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# How to Organize Your Books



By Marty Kaplan



RICHARD NEWSTEAD VIA GETTY IMAGES

It's a sin to throw away a book.

I don't mean e-books. If they're cluttering your e-reader, all you have to do is delete them, and you don't even have to do that, since you can pretty much fit the Library of Congress on a thumb drive.

But physical books — the creepy retronym for the objects formerly known just as books — are different. They take up space. They demand shelves. They can crowd us out and weigh us down. And though no divine injunction exempts them from a recovering hoarder's triage, there's something miraculous about books that stops me from tossing them in the garbage.

They may not have souls, but they're not inanimate objects, either. Ideas are alive in them, and they can contain characters more real than some people I know. Writers spend years struggling to create them, to get them published, noticed, bought and read; how can they not embody some of an author's spirit? Plus they're souvenirs of who we were when we acquired them, and where we read them, or how we felt about not reading them. I realize that some books are already trash before we buy them, but most of the thousands I cohabit with don't deserve to be buried alive.

Yes, I do give books away. I'm always working on a box to drop off at the library. I realize that many will go straight to the 50-cent table, and from there to the dump, but at least the ink's on the hands of the Friends of the Library, not mine. If I were being rational, I'd have dropped my 1959 World Book Encyclopedia into the blue recycling bin instead of loading it into the trunk of my car. But I couldn't bear the thought of junking books that truly opened the world to me, and whose pages I still remember copying - I mean, paraphrasing - into homework, and I didn't want to acknowledge that the person who once did those things with those books is long gone.

Which means that I've kept enough books to stock a used bookstore. This presents the challenge of organizing them. When, from time to time, I've wanted to find a book I'm sure I own, it would be nice to actually be able to locate it, which is why I once tried the traditional categories - fiction and nonfiction, with biography, drama and poetry each getting sections of their own. But entropy, laziness and numbers have defeated me. Until the day I have the time and discipline to alphabetize them, simply knowing that *Absalom, Absalom!* or *Seven Types of Ambiguity* must be somewhere in the house is about as useful as knowing they're on the planet.

Some people arrange books by color, some by height. I seem to organize them by my relationship with them. My inspiration here is Italo Calvino's "Sections in the bookstore" list in *Invisible Cities*, which begins with "Books You Haven't Read," which in my case is a lot of books. I've subdivided unread books — following Calvino — into "Books You've Been Planning to Read for Ages," "Books You've Always Pretended to Have Read and Now it's Time to Sit Down and Really Read Them" and "Books That If You Had More Than One Life You Would Certainly Also Read But Unfortunately Your Days Are Numbered."

Books I read in college are in a clump; they were boxed together when I left my last dorm, and it's always been easier to unbox them in proximity after each move than to integrate them among the later arrivals. This puts *Crime and Punishment* next to *Molecular Biology of the Gene*, and *The Lonely Crowd* next to *Trout Fishing in America* - strange conjunctions on the face of it, but not if you're up for doing a little boomer ethnography.

I think of another section as "Books You Should Read Now If You Don't Want To Be Embarrassed." These are books written by friends. I am fortunate that many friends are authors. I have bought their books at signings, and I've been sent them by their publishers. Every single one of them I always intend to read right away, honest, especially because I know what it's like to send someone something you've written, and then you wait and wait to hear what they think. Within this group, I put on my night table books by friends I'm likely to see soon. When that happens, and I've failed to read it, I use the pre-emptive cop out ("I'm really looking forward to reading it!"), but more often, as Calvino nailed me, I pretend I've read it. Once I say how terrific it is, there's never a trick follow-up ("Did you think the part about the earned income tax credit was too long?") to reveal my well-meaning perfidy.

Some day, which of course means never, I'd like to make a Self Portrait section. This is where I'd put a couple of dozen books that — if you looked at their spines — you'd be able to, well, read me like a book. Our tribal need for identity badges is why I think there'll be physical books even when all the world's content is stored in the digital cloud and downloadable by anyone any time anywhere. Here, in no particular order, is some of what I'd put on that shelf:

*Jumpers* by Tom Stoppard  
*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce  
*The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*  
*The Double Helix* by J.D. Watson  
*One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez  
*Making It* by Norman Podhoretz  
*Against Interpretation* by Susan Sontag  
*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* by Thomas Kuhn  
*The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*  
*Rameau's Nephew* by Denis Diderot  
*Language and Silence* by George Steiner  
*Hope Against Hope* by Nadezhda Mandelstam  
*A Confederacy of Dunces* by John Kennedy Toole  
*A Fan's Notes* by Frederick Exley  
*The Sot-Weed Factor* by John Barth  
*American Pastoral* by Philip Roth  
*Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* by Robert Pirsig  
*Advise and Consent* by Allen Drury

Just starting that list gives me goosebumps.

Of course, for those spines to speak volumes in the e-future, the art inside will still need to belong to a common culture. I may be confident that physical books won't go away, but whether they'll be read widely enough for their material presence to tell my story (or anyone else's) — that, I'm less sure about.

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*On Sunday at the 56th Annual Southern California Journalism Awards, I won first place for 2013 for my Entertainment Reviews/Criticism/Columns in the Jewish Journal. This piece is a cross-post from there.*

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