In Defense of Bookworms

By David Isaacson,
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I am a bookworm. I say this proudly, but also a bit warily. Bookworms belong to the same genus as booklovers, but we are in a separate species. Librarians have traditionally catered to booklovers. After all, many librarians are themselves booklovers. But not all of us who know we are bookworms are ready to come out of the closet. I’m going to risk outing myself here.

I’m not a literal bookworm, defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “a kind of maggot, which destroys books by eating its way through the leaves.” However, I am the figurative kind, which the same learned source defines as “one who seems to find his chief sustenance in reading, one who is always poring over books.” It surprised me to learn that the first recorded allusion to a literal bookworm was not until 1855, although as early as 1599 Ben Jonson, in The Fountain of Self-Love, or Cynthia’s Revels, refers to the human variety when he describes a character as being “perverted and spoiled by a whoremonger bookworm.”

Neither kind of bookworm gets a good press. From Jonson’s time on, the figurative bookworm has been regarded as at best eccentric, but sometimes downright crazy. To add insult to injury, it seems that the insect bookworm that actually destroys books is named after the human being who treasures them. I’m usually on a soapbox defending animals against all the vile associations with which we metaphorize them: the dirty pig, the skulking dog, and the sneaky cat. But human bookworms do no harm to books. In fact, some books, like Burton’s Anatomy of Melancholy, were written just for us.

One can only speculate about the origin of this word. Whether Ben Jonson made up the term or borrowed it, back in Elizabethan days, when books were much scarcer, people who were overfond of books were said to be worming their way into them. Worms serve a useful purpose in nature. Worms who literally eat books can be presumed to be doing so because the cellulose and glue are tasty (and nutritious). We don’t have to go further than Francis Bacon’s famous essay “Of Studies,” with memorable lines like “Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested, ...” to realize the profound accuracy of this association of reading and eating. Human bookworms find sustenance by consuming books, but even when we have to eat our words we don’t usually masticate actual books.

I bet someone who was not a bookworm created this epithet to mock someone who was. My guess is that the person who first used this term was an illiterate or semi-illiterate lazy person who envied the bookworm’s elated state. Not willing to admit he didn’t have such an ability himself, this killjoy pretended that the bookworm was what Jonson calls a “verse whoreson.” Prejudiced people put bookworms in the same mental sidelines as nerds, dweebs, wonks, pointy-headed intellectuals, absent-minded professors, and other wierdos, who, they insist, don’t have real lives.

Direct manifestations of this prejudice help to make us bookworms even more wormier. My preference for reading over most other activities goes way back to childhood. I preferred to read because I liked taking imaginary trips. I was not an especially odd or lonely kid. But I think I was even more self-absorbed than many other kids were. At this point in my life I don’t know or care whether my bookworminess was more the cause or the effect of self-preoccupation. But I still feel as if I need to justify my passion for reading, even though, as a librarian, I make my living tending to bookish things.

Later, from about junior high on, most people get the idea that a lot of reading should be serious. We bookworms say we agree with this, but this is just a dodge. What a drink is to an alcoholic a book is to a bookworm. The normal book reader has other things to do with his life—even if he is a college professor and is paid to read. But the bookworm is obsessed. Reading is an end-in-itself. The non-addicted reader enjoys reading, but also enjoys other things. The bookworm, on the other hand, does not want to come down from his reading high. To be deprived of a book is to suffer withdrawal. A bookworm without anything to read starts to get nervous and itchy. Deprive us of print too long and we may have panic attacks about where our next reading fix is coming from.

Non-bookworms cannot really empathize with us. Where they might get tired if they’ve been too long with Mark Twain down the Mississippi, bookworms resent coming back. Reading something is more important than reading any particular thing. If I can’t have Twain, I will settle for Agatha Christie. In a pinch, a Harlequin romance is better than no book at all. Any kind of reading—even in a language I don’t understand—is better than no print at all.

There are stages of bookwormishness. The first stage—a mere preference for reading over other activities—is virtually indistinguishable from bookloverliness. But the second stage—when one just has to be reading something, anything, in print—at a certain time every day—is a critical turning point. The third stage is the reading binge. For some, this is an occasional spree of round-the-clock reading. For others, binging occurs every day. Bookworms frequently are in denial. They make quite a fuss over saying to others that they prefer television or some other pastime to reading. But the non-bookworm does not have to ration his reading, or fixate on where he will find his next book, newspaper, or magazine. Some bookworms, disguising themselves as book connoisseurs, will talk a good line about loving special books, or certain authors, or only liking to read at certain times of the day. Don’t believe them. The real bookworm has to read an hour or two before leaving the house to go to the library to study, because she just can’t be sure even the library has enough books for her, or will give her all she wants when she wants them.

Bookworms in the last stage of this cunning disease are completely anti-social. Now, a bookstore or library becomes threatening and oppressive. The pure bookworm does not have time or patience to talk to other people. He resents having to emerge from whatever reading matter has him enthralled at the moment. Even the company of fellow bookworms is frustrating. Locked into an imaginary life bounded by a book, the bookworm does not want to share that world with anyone else. Any other person may be a false friend, one who might try to steal her book. The bookworm re-make of the movie Leaving Las Vegas would be one long, progressively more depraved and disgusting gulping and gorging of books.

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additional resources, including materials geared toward university students. These resource materials are available to teachers and faculty interested in incorporating "Shared Waters" into classroom activities.

Experience "Shared Waters" for yourself. The exhibit includes numerous panels with text and artwork from 25 museums and archives in the United States, Canada, and France. The artifacts include some spectacular pieces of trade silver on loan from several museums. One particularly striking artifact is a birch bark canoe constructed using traditional methods. A canoe cradle, developed by WMU's Physical Plant, provides a wonderful venue for viewing the interior and exterior of this artifact. It has proved to be extremely popular with all of the groups visiting the exhibit. The exhibit is located on the second and third floors of Waldo Library and will be in place through the end of February 2006. For additional information on the exhibit or to schedule a group tour, please contact Kathy Gerow, University Libraries, at 269-387-5202.

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newspapers, scholarly journals, popular magazines, newsletters, printouts, leaflets, cereal boxes—anything in print.

Fortunately, there is help for bookworms, and for those who care for them. But it must start with a sincere, complete decision by the bookworm himself to give up all forms of excessive reading. For years I was able to hide my addiction to reading from family, friends, and colleagues. But I could not, finally, hide my addiction from myself. In the last years of my increasingly downward spiral, I lost all sense of reality unmediated by reading. I finally attended a meeting of Bookworms Anonymous. I am not going to say anything more about this organization that saved my life because I don't want to risk compromising it, or my own biblio-sobriety.

But I do want to thank all my fellow librarians who supported me during this sometimes agonizing period of recovery. The first days and weeks of carefully rationed reading are horrible! Bookworms typically need a lot of time to come to terms with a world that seems empty without the constant reading we thought we had to have. But, one day at a time, a normal reading life begins to seem livable, and then, by slow degrees, wonderful. I have finally discovered that I don't have to hide from the world in a book. There are many books I will never read. That's OK. Conversely, some books, I'm convinced, probably will get along, "equally OK," without my reading them. I think it's even safe for me to attend a library convention again, although I cannot trust myself just yet at all those publishers' booths. I can have a few books, of course, but not nearly as many as I thought I needed. Now I have the capacity to choose books. Before, books chose me.

If this sounds familiar to any reader I encourage her or him to call, write or e-mail me. You don't have to suffer alone. Together, we can survive without being hopeless bookworms!

[David Isaacson, Professor and Humanities Librarian in the University Libraries, came to WMU in 1973 and is retiring, after 32 years of service, in January 2006. He has been a major contributor to Gatherings since it was first published, and will, one hopes, continue to bring his love of reading and writing to future issues as he ventures beyond library walls to the wider world.]

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