

On Books, Bibliophiles, Bookshops and Book Reviews

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1 Introduction

In the second decade of the 21st century mankind has the capability to physically and to virtually store huge amounts of information. The element silicon is a key enabling constituent in the technologies used in this age of digital data storage. In the editorial for this issue of *SILICON*, I have taken the opportunity to look back over my 50 years experience (and love) of books.

2 On Books and Bibliophiles

I think that it is fair to say that I am at my happiest when I am surrounded by books. This could be at home, in my office, in a bookshop or in a library. My book collecting goes back about 50 years and I still have several books with me from my childhood, even though I have moved to a different continent during the course of my career. The books that I own are from a wide range of authors, subjects and publishers. So my books form an eclectic collection and this ever growing collection is not gathered in the style of the modern bibliophile as described by John Fowles:

Every treatise on bibliomania repeats the same excellent advice: stick to one age, one field, one press, one author ... specialize, or waste your money [1].

Such words fall upon deaf ears in my case.

I have no listing of the books that I own, nor do I even have any systematic way of placing them upon my shelves. This approach is not advisable for any serious library or bibliophile. As I don't have a "reading list", surely part of the fun in this life is pottering about and finding what one should read next.

While on the topic of lists and perhaps negating my suggested "pottering" referred to above, back in 1994 I published a short suggested reading list of books from my own research area of *Polymer and Biopolymer Engineering (PBE)*. This was presented in an article that I entitled "Desert Island Polymers" [2]. The title of this article was clearly inspired by the famous *BBC Radio Series "Desert Island Discs"*. Looking back to 1994, I would also propose that this *PBE* reading list be taken in alongside Sir Peter Medawar's *"Advice to a Young Scientist"* [3].

3 On Books and Bookshops

As one of my favourite English actors—the late and sadly missed Sir Dirk Bogarde—stated:

A bookshop should be a familiar place, somewhere one goes for the sheer love of books, for the smell and feel of them, for the companionship of others who share the joy of touching, holding, reading and learning [4].

I have certainly spent many, many pleasurable hours in bookshops around the world. Indeed no trip to London is ever complete for me without a visit to *Foyles* on Charing Cross Road (see Fig. 1) [5]. Even though there are many on-line booksellers for both new and used books—nothing will ever act as a substitute for finding an enticing book that is looking for a new home. This is perhaps partly a form of treasure hunt but I suspect that when (and if) my genome is

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Fig. 1 Foyles, 113–119 Charing Cross Road, London WC2 (Copyright Stephen J. Clarson)



published, there may well be the genes of a Magpie built into the Clarson DNA.

4 On Books and Libraries

One of the great pleasures of working at a research university in the early 21st Century is surely having access to a research library. Indeed, two of our librarians at the *University of Cincinnati*—Dr. Dorothy Byers and Mr. Jim Clasper—have become very good friends of mine and their help and expertise over the years have been invaluable to me. Both were instrumental in protecting an excellent library, its ornate

reading room which is adorned with murals and the library contents during the recent renovation of Baldwin Hall that was needed in order to bring the building up to modern educational and safety standards (see Fig. 2).

One of the great tragedies of this world was surely the destruction and loss of the great library in the city of Alexandria in Egypt [6]. The library of Alexandria was founded and patronized under the Ptolemaic dynasty and by some estimates it contained 500,000 papyrus scrolls. Although there are many descriptions of the destruction of the *Royal Library of Alexandria*, the details of the loss, damage and destruction of the library are still debated by 21st century scholars.

Fig. 2 Baldwin Hall at the University of Cincinnati. The College of Engineering library is housed on the top floor of this building. The UC engineering undergraduates are gathered with Professor Clarson who is pictured on the far rhs (Stephen J. Clarson Personal Collection)



If one looks East to libraries of China, then we are told by Lucien Polastron [6] that:

The bibliography of China attempted by Han dynasty experts toward the very end of the first century B. C. E. came up with 670 titles [7].

Polastron then goes on to say:

Out of the Han inventory, 41 works have survived to the present, 65 have been more or less reconstructed using other sources, and the rest have vanished in smoke forever [7].

My own direct experience of destruction by fire was when the Chemistry Department A-Block building burnt down on May 19/20 in 1980. This was during the time when I was a student reading for my degree at York. That building at the *University of York* housed the Chemistry Department Research Library (this is the Whinfield Library that was named after the inventor of the commercially successful polyester Terylene). Looking over the ten photographs that I took that morning—I am still amazed that I was allowed inside the destroyed building on that fateful spring day in 1980 (see Figs. 3 and 4).

The technology of “writing and publishing” has moved chronologically from wooden carvings to clay tablets to papyrus scrolls to parchment codices to printed books to acid free paper to modern day computer servers and to *Apple iPads*. Speaking as one who has suffered the loss of data both on a flash drive and also on a failed hard drive, one concern that I have is that we are merely one power



Fig. 3 The Chemistry Department fire at the University of York in 1980 taken inside A-Block (Copyright Stephen J Clarson)



Fig. 4 The Chemistry Department fire at the University of York in 1980 from the car park behind A-Block on the Heslington side of the department (Copyright Stephen J Clarson)

surge or lightning strike away from frying huge quantities of mankind’s records and stored data. Indeed the Y2K problem was just one global manifestation of such a concern over data security and data storage stability.

Is this author a bibliographic “Luddite” one may be asking at this point? Well this Clarson must confess that he does print out PDF files and then read them “off-line”.

5 On Books and Book Reviews

So if one loves books, then why not write reviews of them?

We find Sir Dirk Bogarde describing his own initiation into the field of book reviewing as follows:

One evening a pleasant young man came round to the house for a drink. He was Nicholas Shakespeare, then the literary editor of the *Daily Telegraph*, and he asked if I would consider reviewing some books for him. This suggestion was so surprising, the meeting in the unhappy house so bizarre, that I agreed. ... One morning shortly afterwards, a package of books was delivered, with a note: “About 750 words? By the 27th [4]?”

The chap that asked me to write my first book review was not the splendidly named Mr. Shakespeare but it was one Dr. William Hawthorne, who was at that time the editor of *Trends in Polymer Science* at *Elsevier* in Cambridge. So without ever having planned to do so, I have written book

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