said Keith Oatley, a cognitive psychologist and professor emeritus at the University of Toronto, "and the better you become at understanding other people and empathy."

So at a time when I'm spending the least amount of time around strangers, I might actually be learning the most about them.

There will be plenty of time next week, and the next, for me to get my house in order. So what's the best way to make a home for too many books?

"People wrestle with this all the time, because they always think they are not going to continue reading things on paper, but they still do," said New York City architect Lorraine Bonaventura. "Every client still asks me to find a way to incorporate their books."

It might sound counterintuitive, but Ms. Bonaventura said the best way to keep books from overtaking a room is to "fill an entire space with bookshelves," she said. "When the shelves extend from end to end on a wall and all the way up to the molding, they kind of blend into a room."

Architect Elizabeth Roberts, who also is based in New York, said recessed, built-in bookshelves might be the best solution. "My way to solve the problem with books often involves renovation," said Ms. Roberts. "I am constantly scanning walls of a home that we're working on, and if I find a big blank wall where I can borrow space from an adjacent room, I'll do shelves from wall to ceiling."

Built-in bookshelves needn't steal a lot of depth from a room, Ms. Roberts said, adding that the typical novel only requires a shelf that is 8 inches deep. "But it's smart to give yourself 2 more inches for deeper books," she said.

“What about for people like me, who aren’t planning to do construction but still have a lot of books?” I asked.

“You can get creative and use stacks of them in front of the sofa to use as a coffee table or as side tables,” she said. “I like the impression you get in a room that’s filled with books—they add a kind of colorful wealth of knowledge. At my house, I put tiny, wall-mounted L-shaped brackets on each side of the bed as a stand-in to bedside tables,” she noted. “My husband and I both have six to eight books we’re reading stacked on them, and I put my clock on top. The brackets are very inexpensive—I’ll send you the link.”

Later, I studied the description of the metal brackets, which look like wide, wall-mounted spatulas that hold books and disappear under a stack. Called the Umbra Conceal Shelves, they sell for \$25 for a set of three.

The shelves won’t entirely solve my book problem. But I decided to mount them to both sides of the bed in the guest room. Next time Ella visits, I’ll know where to shelve her latest airplane read. I hope it’s a murder mystery set on a college campus.

#### GREAT ESCAPES

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#### The Confession

“...the first spray of my husband’s blood hitting the television screen” haunts protagonist Julie McNamara, and readers, in Jo Spain’s thriller set in Australia.

#### The Secret of Santa Vittoria

Italian peasants hide a million bottles of local wine from occupying Germans in Robert Crichton’s WW II-era comedy-slash-melodrama.

#### The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry

A foundling child revives a bookseller’s will to live in Gabrielle Zevin’s tale of the ennobling power of books.

#### The Benson Murder Case

The first in a 12-book series wildly popular in the 1920s, S.S. Van Dine’s stylish, smarty-pants New York City sleuth works the Benson murder case, undertaken as a public service to aid the bumbling effort of local government.