

Shelving the Library

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Today I cooked breakfast (pancakes and scrambled eggs) for my family and underwent the usual struggle to try to get everyone to the table to eat, and minimize the amount of complaining. I made a relatively small batch of pancakes, as they were mostly intended for the picky younger eaters. I had Joshua crack 14 eggs – it takes a lot of eggs to feed our hobbits – and scrambled them with a chopped-up package of Boursin cheese. We also served leftover tuna and mackerel salad and bread, and some leftover hot dogs for people who were still hungry.

After the meal I discovered that Sam was in the kitchen again. He had created an enormous vat of pancake batter, an entire mixing bowl filled nearly to the top. The pancake mix came from GFS (Gordon Food Service), a local restaurant supply company. Sam made a “quarter batch” because it seemed to him that following the directions on the bag, which makes the whole five-pound bag of mix, would make too much. I guess I should be grateful that he didn’t attempt to make the entire bag. I had made silver dollar-sized pancakes, which are easy to flip, but he was in the process of making single pancakes that filled the entire frying pan, and frying them in olive oil. I had to leave the room in frustration. I asked Grace to please consult with him because I did not want to wind up raising my voice.

I had told him to put any leftover pancakes in a bag and stick them in the freezer, but it turns out they ate the whole batch of pancakes. So apparently the right amount of food to make for breakfast for the kids is 14 scrambled eggs and a dozen servings of pancakes, in addition to assorted other leftovers. But I guarantee that if I had made all those pancakes initially, I would have been left with a mountain of uneaten food. It makes no sense; that’s just how it works around here. I don’t make the rules.

So while Grace explained to Sam that perhaps olive oil wasn’t the best thing to cook pancakes in, and he should use the can of bacon fat instead, I came into our bedroom and checked our bank account to see if our tax refund had been deposited.

In doing this, I discovered an unauthorized charge from Amazon Digital. We don’t have any sort of Amazon account. This led to an hour on the phone trying

to talk to a representative at my bank, with my phone audio cutting in and out. We have once again had a card number stolen, with no idea how this happened. When we first moved back to Ann Arbor, I had it happen to my card several times, and it turned out the likely culprit was skimmers on gas pumps, so I started always going inside to pay for my gas at the register. That seemed to solve the problem at the time. But it looks like Grace's card was compromised this time. So, her card has been canceled and we will wait for the postal service to deliver a new one.

Speaking of the postal service, I just received the December 2020 issue of *Current Affairs* magazine. Sam got his copy in December.

While I was typing the last paragraph, and Grace was trying to engage with some of her friends in a Zoom call, our Internet connection went down. So I won't be able to actually finish and send out this newsletter until it comes back up. And I really hope we don't have a long outage, because we have online activities scheduled with the kids next week, including a set of meetings with a math tutor.

For some reason our cell phone service has been terrible as well – calls are very garbled and hard to hear.

So that's how today is going.

I heard back from a friend who has gotten her second vaccine dose, and that's encouraging. But last I heard, only about five percent of Americans have been vaccinated, and that's less encouraging.

Shelving the Library

Yesterday I finished a project I've been working on this weekend and last weekend. After many months, IKEA finally seems to be getting more of their Havsta bookcases in stock. We had been waiting for white ones, but they had three brown ones in stock the week before last at the store in Canton, so we went and bought all three while we could. Then, last week, they got a whole palette of 12 more brown ones, so we went back and bought one more. Over the last couple of weeks I assembled them and we went to our storage unit twice, bringing home about 24 boxes of books. There are about 48 still in storage.

That's quite a bit of heavy lifting and a lot of assembly work, but I'm very happy we did it, because we have moved Malachi's crib out of our room and I am now looking at four beautiful bookcases filled with many of my favorite books. Most of these have been in sealed boxes since 2015 or 2016. The whole time we lived in Saginaw, despite the size of our house, we never could come up with a good solution for shelving most of our books – there just weren't very many flat walls without windows, where bookcases could go. So many of the books were shelved in closets, or remained in boxes even then. And as I gradually continued to grow the collection, many of them wound up going right into boxes, in the hopes that we'd get proper access to them someday.

The Library of America Volumes

Two of the four new bookcases are largely filled with slipcased volumes from the Library of America. I think we started our subscription back in 2010. By default, they send ten volumes a year. After we moved to Pittsfield Township, I had them switch to a dozen a year, so that it became a monthly charge, which made it easier for me to keep track of along with all the other monthly charges.

We now have over a hundred volumes, and because we only paid for about one book a month, it never seemed like we were spending a lot on these books. I'm now very happy we kept it up!

The Library of America books are small hardcovers, and they are well-made books, with signatures actually sewn into the bindings. An awful lot of recent hardcover books are really paperbacks with a hard cover glued on, sometimes, with little strips of fabric stuck in the top and bottom of the spine to make them look at first glance like they are sewn.

Each volume also has a little satin ribbon sewn in to use as a bookmark, which comes in handy.

The volumes are printed and bound in the United States. They used to be printed and bound in Ann Arbor, although that facility has shut down and I think they are now making the books somewhere in the South. But at least, as far as I know, American workers still print the Library of America books.

Over the years i read a few of them as they arrived, but most of the arriving volumes continued to go into boxes even if they were interesting, just because we had no place to put them. I have never actually seen all of these in one place until now, but they have steadily accumulated, and now they form quite a collection. And now that they are all on shelves, we can actually comb through them and select some that we don't really care for, and those volumes can go to enhance someone else's library.

As a first pass, going through the volumes with Grace, we set aside about twenty volumes to consider getting rid of. I went through them and vetoed a number of the choices, deciding that yes, I really did want them in the collection, or at least I was willing to give them a second chance. But there were a few volumes that we were both indifferent to.

If you would like any of these Library of America books, dear reader, please let me know – send me a shipping address via e-mail and I will send them to you. Otherwise, we will find someone who wants them locally.

***Leatherstocking Tales* by James Fenimore Cooper, Volumes 1 and 2**

I read through the prefaces and settled down to try reading the last-published novel, *The Deerslayer*, which is the earliest of the stories of the life of the protagonist Natty Bumppo. Bumppo is a “noble savage” character, an Anglo-American raised in part by Native Americans.

It quickly became evident to me that while these stories are of great interest to historians, because of what they say about attitudes towards Native Americans, missionary work, and the colonization of North America, they are painful to read. Every event is interpreted to death, in the text, by the author, as it happens, in a very long-winded and didactic style, switching constantly between “showing” and “telling.”

Deerslayer, as Hurry called his companion, was a very different person in appearance, as well as in character. In stature he stood about six feet in his moccasins, but his frame was comparatively light and slender, showing muscles, however, that promised unusual agility, if not unusual strength. His face would have had little to recommend it except youth, were it not for an expression that seldom failed to win upon those who had leisure to examine it, and to yield to the feeling of confidence it created. This expression was simply that of guileless truth, sustained by an earnestness of purpose, and a sincerity of feeling, that rendered it remarkable. At times this air of integrity seemed to be so simple as to awaken the suspicion of a want of the usual means to discriminate between artifice and truth; but few came in serious contact with the man, without losing this distrust in respect for his opinions and motives.

While there is a lot to unpack and study and criticize in these stories about the “frontier myth,” I realized that I would not want to read them to my kids, outside of the context of teaching a class (which I am not actually qualified to teach, since I haven’t studied this history much). And I realized that I would never wind up actually completing even one of the five novels for my own enjoyment, because I just can’t enjoy Cooper’s leaden prose.

I’m very glad that I looked up criticisms of Cooper’s writing, though – the search results led me to Mark Twain’s essay “Fenimore Cooper’s Literary Offences” (the British spelling of “offences” is in the original). It’s a delightfully snarky piece of writing, and far more enjoyable than the work it criticizes:

Cooper’s art has some defects. In one place in ‘Deerslayer,’ and in the restricted space of two-thirds of a page, Cooper has scored 114 offences against literary art out of a possible 115. It breaks the record.

There are plenty of other Library of America volumes of writing from that era which we are keeping, though – we will never part with Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novels and stories, for example.

Stories and Other Writings by Ring Lardner

I tried to enjoy the allegedly humorous stories and essays by Ring Lardner, but skimming through the volume and dipping into the stories and sports writing, I couldn’t find anything to interest me at all. Many of his contemporaries praised

his writing, but it isn't for me.

***Early Novels and Stories* by William Maxwell**

Maxwell worked as an editor for *The New Yorker* and published a number of novels and story collections during much of the twentieth century. I just didn't find his writing style or subjects to be at all engaging.

Kaufman & Co.: Broadway Comedies

This is an anthology of American plays by George S. Kaufman, including a stage version of *Animal Crackers* from 1928, which was adapted into the Marx Brothers film released in 1930. I'm giving this one away because although I'm sure I would enjoy some of this material as plays or as films (and I enjoy the Marx Brothers), it just doesn't seem very engaging in print. I enjoy some plays in print – for example, Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* – but not these.

***Novels 1942-1952* by John Steinbeck**

This volume includes four novels, *The Moon is Down*, *Cannery Row*, *The Pearl*, and *East of Eden*. This is a duplicate – I actually already owned this copy, but had forgotten about it, and we received a regular slipcased copy as part of our subscription. This book has a previous owner's book plate and a date inscribed in it, but is otherwise in mint condition. It did not have a slipcase or jacket, but I have ordered a slipcase which should fit it.

***Five Novels of the 1960s & 70s* by Philip K. Dick**

This volume contains *Martian Time-Slip*, *Dr. Bloodmoney*, *Now Wait for Last Year*, *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said*, and *A Scanner Darkly*. This is a duplicate. This volume comes with a jacket rather than a slipcase and was sold through bookstores rather than via subscription.

The New York Review Books Classics

My brightly-colored trade paperbacks from the NYRB Classics series are now all in one place, in all their Pantone glory. I will be weeding out a few of these over time, now that I can access them. The whole series consists of reprint editions. They are very well-made trade paperbacks. Many of them are nicely re-set in clean new type, although some editions are reproductions of earlier volumes and so their text can be a little fuzzier and less pleasant to read, but they are nowhere near as bad as some awful-looking print-on-demand editions I've received when ordering books online.

Penguin Classics Graphic Deluxe Editions

Penguin has a series of modestly-priced trade paperback editions with deckle-edged pages and original cover art. You can see a list of some of the volumes here, although that is not a complete list as it does not seem to include out-of-print editions. We have sixteen books from this series and I plan to get more when I am able to browse in bookstores again. These chunky volumes are very satisfying to hold and read and they are my favorite way to read classics like *Crime and Punishment* (Oliver Ready's translation), *The Haunting of Hill House*, *Dubliners*, and others. They are printed with thicker paper that feels a little less tearable than the thin Bible paper used in some of the fatter Library of America volumes.

Harvard Classics

A few years ago, in a used bookstore in Wooster, Ohio, I found a complete set of the Harvard Classics, in a nice dark green faux-leather edition from Collier and Son. This version is a 22-volume edition of the original 50-volume set. These printings are from the 1960s. The leatherette is a bit brittle, and they smell dusty, but there is no mildew and the bindings and pages are in good condition.

I would like, one day, to have a set of Britannica's Great Books of the Western World series as well, but we are not in any great hurry, given that we can't even shelve the books we have.

My Vintage Children's Books

I have collected over the years some vintage children's books and a number of them are now shelved. These include a set of the first four Borrowers books by Mary Norton, and a complete set of the Doctor Dolittle books by Hugh Lofting. These are some of the books that I grew up with. I also have several years of Cricket magazine from the 1970s. These are copies that I had as a child. A lot of books I had as a child have been lost, some of them tossed out without my consent, but I feel very fortunate that my mother and I preserved these and I can now read them to my children.

There are lots more children's books in our library, but these are the ones I have set aside in our bedroom to preserve them from small destructive hands.

Special Volumes of Science Fiction and Fantasy

I've got thousands of volumes of science fiction and fantasy, but have shelved some of the volumes on these new bookshelves. They include a number of first editions or otherwise scarce and limited editions, and many of them are signed. The authors represented here include a number of my favorites:

- Kage Baker (many volumes of novels and stories)
- Iain M. Banks (the Culture novels)
- Stephen Baxter (a number of special small-press editions)

- Greg Egan (many volumes of novels and stories)
- William Gibson
- Lev Grossman
- Stanislaw Lem
- Bruce Sterling
- Charles Stross (including the complete Laundry Files novels)
- James Tiptree Jr. (story collections)
- J. R. R. Tolkien (including the 12-volume History of Middle Earth, his translations, and the recent books edited by Christopher Tolkien)
- Peter Watts
- Gene Wolfe (many volumes of novels and stories)

There are some more bookcases in our bedroom holding assorted books including poetry and politics, but the above list covers just about everything on the four new bookcases.

The idea was to use white Havsta shelves in the basement, where it is a bit darker, and dark brown shelves upstairs, to go with the existing dark brown furniture and wood floors. These four bookcases represent progress, but there is a lot more work to do.

The white shelves have been out of stock for a long time, but it appears that just in the day or two, more have appeared in the Canton store. If they will stay in stock for a while, and our finances allow it, maybe we can buy more of them – we could use eight, or maybe a dozen, or even more – Joy also has a lot of books in storage and we'd like to be able to shelve those, too.

We are making things up as we go along to some extent; I'm not quite sure just where in the basement these would go. There is some space for a number of these bookcases, but it will require a lot of rearranging.

We also have considered paying a carpenter we know to build some custom shelving, although something is going on with dampness and buckling floor tiles in one end of the basement. That is making me nervous and hesitant to put in anything permanent, since we might wind up having to tear up the floor. When we first moved in to this house, in 2017, the workers installing our washing machine upstairs failed to properly tighten a drain hose, and minutes after they left, the washing machine flooded the upstairs laundry room, and the water flowed all the way through the first floor and down into the basement. The company refused to consider compensating us for the damage, and lawyered up immediately. We filed an insurance claim, and they covered most of the remediation, but our insurance company was never able to get any money out of them either. We thought the damage had all been found and mitigated, but there may be more damage. Or it may be something else – maybe the basement floor has water problems, and the previous owner decided to just cover up the problems rather than repair them. It wouldn't be the first example of this that we have found.

I am not sure if finances will allow, but I would like to set a goal to get all the

rest of our books out of storage in 2021. It's taken long enough.

I posted a thread on Twitter with some pictures. To end the thread, I wrote:

When I die a library will burn - the one in my head. But I aim to leave a physical library for my family, containing much of the things I loved to study and think about while I was alive. What they do with it then will be up to them. It is my expression of hope for the future.

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