

# Unpacking the Personal Library: The Public and Private Life of Books

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## REVIEWS

Jason Camlot and J. A. Weingarten, eds., *Unpacking the Personal Library: The Public and Private Life of Books*, Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier Press, 2022, 288 p., \$89.99 (hardcover) ISBN 978-1771125680

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*Unpacking the Personal Library: The Public and Private Life of Books* brings together curators, academics, librarians, and writers to critically examine the notion of the personal library as defined by editors J. A. Weingarten and Jason Camlot. A personal library is “a library of books, papers, and things accrued for particular creative and intellectual uses; and put to use in the realm of letters, culture, and society” (8). The book posits the personal library as a site of interpretation for individual experiences, socio-cultural contexts, the formation of disciplines of knowledge, literary production, and literary authorship and community, and critically engages with this method of study across twelve chapters.

Camlot’s introduction charts the course of his and Weingarten’s research into the personal library, starting with the acquisition of the personal library and papers of novelist Mordecai Richler by Concordia University in 2013 and ending with an international conference held at Concordia University in 2016. Notably, many of the book’s contributing authors participated in this 2016 conference, which was titled “The Promise of Paradise: Reading, Researching, and Using the Private Library.” Camlot sets the stage for a critical study of personal libraries by establishing definitions to differentiate personal, private, and public libraries, situating personal libraries in their Western socio-cultural context and drawing together literary interpretation, librarianship, and archival analysis under

bibliography in its capacity as the “sociology of texts” (11). Weingarten’s work on private libraries, which he carried out under Camlot’s supervision during his postdoctoral research, informs *Unpacking the Personal Library*. Fittingly, the book closes with Weingarten’s personal reflection on the liminal nature of libraries; he compares the library to the Heraclitean river, suggesting that just as we cannot step in the same river twice, so too is his personal library in constant flux, changing as he himself has changed.

The book is divided into two parts, each with six chapters. “Part I: Private Libraries Made Public” focuses on cases where private libraries have moved to the public sphere in some form, raising questions about what this transformation means for the collections, for the libraries’ owners, and for the institutional, national, and political contexts of their use. Cases include the private libraries of notable individuals, including the Osler Library of the History of Medicine held at McGill University and the Library of William Lyon Mackenzie King (examined by Anna Dysert and Meaghan Scanlon, respectively). Less traditional interpretations of personal libraries include Bart Vautour’s study of the embassy libraries assembled at Canadian foreign missions and Sherrin Frances’ investigation of the libraries collected to support protest movements, including Occupy, 15-M, and *Nuit debout*.

These cases serve to demonstrate how close study of personal libraries and considerations of their provenance and ownership can bring the concerns of librarianship and bibliography into dialogue with cultural, social, and literary questions. As librarians trained in archival practice, both Dysert and Scanlon highlight the importance of provenance and custodial history to understanding the context of the creation of personal libraries, as well as the implications of their transition from private to public ownership. Their work is well complemented with analyses by Vautour, Frances, and Andrew Stauffer, all of whom have backgrounds as English professors. In particular, Stauffer’s closing chapter, “Serious House: On the Future of Library Print Collections,” highlights a tension between bibliographical interest in the physical and the particular in print collections, as well as an information science approach that detaches texts

from books and relies on digital copies and deduplication at the expense of bibliographical concerns.

“Part II: The Personal Library as a Field of Interpretation” narrows its focus to the personal libraries of writers, researchers, and booksellers. The six chapters in this section bring the definitions and methods that Camlot and Weingarten introduce to bear on figures including Virginia Woolf, Robert Duncan, Sheila and Wilfred Watson, and Al Purdy, offering critical analysis of the authors’ lives and works built on their personal libraries. Bibliographical considerations are brought into dialogue with the concerns of library and archival theory and literary studies to produce interdisciplinary insights that demonstrate the value of the personal library as a field of interpretation and as material evidence.

As with part one, part two includes critiques of traditional library and archival practices. Cameron Anstee’s account of Room 3o2 Books, the small-press bookstore maintained by jwcurry, argues that the nature of the bookstore and its contents are such that a centralized institution like a library or archive could not grant access in the same way that jwcurry’s eccentric space allows. He goes on to posit that the “strictly regulated order of uniform shelves in libraries, archives, and traditional bookstores” cannot account for the varied size of items produced by small presses, which is among the assertions that may ring hollow to information professionals (217). Anyone who has walked the shelves of an archive or browsed an archival supply catalogue will be well aware that the varied sizes, forms, and material compositions of holdings inform both. Nonetheless, Antsee makes a compelling case for the bookstore as a space with a qualitatively different user experience that can counterbalance the traditional library or archive.

Readers with library or archival backgrounds may also find that the predominance of authors with academic backgrounds in English skews the book toward literary analysis and limits engagement with library and archival theory. In particular, while archival concepts such as *respect des fonds* and provenance are frequently mentioned, they are not accompanied by consideration of recent archival literature that critiques and questions

them, relying instead on the traditional, modernist archival perspective of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The book claims to “advance the application of archival thinking, and of thinking beyond the archivist’s concept of a collection’s unity” but fails to recognize that this type of critical work is being done by archivists themselves (17). For example, the concept of personal archives has received much attention from archivists, including Sue McKemmish and Catherine Hobbs, and continues to inform efforts to expand archival theory—and yet, it is absent from the book.

Regardless, *Unpacking the Personal Library* lays the groundwork for fruitful interdisciplinary research into personal libraries as sites of interpretation and critical analysis. Camlot’s introduction and the chapters in part one establish definitions and demonstrate a scope that goes well beyond the traditional bibliographical topic of the individually owned library, while part two brings interdisciplinarity to bear on the study of literary figures. As interdisciplinary research, the chapters in this volume create a space for fruitful integrations between literary studies and information professional scholarship.

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