

The Bridwell Quill

a note from the director



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Issue 13-14: *Symbols and Semiotics*

Earlier this summer I read a fascinating article in *The Atlantic* magazine online by Dan Cohen, Dean of Libraries at Northeastern University. The article in the *Ideas* section of the publication was titled “The Books of College Libraries are Turning into Wallpaper,” (May 26, 2019). In the following weeks, I penned a response to the article and sent it to the editors. I later learned that they were not publishing responses and then sent my short article to Dr. Cohen himself. He responded with a thoughtful email of thanks and added some further insight to the conversation. In this present newsletter, I thought I would share the piece I wrote in response to his initial article. There are certainly many more things to consider when discussing the roles of books in libraries, whether we consider the book of 25 years ago, the book today, or the book 25 years in the future. And I would agree with Dr. Cohen’s response to me that even though I suggest that books are semiotic and symbolic objects that have significance, they are not the only things that can affect people’s feelings or behaviors. Further, a person’s (and especially a *child’s*) environment, level of stress, and feeling of safety, protections, and space of emotional stability matter far more than whether a physical book is on the shelf. This all said, there are still many things to consider, beyond the general perception of how we understand, interpret, or consider “an old book on a shelf.”

Not Just Wallpaper. When I first read Dan Cohen’s insightful article, it gave me pause and made me think about a number of issues that have been with us in libraries for more than a decade. I was very pleased that he wrote the piece, because it seemed to convey a



wide array of problems that are present in almost every academic library—the declining usage of physical books, the lack of usable space, and the need for adaptivity in our ever-changing information landscapes. The question of how we use academic books especially is central to the basic management of an academic library, while the access and utilization of digital formats is clearly on the rise. I have lived through the eras when there were only physical books for consultation and card catalogues were your guide to finding materials in the stacks, but also through that transitional period when materials were converted to digital collections and online searchable catalogs. When my colleagues and I do research, for example, the way that we have changed our habits of research has shifted fairly dramatically in terms of accessing physical books in favor of digital surrogates for quickness and ease of searchability. This may be at least one of the reasons that students, faculty, and researchers alike have opted to use or check-out fewer physical copies of books. One of the main points in his article, which I found a compelling conversation starter, and which Cohen noted that he’d received several comments about, has to do with books as wallpaper—or at least, books as aesthetic objects. This theme has echoed through the halls of libraries and universities for some time.

About twelve years ago, I had first come across some research that examined the role of books as objects in libraries, homes, offices, and personal spaces. I subsequently began my own research and conducted interviews with a variety of people around this subject, and asked them how the placement, location, and proximity of physical books of any kind influenced the way that they read, wrote, thought, acted, or were even able to concentrate. The results were somewhat surprising, because the majority of those interviewed said that books did convey a message

of support in the way that these scholars and readers focused their attention. Many of them went so far as to anthropomorphize books, using language that one might use for a beloved pet or relative. I should note, too, that almost all of those whom I'd interviewed were attached to theological schools or seminaries. In these instances, individuals had strong feelings about the role of physical books, including the Bible, but they also had distinctively greater sensitivity to the grand legacy of how books were constructed, printed, bound, and disseminated, especially religious antiquarian volumes.

Yet the question remains about the visual appearance and presence of the physical book in stacks and on shelves, and whether the wallpaper analogy is the way to look at this. For many in academic libraries who speak about the visceral feeling they get when they see or sit near rows of books, or the emotive expressions about the anticipatory action and potential of reading books that lay on a table before you, or even at a short distance on shelves next to you, this is something very real. In some instances, participants had even stated they felt pain or sickness when seeing books damaged. Yet, this is not something that we as librarians or administrators generally think about, because it is not necessarily quantifiable or even identifiable in metrics and analytics that we need to produce and present to oversight committees for renovation, reassignment of spaces, consolidation, or off-site storage. What this unnamed feeling is, effectively, can be described as a human reaction to semiotics, or the study of symbols, their meaning, and influence on individuals and society. Yes, it is very true that what's inside the books is important, rather than the covers, but that's where the wallpaper example doesn't adequately portray the issue. Books as wallpaper suggests that they are pretty like a sitting room, parlor, or in today's terms, a Starbucks. Books as semiotic objects are instruments of power that convey the untapped strength and potential of what's actually inside of them. When I first set out to understand this phenomenon, it was like an exploration into the

world of Umberto Eco, where the idea of the book was embedded with layers of meaning and symbols. It led to the possibility that many students and faculty, especially in theological education, had developed their own ways of thinking based in part on how they experienced the symbolic and emotive power of the physical object. It was effectively a formulation of a theology of books, which constructed a worldview and understanding of the divine through the phenomenological experience of not just reading physical books but being in their presence.

For some, this may seem way beyond the expectation of what it means to have books as visible objects in sight or on shelves in academic libraries. It may seem a bit childish to say "my books are my companions," and yet, I hear this more often than not. The semiotic character of the book as object in our libraries, especially our



academic libraries, should remain part of the constructed spaces that we create, so that this generally unarticulated feeling may provide greater potential

for our patrons, students, faculty, researchers, and visitors. To test the symbolic power vs. aesthetic wallpaper imagery comparison, just consider the following: what is your reaction to walking into a room full of academic or literary titles that are of great interest to you in contrast with walking into a room full of cheap dime-novels or pulp literature that you could care less about (or vice versa)? What about the aesthetic differences between red, blue, and black covered Swedish titles in IKEA showrooms in contrast to free shelves or community book shares in local coffee shops containing an array of travel memoirs, graphic novels, and self-help books? If the feeling is the same, then the wallpaper scenario might be correct. But if you feel distinctly different emotions, then the semiotic test is more accurate, and conveys the true depth of that imagined connection that you as the reader have to books, and those books especially. It is as if Umberto Eco was right to

convey the medieval magic of books and their communicative power beyond the actual pages and into our minds and hearts, affecting our emotions and behaviors simply with the power of being books with the potential of being read, being thought through, and transforming the individual. That anticipatory essence is what this is all about.

In the late 10th century, the Armenian monastic, saint, and poet Grigor Narekatsi (ca. 950-1003) wrote a mystical text called the Book of



Lamentations, in which he elaborated on the role of certain religious books as objects of adoration and protection, like the role that amulets play in protecting a person from evil spirits, by wearing such small booklets around the neck. It was not merely something that was “magical,” but its presence was believed by the wearer to hold some power to ward off evil, just as those who saw it around the wearer’s neck knew what it meant when they encountered that person. It was a symbol of power and protection, which stirred the emotions and feelings of those who were in its proximity.

Where we are today, in some respects, is where the medieval monk, peasant, or cleric was a millennium ago. Today, though, we should be more concerned with the social psychology of books and how their symbolic expression in our multicultural, diversified, and unequal socioeconomic contexts mean certain things, influence our behaviors, and affect the outcomes of our reading, studying, and writing habits. Social psychology, like political geography, sets standards and rubrics that can determine how we envision the micro-cultures of places like academic libraries, and ultimately gives voice and name to this long-held and complicated feeling we have for books on shelves in those very libraries. What does it mean, after all, to have books on shelves? What are the symbolic expressions that are conveyed to those who are in proximity to these volumes? Do books indicate power or weakness, inclusion or exclusion,

potential or limitation? Do books on shelves evoke the legacy of coloniality or the imperative to decolonize modern thought? Or do these things depend on the very person who experiences being around books? In many ways, there are no right answers to these questions, except that we live precisely on the spectrum of human experience, which demands that the infinite variety of experience interacts with the phenomenological and symbolic power of all kinds of books and their physical, cultural, and social locations.

Of course, we can make do with visits to a coffee shop to do work, or find a place that gives us comfort, solace, or inspiration. But the library of the past must be negotiated with the library of the future, taking into consideration all of the issues, hurdles, and opportunities that we face. Like the late nationalism scholar Benedict Anderson offered us, the idea of an imagined community is one that constitutes the formation of a nation, but for all of us today, it is the imagined community of the book, despite the paradox of declining borrowing stats and the complicated relationship we have with the physical book, that still resonates. It resonates because that imagined community is one that connects with us directly as objects of interest that possess the power of ideas and the transcendence of individual thought across the generations, through time, and into an infinite gallery of printed words that represent humanity in one of its most cherished forms. Wallpaper is generally attractive, but I’m not sure it ever protected anyone from evil spirits, inspired someone to write a best seller, or gave anyone the confidence to draft a work of profound greatness.

Pax vobiscum! ~ AJE

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