



Too Much Volume!

What do you do with books after you have finished reading them? Some people in my neighbourhood bundle them up and put them out for paper recycling. Others prefer to take them to a used book shop; we don't get much money for them that way, but at least it seems better than just throwing them out.

Some people though - and I include myself in this group - can't seem to part with finished books quite so flippantly. A newspaper can be purchased, read, then discarded without hesitation. A magazine likewise. But a book seems different; even though we may have 'consumed' the product, it doesn't make any sense to just discard it. So they build up, and they build up some more, and before we know it, our home becomes over-run with stacks of books in every room.

The situation for me has become somewhat less critical in recent years, since I now live alone in quite a large house, but even so, things might really start to get out of hand if I am not careful. Might? Well ... that could be the wrong tense to use ... For an experiment, I just took a tape measure and added up the total length of book shelves in the 6-mat room in which I am sitting to type this. The room is quite neat, and there are no books stacked on the floor; everything is on proper shelves ... more than 23 meters of them! 23 meters of books! In a single small 6-mat room? True ...

If I move through a doorway into the kitchen, and repeat the calculation there, I find 8 1/2 meters more, and that's ignoring the CD shelves and the filing cabinet. Then should I next move into the storage room downstairs and start inspecting some of the boxes of books that have yet to be properly set out on shelves? I think I had better leave them alone for now!

A guest one day looked at some of my bookshelves. After asking me if I had read all these books, and hearing my positive answer, he then asked, "Why do you keep them? Do you plan on reading them again?" This is a difficult question to answer, because on the face of it, my reply has to be "Well no ... I don't suppose I will ..." But if so, then why keep books that I have read? Are they just for decoration? Absolutely not! There is a very good reason why I keep these books (and incidentally, it is also why I refuse to use two-layer bookshelves, in which one layer of books is hidden behind another.)

After finishing a book, I usually make an immediate decision about whether or not to keep it. If this book had an effect on me in a way that I want to keep in memory, then I will keep it. Onto one of the bookshelves it goes, and even though I may not actually read it again cover to cover, it will catch my eye on occasion, and will thus remain part of my 'living memory'. If I were to sell or discard it, I am sure that the memory of the contents would also soon disappear from mind. The main reason for keeping books is to try to keep their 'message' alive in my mind.

In the future, when we no longer have paper books, but just data files stored on some kind of electronic reader, it will certainly be easier to hang onto our 'old friends', but without the actual physical presence of the book covers near at hand day in and day out, I wonder if they will remain quite such close friends ...

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