

A Welcome Abuse: Notes on Finding Community Through the Battered Book
By Andrea Belcham¹

Part the first: In which the author makes a dreadful confession

I wish to declare my support for abuse.

Not the abuse of flesh, mind you, but the abuse of paper, board and leather. An abuse which, when inflicted upon these media, is not a mistreatment at all but a loving caress.

No single witnessed act prompts me to make such a declaration here, at this time. Rather, it is a collage of observed and shared-in phenomena that layer my thoughts and foster a general feeling of affection for the cheap, the tawdry and the wounded, and an abhorrence for the glossy, the clean and the virginal. Shuffling my way through the crowd at a book-arts exhibition, awaiting my turn to don the white cotton gloves (required should I wish to touch any of the fine-press books on display) – then leaving the show with only pamphlets and business cards in my tote (because that’s all I can afford), and finding that someone has scattered on the benches of the building’s lobby numerous well-worn books with stickers that shout, “I’m free – please take me home with you!” (I adopt a jacketless hardcover edition of *The Name of the Rose*)... Scanning the results of my online bookstore search for a used anthology of Dorothy Parker’s short stories and being astounded by the hierarchy that emerges: how the littlest tape-mended tear designates a book as classes below its pristine cousins... Walking up to the side entrance of the Atwater Library on garbage day and being startled as I round the bushes to see a small swarm of people looking eagerly through the boxes on the lawn; slowing my pace and a woman noticing me and beckoning, book in hand, “They’re just being thrown out, imagine!”... Years back, in high school, being assigned my English texts for the semester – opening each one to its first page to record my name and reviewing with curiosity those preceding mine (my inheritances constituting a detached hands-holding with the same kids who ignore me, whom I ignore, in the halls)...

Bundled together, these fractured incidents hold meaning. Read by one whose current immersion in the commercial side of the book industry overwhelms her with the seeming infinity of seasonal catalogues, of volumes and volumes shining and bright and frivolous like wax fruit in a centrepiece, these memories remind her of what she prizes about reading, about books. Such as how when books are loved they become like another limb, travelling everywhere with the reader. Or how the book’s own body, just like the mind of the reader, shows the scars of this love and wears its stretch marks proudly.

I’m championing drawn-out violence, then: a masochistic relationship between reader and book that reverberates through generations.

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Part the second: In which the coercion begins with a mirror'd aspect

Affect not as some do that bookish ambition to be stored with books and have well-furnished libraries, yet keep their heads empty of knowledge; to desire to have many books, and never to use them, is like a child that will have a candle burning by him all the while he is sleeping.

– Henry Peacham, *The Compleat Gentleman* (1622)

To win you over to the seedy, pro-abuse ranks (to get you to suspend that which our consumer culture advocates – that it is the new, not the old, that brings one satisfaction), I see that I must try to apply some order to my argument. So I will begin with display.

It is a common visual symbol in our culture, the private study of jewel-toned, leather-bound books that line sturdy shelves and glow behind glass, singing their owner's wisdom and wealth. The majority of our friends' homes may not contain so genteel a gallery, but is it not true that – building on the understanding that one's identity is at least partially communicated through those items surrounding oneself – we may, upon visiting someone's place for the first time, look to their belongings to get a better feeling for who they are? (I'm mildly uncomfortable whenever I enter a home in which books are noticeably absent – as when I'm in a room without windows, or houseplants.) I like to examine how books are arrayed, as a way of getting closer to knowing how their owners behave when they are away from the public gaze. Which books, for instance, are stacked nearest to the action, as well-thumbed, life-stained spiritual or practical reference materials? Which rest further back on the shelf, spines perhaps yet to be broken as they wait for a free moment that may never come? Are volumes neatly lined up or haphazardly piled; are they subject to alphabetical or thematic arrangement, or do they amass like strata of the earth, chronologically, according to the date of their purchase? K.I. Press's "Library" (from 2004's *Spine*) plays with this notion of the singularly ordered mayhem of some personal collections: "They looked like little pizzas," the poem begins,

keeping warm inside
their cardboard boxes. But those were books
in the oven. Books in the pantry
too, pickled and canned, and cold,
frothy ones in the fridge. Books three deep
in the shelves, of course.

...

Emergency books in the trunk of the car.
Dirty ones lying on the backseat floor.

Do the books in the house I am visiting have a room that is their exclusive domain, or are they allowed to roam freely about the house so that they climb with me up the staircase, sit beside me in the bathroom, hang over me as I pass through doorways?

There are many more softcovers than hardcovers in my collection, which may lead the investigator to conclude that I am neither wise nor wealthy.

I both support and refute Peacham's statement about the frivolity of an unmined library. If a book is at heart a vessel for the transmission of knowledge, then an unused book is an unfulfilled one. The home library constructed of books one *ought* to read or *ought* to own, and that remain untouched after a purchase but for dusting day, is décor first and foremost (versus décor as a by-product of functionality). For then the personal library is an extension of the public mask: it is meant to impress the other, and not impress upon the mind of its curator. On the other hand, I must admit to having gathered my fair share of books that I have yet to, even years later, crack open and read for myself. But the intent is to one day consume them, and in the meantime I would not object to their being displaced or lent out and sullied; their presence still attests to my interests.

In her article “‘This Late in History,’ What Shall We Choose to Read?” Jeannie Marshall proposes the accumulation of “stacks of unread or partly unread books” to be a common symptom of a postmodern consumer affliction known as “reading anxiety.” She suggests that the vast quantity of declared must-reads flooding the market today nurtures malaise and guilt in the reader, who feels the pressure to keep abreast of the newest, hottest picks being discussed by those in the know. The insubstantiality of these plastic reads is attested to by their swift relegation to store discount bins. Typically, new books join my shelves by way of gifts from friends, or book review assignments. Their bright bodies seem out of place next to their more worldly neighbours, and I do not hesitate to mark up or fold pages as I am so moved. This is their initiation.

The older books are heavy with retained fingerprints.

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Part the third: In which reputations are tarnished, without regret

I do love secondhand books that open to the page some previous owner read oftenest. The day Hazlitt came he opened to ‘I hate to read new books,’ and I hollered ‘Comrade!’ to whoever owned it before me.
– Helene Hanff, *84 Charing Cross Road* (1970)

This notion of trace evidences feeds into the topic of circulation. When we purchase a used book or borrow a book from a public library, we are bringing more than their textual stories into our home. We are also adopting threads of their former keepers' own stories, personal narratives partially unravelled about the body of the book. These are individuals who, were we to actually meet them, might seem nothing like us; it is all the more

beautiful, then, that through a book we are sharing with the faceless in a moment of convergence, like strangers brushing shoulders on a crowded street.

But do we necessarily feel the touch? It may seem more of a push if the evidence of a book's past lives disturbs our reading – if in the midst of our reading reverie we're jarred by an encounter with a boldly underscored passage or notations (“!!!”; “???”) scribbled in the margins. Or it may be more like an easily ignored breath, a single bent page-corner that we unthinkingly return to its original position as we read along. I don't select a book for its possible physical narratives, yet I am pleased to find them when they emerge. There is a comfort to be had in knowing, through the natural opening of a volume “to the page some previous owner read oftenest,” that your book once stirred the emotions – positive or negative – of another. Such knowledge makes the solitary act, reading, also a communitarian one.

BookCrossing.com takes some of the mystery out of used books' genealogies. The site encourages bibliophiles to abandon their unwanted books in public spots where passersby might discover and claim them: each book is given a label with an identification number and a reference to the website so that new owners can log on and learn about their book's past journeys, as well as updating the profile with their own statistics. It's a project with great potential, this mapping of a book's socio-geographic movements. Its success, however, depends on universal access to high technology.

My detective work is rather more Holmesian. A checklist of quiet clues: the wear on a spine, like wrinkles on a forehead showing long worry and/or laughter; damage done by liquid – water wounds, curling pages, a bending of the overall shape of the book into an arthritic dowager's hump, or sepia coffee rings, wine-blood drops; scents (mildew, perfume, curry dinners, cigarettes).

I have a particular fondness for title-page inscriptions. I would love, for instance, to receive a perpetually regifted book as a present. One with a title page filled with dedications from giver to recipient, John to Maud, Maud to Sam, Sam to “My Love,” Dena to me. Just think – all those hands, so many motives, brought together on one page. Recently, while perusing the shelves of a charity shop, I came across a bundle of old Canadian poetry journals, and on the cover of each one the same woman's name had been printed in pen. Looking amongst the books surrounding them, I also found scattered about several volumes of poetry similarly enscribed with this woman's name, and I could only wonder at who she was to be so obviously interested in the genre. Was she a poet herself? A teacher? Or a muse? Was she dead, that these items had finally been let go, or did she only wish to forget?

The “serious” collector might attach value only to the signature scrawled by the book's writer. Says Al Purdy in a letter to Margaret Laurence (dated August 23, 1977),

P.S. I wrote William Golding, asking him if he'd sign his books etc. He wrote back, sending me twin signatures like a crossword puzzle, that I could clip and, as he said, “deface his books” – It broke me up to see

those signatures; I chortled for half an hour. Like Gabrielle Roy, who wrote “to be continued” in each book.

Authorial autographs are acceptable graffiti in the connoisseur’s eyes presumably because they present a more personal, rawer aspect of the writer, whose typographical idiosyncrasies have otherwise been cooked to consistency by a machine-made font. An autograph is, of course, also significant proof that a given volume has been touched, if only for five seconds, by the godhead Him-/Herself. I own only one book marked by the signature of a presently notable personage (Louisa May Alcott), and a few signed by those of possible future notoriety. I have many more with surprising inscriptions by the “everyone else”s of the world. In my copy of *A Room With a View*, which appears again later in this essay, is the anonymous and cryptic sentence, “I think this beats ants any day!”

Do these inscribers ever regret what they so hastily or so carefully penned? It’s a little sad to find via the used book that the eternal love proclaimed in an inscription has come to an end (for as the book is in my hands, it means something, someone, has died). Strangely, while the names penned may be strangers to me, I care.

Library books – or the popular titles amongst them, at least – claim right to the status of most-circulated book form, and as such they often wield numerous bruises of their many past keepers. This despite the hard work of librarians to fortify each volume’s initial bindings to ensure a maximized lifespan. (For a short period I worked in the cataloguing department of a university library, my desk next to that of Edith, expert book mender. The piles of books awaiting her attention were endless; she was a master mixer of glues, a tyrant with the tape, respected by all.) The librarian is a crime-prevention force, arming books with clear plastic coverings and reinforcing their spines, issuing passes for their temporary releases. The public’s tardy return or excessive mistreatment of a book are punishable offenses. Like weeds pushing up through asphalt, however, life and time manage to erode even the most Mylared of inmates.

What a small joy it is to find nestled deep in a library book’s pages some forgotten slip of paper – a past user’s note of to-do’s, a sales receipt, a snapshot – detritus that once served as bookmarks and that currently serve as links to another life. And that life is not necessarily anonymous, if the bookmark should be a patron’s record of holdings; for then the ghost is named, and I will inevitably look at the full list of borrowed materials, wondering at the thoughts that dictated such selections (*Circle of Friends, Insomnia, Camelot*, how so?).

The reader with the wandering mind, or the fervent admiration for propriety, may jump at the chance to unfold the corners of those pages deemed noteworthy by someone else in a book’s lending history. In a chapter that outlines ideal library research methods, Duncan Branley (2004) advises scholars to take care to handle borrowed materials with respect: marking up a page, he states, constitutes “antisocial” behaviour. While I do agree that an orange highlighter’s aesthetic impact on a text can be severe, it *does* bring the past face-to-face with the present; so it *is* a social dialogue, albeit a distracting one. The

unpopularity of a particular library book I once signed out was revealed to me through my discovery, midway through the tome, of a flattened and long-desiccated spider; I brushed it out, but the shadow of its death had been tattooed on the page (a reminder for me, and an enigma for the next reader).

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Part the fourth: In which the citizens grow limbs of paper, and walk all the better for it

The garden of Windy Corner was deserted except for a red book, which lay sunning itself upon the gravel path.

– E.M. Forster, *A Room With a View* (1908)

I move firmly now to sentiment, and the bifold nature of preservation. I've been suggesting that the used book can hold meaning as a flame for fancy – conjectures about strangers lit by a book's physical condition (so a meaning besides those effects on the imagination caused by textual content). But it can also hold further meaning as a conduit to the reader's personal development and legacy.

When the book in question – one passed on through familial generations – is beloved and retained for its ties to the owner's ancestry, the desire to sustain its health may conflict with the wish to handle it, rough it up. One of my shelves is populated by books that once belonged to my grandfather and that I recovered, several years after his death, from a cardboard box in a basement. Inevitably, time had worked its way through the carton, crumbling paste in the bindings, powdering pages with mold, letting in mice and insects to chew away at the paper. These books, because of their shoddy states, may not fetch much in an antiquarian bookstore, but so be it. Can I really put a price on what they offer, namely the chance to see my grandfather's name conscientiously scripted in pencil on a frontispiece by his ten-year-old hand? One of these books, a primer on Greek, was obviously valued less as a teacher than as an inconspicuous journal for his and his brother's secret and exclusive "Firemen's Club," the rules of membership for which were recorded on the blank end-pages of the book ("Rule #2: Firemen will not cheat other Firemen"). Not surprisingly, my grandfather's old books seem brittle every time I pick them up. But I continue to handle them, to crack open their spines and inhale their mustiness: I will still use them. Old books dry with age thirst for a human touch.

My mother still has, and uses, a cookbook once owned by her grandmother. The subtext of these anthologized recipes relay a whole different set of social ideals than what I read, cook and live in today; the supertext of the book communicates tiny details about four specific generations of women who have used it. Interspersed through the pages are many newspaper cuttings containing further recipes or household maintenance tips. They are deeply yellowed now and have soiled the pages that enclose them. There are butter slicks and cocoa smears on the page for chocolate icebox cookies, a favourite recipe of mine growing up.

That would seem to me a good thermometer for the success of a cookbook: when shopping for one in a used-book store, look for the volumes with the pages most coated by ingredients.

One would expect to face admonishment for leaving a book about as Forster describes, exposed to the elements. Granted, the “proper” treatment of a book (i.e. *not* leaving it upon the garden path) finds an honest goal in the guarding of a book’s structural integrity: it would not do to let a rainstorm or a rambunctious dog lash the volume to sodden shreds. Yet I do believe we should be proud of a book that shows, by its form, that it has spent many a day alongside us, and our forebears. We cherish as fine an oak table passed on through the family ranks, treasuring the surface’s various nicks, scratches, burns and grooves with their accompanying stories. So why not the book, with its own ciphers of what once was?

Think of your copy of a book you were required to read during your school years: *To Kill a Mockingbird*, perhaps. Remember how you hated those classroom lectures on the nature of Boo Radley’s madness, and how you tried in desperation to use mind-power to advance the sluggish hands of the clock – how you amused yourself with your serial sketches of a running stick-figure on the bottom corner of each page? Yet here you are, ten or twenty or thirty years on, with the same copy still in your possession, because somewhere along the way you changed and Scout and Atticus and Harper started to speak to you, and now you can hold that book and see, through its body, both what you once were and what you are today.

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Part the fifth: In which a case is put to rest, and patience recovered in the process

... I soon possessed myself of a volume, taking care that it should be one stored with pictures. I mounted into the window-seat: gathering up my feet, I sat cross-legged, like a Turk; and, having drawn the red moreen curtain nearly close, I was shrined in double retirement.

– Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (1847)

The evolution of a book’s scent attests to its physical development. Think of how the new book smells: is it not sterile, clinical? Now envision its counterpoint, a book in the most severest condition of decline after decades spent in seclusion in the dankest spot of a cellar; too long ignored, it has festered and it glowers and if ever released again its resentment – the stink of mushrooms and the black bars of mildew – will censor any attempted reading. I like the median between these two woeful states, which is like an organic ripening, a waft of rising yeast. Or so I conceive it to be, for the scent is forever bound to my memory of reading a particular picture book from my elementary school library, Maurice Sendak’s *In the Night Kitchen*, and while visually consuming the images of the curious boy exploring the night in his dough clothes and his dough plane, also inhaling the aged smell of well-fingered pages and binding glue turning slowly to dust.

I have heard of people bringing their libraries out onto their lawn for an annual airing, a concept that makes me wonder whether pages from Chaucer or Dashiell Hammett ever end up lining the nest of a resourceful squirrel.

Does a book only begin to live when it is opened? Do its textual worlds only *become* when someone is there to read them and thus make them significant? Literary theorists Bennett and Woollacott feel that “texts and readers” are “the mutual supports of one another” (via Storey 1999). Without lapsing into pure relativism, then, I *will* propose that our understanding of the text is shaped by the intellectual capacities, the points of reference, that we bring to it. Similarly, we also bring our physical world onto and into the physical world of the book when we pick it up, so that the book-body becomes a repository for whatever violences and joys we sustain ourselves (recall that only three pages later, the same book that brings poor Jane Eyre company is used by her hateful relation as a weapon against her).

The book-body and the flesh-body live in tangent. Or such should be the case, if we allow the book to live with us and not under glass, in plastic sleeves, in a safe, under lock and key in a climate-controlled, neutrally lit niche. If we welcome damaged goods into our home and release them into the homes of others. We can learn a lot about ourselves and our fellow readers by considering a story’s casings: patience, for one thing. That community extends beyond the immediate and into the virtual, for another. That we all want to be roughed up. For what is an untouched book but an unlived life?

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