

Ex-Libris: Part 1

There is a scene in the film "The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and her Lover", where Georgina and her Lover escape her Thieving husband. They take refuge in a book depository where the Lover spends his spare time cataloguing French History. . . The space is a mixture of classical and postmodern architecture. The foyer is a long expanse made up of marble colonnades with totems of books within each nook. The lovers completely nude, saunter into this room lined with volumes, stacked from floor to ceiling sans shelves, their spines resting horizontally on one another. The scene ends with the lovers embracing in front of an oversized arch window, only found in loft spaces in industrial buildings turned residential.

In the morning Otto, squinting from the bright sun, looks at the bookshelves lining my wall and asks:

"Have you read all of these books?"

Before I answer, I think to myself, this is a man, though he is adorable, does not belong in my apartment. This is a man who does not realize a library is a working tool, a collection of beautiful objects, and a wall full of endless information. I realize I have a man who thinks of my library as a storage place for already read, or perhaps half read and abandoned books.

"Have you read all these books?"

No, I have not read all of the books, but just to humor myself and clear his suspicion, I answer, "Yes, of course I have!" Anyone who has a working library at home knows I have not read all of the books. In fact I haven't read all of the fiction even. And I also must confess that some of the fiction I have already read, I care not to keep, knowing I will get nothing out of re-reading them, and I keep them still, just to have them in my library.

I can tell you what is stored in each book. And I can also tell you why I keep each one. Some of the books are there, for the same reason others have photo albums of their past. Within the first few pages of each book is the following information: when I acquired the book and where I got it. Some have inscriptions written by friends who understand my love of books. Those who give books tend to be my dearest and oldest friends. They have whispered something about our friendship, or sang happy birthday between the leaves in the frontice piece.

On the cover page of Umberto Eco's *How to Travel with a Salmon and Other Essays*, penned in a quick blue ink is:

"Happy Birthday Micki. This is to remind you that this is what I do. I travel with a salmon and that is all I do, and now when people ask you, tell 'em, I travel too!"

There is no signature, but I recognize the handwriting of my friend Rob and though it is not dated, I know it was given to me on Christmas 1994. Because it says so, two lines under the ISBN in this hard cover book.

My first love, Ted, the boy I thought the naive young me would marry and live happily ever after with, gave me my first serious art book.

In a black scrawled casually way he wrote:

Dear Micki,
Good luck with your art,
Hope this book is interesting and helpful.
Keep it with you forever.
I love you always.
Merry Christmas.
Teddy

The poor struggling engineering student, bought a hard cover Ansel Adams book of letters and images for \$50 and presented it to me on my 19th birthday. I wondered back then, why he gave me this specific book, after all he knew that I was a sculpture student not photography at the art school. At the time I didn't give the book much thought, regarded it as just a beautiful coffee table book that a non-artist would have found interesting. A flashy art book to impress the girlfriend in art school by showing her he too was interested in art, not just math and physics.

Flipping through the pages now after all these years I realize that he regarded our relationship in the same way the book is structured. We had a long distance relationship at the time, and being poor students with one pay phone shared by a whole floor of the dorm, we corresponded through letters. I must have written similar descriptive letters in closed with black and white photographs I had taken and developed myself, about my new situation and all that I was learning at the time, as Mr. Adams does in my book. The majority of this 400-page book on this master

photographer is filled with letters and texts and I find myself quietly apologizing to Ted for misreading his intentions.

The first books given to me were from my father when I was one and a half years old. They are French children's books meant for a child of about 4 or 5. Sentences organized in largish paragraphs with illustrations. Since I couldn't read, especially French, there isn't much of an inscription in the book.

He used a purplish pen and in all cases wrote directly on top of the title graphics on the title page. It is simple but mysteriously odd.

He wrote:

To Migiwa
The date
And they are all signed
Kei
Switzerland

or Kei
Lausanne.

or Kei
Hamburg

A formal gift from a father on his travels to an infant daughter.

I recognize his handwriting to be my own and also realize where I get my habits.

Certain books also exist as archeological sights, where histories can be unearthed. Most of the books bought for my first philosophy class in college, often used love letters or goofy postcards from Ted as bookmarks. I select A Nietzsche Reader from the shelf and immediately it opens up to a page where a bookmark abandoned by a student fed up with nihilism marks its presence. On this page the student has underlined passages having to do with degeneration of morality, self-deception, etc.etc...etc. And I smile as I see the warm-hearted mushy gushy love note marking these thoughts.

The many books of fiction and critical essays often have plane ticket stubs as markers, showing my itinerary of thought while I was traveling. When I pick up these books for re reading, not only do I get the story that the author wants to retell to me but also the narrative is often mixed with my memories of the beach I was lying on, the Heathrow airport, or the guest bedroom in Osaka.

Part 2

I leave the room for a moment to start the coffee for our first cup of the day. When I return, the Banker is leaning, back against the headboard, w / my copy of Best Known Works of Flaubert resting on his belly. I think to myself: why this specific book out of all that is in front of him? I quickly scan the shelves and realize that this is one of the few that is hard bound in cloth naked of a graphically colorful jacket. It is a faded Harvard maroon in color, and on it's spine, the title simply in gold letters on a black square. I recall him saying once how he loves old books, and realize why this particular one caught his eye amongst all the rest.

This book contains three complete, unabridged novels: Madame Bovary, The Temptation of Saint Anthony , and Salamambo. I bought this book off a street vendor somewhere in downtown Manhattan, years before I moved to the city. I don't remember where exactly, because back then, the streets were so foreign to me and the abundance of books lying about on blankets and shelves on the street amazing. I also recall the book was less than a buck, and opening the cover, I see in pencil, the scribble of 40 cents on the upper left corner. I remember thinking at the time, I should or rather every library should have a copy of Madam Bovary and how amazing that I can include this in my library for a mere 40 cents!

I slide up on the couch next to him as he reads passages from the book. He chooses lines out of a battle scene, obviously not Madam Bovary. I half hear him rambling on about horses with their bellies scraping the tips of grass at high speed, men being impaled by swords and such, how men just don't have jobs like that anymore...And I jokingly say that banking is perhaps just as rough in the year 2000. I listen contented as he reads. The sound of a voice reading is music to my ears, no matter what is actually being read. It is neither speech nor is it theater. I cannot explain it but there is a distinct sound the voice makes when reading out loud from the page.

I can't recall being read to as a child, but I have memories of many children's books. I have memories of my own voice in my inner ear trying to pronounce the new words from the Mochi Mochi Tree and the Aesop's Fables in Japanese...Later the same voice trying to decipher the new sounds of the English language as I stumble through One Fish Two Fish Red Fish Blue Fish, and much later the same voice in a more experienced inner ear cascading over the syllables in Horton Hears a Who and Where the Sidewalk Ends.

Chris, on the other hand is my audience. In his company I become the reader. I often find myself reading silently in his company, while he busies himself with his tasks. He will look up to check to see where I've gone, and noticing my nose in a book, paper, or most often at his place, a magazine, he will say three simple words...

"Read to me"

I often do not preface what I am reading, nor do I begin at the beginning, I just start when I hear him ask, "Read to me?" And sometimes it may be in mid sentence. Lately during the days we are separately working from one another, I come across text I want to share with him, and I dog-ear these selections in my mental tablet. The day we saw the 100 year old tree, I read to him Ethan Canin's short story, The Emperor of the Air. In the dim over head light spotting the paragraphs I read to him about the science teacher who wanted to save the old oak that had become invaded by red ants. I stopped between paragraphs to listen to his soft breathing, his head rising and falling in the crook of my shoulder as I read. Occasionally stopping to poke him awake again.

I save and catalogue the shorter pieces in my bag to read to him for our rides home on the subway at 3am after a night of drinking, or the brief moments before we fall asleep... Reading out loud transforms me into an actor. I must confess that I read to myself out loud when I am feeling lonely. Just to hear my voice telling myself a story is comforting.

History of reading/writing, about libraries being extremely loud due to no one not yet discovering silent reading.

Once the Banker took me to the Harvard club, his almamater, where they were hosting an evening of whisky tasting. Knowing my interest for architecture and interiors, took my hand and toured us around the three main floors of the historic McKim, Mead and White building. Stepping back into the turn of the century of old New York, we barreled through rooms musty with a hundred years of cigar smoke and heated discussions had by many white distinguished men, penetrating the upholstery. Then we end up at our destination, the room full of Oak, red plush carpeting. Bookshelves lining all four walls from floor to ceiling and more oak. There is a card catalogue in oak, the railings where the ladder slides on is oak, its years of brass rolling along the edge giving the wood a nice dark patina. There are no gilded frames of portraits of dead Harvard alumni, just books. This is a serious library. This is my dream library.

When I retell of my time spent in the Harvard Club library to my friends, they immediately refer to the JP Morgan's Library to be in simpatico. JP's library is much

more opulent, with much more red plushness, a dark brocaded mausoleum of knowledge. A singular collector's treasures, and the most important difference between the two is that at the Harvard club, the books were living tools that I could brush my fingers along the spine as I strolled through the space. I could pick out whichever volume caught my eye, and open it to reveal a whiff of age and antiquity. JP's books were out of reach for me.

I remember the first time I went to the Piermont Morgan Library and was impressed at the sheer scale of public intimacy. His study and museum have become an example of a period room, not a working library. Velvet ropes hold us back so we don't get too near the books. His study has barely enough illumination from the antique lamps to read. The books are all caged behind glass and patterns of cast patinaed ironwork, unable to get out for us to enjoy. There is a collection of religious iconography, paintings of family members, a bust of Ben Franklin, and the focus of the study is a fireplace larger than my bedroom.

Across from his study, you walk through a beautiful rotunda to enter into the library. This room has the stacks separated into three tiers, the upper two accessible by bookcases, which are also secret revolving doors. I sometimes I take my shoes off, and having the plush carpet underfoot I would walk about and pretend it were my own library. As you enter, directly to your left is case number 1. In the upper left starting point is a book by Baudelaire. I notice it is not categorized alphabetically, nor are there any numbers on the spines of the books. The books sit on shelves as objects in a collection, not as books in a library. Baudelaire cohabitates with other French titles: *L'Offrande Lyrique*, sets of books by Rousseau, many books on Fables by LeFontaine.

Case number 2 begins the collection of Bibles; the earliest I can see dates back to the 1500's. The bibles go on for few more cases. Case number 13 contains his collection of miniature books, mostly children's books. Titles like: *Short Stories*, *Simple Stories*, the *Little Book of Knowledge*, *Cupids Present*, *Tom Thumb*, *Kinderspiele*, *Hymns for Infant Minds*, 4 copies of *Jack the giant Killer* in a row, *Captain Gulliver*, *Little Old Woman*, *Wisdom in Miniature*, *Little Bob*, and so on. The largest book in this section is probably about 4x4 inches. Case number 21 is completely filled with books from all over the world about *Robinson Crusoe*: *Kleine Robinson*, *Nouveau Robinso*, *Le Robinson Suisse*. *Adventures de Robinson Crusoe*, *La Petite Fille de Robinson*

Some books are kept together and bandaged up with white cotton ribbons, like injured soldiers from the civil war. Others have frayed edges in the headband from years of index fingers picking it off the shelves. But for books that must be at least a hundred

years old, the gold leaf is hardly tarnished, the leather in perfect shape, they are surprisingly new looking.

My friend Rob used to stop at the threshold of the stacks at our Library in Graduate School. He was mesmerized more by the new acquisitions, just as he orders Chinese food from the colored back lit pictures, he was only interested in the immediate colors of the new glossy books. He would spend time with the new volumes, knowing he could not whisk them from the library, so new the books were, that they hadn't been catalogued yet. No bar code to brand them. Perhaps this was a closer feeling to being in a bookstore for him. That one step closer to owning the book. Before they got dressed in plastic cellophane jackets.

It was soon Christmas when Erik. entered my life. I find out through our puerile conversations that he too is a collector of books. He challenges me by saying he has more volumes than I. He calls it a collection, not a library. He tells me he has a larger collection.

How much do you spend on books a year?

And being skeptical, I quiz him about the bookstores in the city. Anyone who is addicted to books will spend a considerable amount of time in bookstores, so my first question to him is:

OK, where is the bathroom in the Borders at the WTC?

His immediate reply is:

Second floor, past the cafe, past the CDs on the right. This is correct.

OK, where is the bathroom in the Barnes and Nobel at the Citicorp center?

Again he immediately replies:

Second floor past the art section turn left than a right.

This is correct.

Then it's his turn to question the skeptic:

Where is the art section in Coliseum books?

I have been to this bookstore twice in my life. Once before going to the dentist to kill time, and on one other occasion, with a friend after a dinner full of wine.

He has a grin on his face knowing that this is a trick question.

Long silence then I answer:

Downstairs? Near the bargain books?

I am half right because the art section is both upstairs and in the basement.

Next question for the skeptic:

Where is the Poetry section at Strand?

I counter his question with a question:

Which Strand?

And his reply tells me we are even again. Where is there another Strand?

Next question for the skeptic.

Where is the Edward Gorey section at the Gotham bookstore?

I haven't a clue. I am floored at his knowledge of bookstore information and realize my instant infatuation for this new friend.

My turn: And I am feeling like a bad loser, I know I am not playing fair, when I ask:

OK, where is the ceramics section at the Kinokunya bookstore at Rockefeller Center?

Big silence.... and

I see that this game could go on forever with the amount of bookstores that exist in this city.